Narrative Journeys:
An exploration of reading identity through memory, experience, and ownership

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Introduction

Readers are readers when they have a reading story. Or as Dorothy Allison says in *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, “the story becomes the thing needed” (p. 3).

When I was a little girl and was read a story I was afraid to close the book because I didn’t know what would happen to the characters. I assumed that they went on with their lives beyond the watchful eyes of the reader. When I was older and able to read for myself, I wanted to know what “happily ever after” really looked like so I would make up the next part of the story myself. I knew that the characters didn’t exist without their story and that someone needed to tell it. It is somewhat discouraging, and somewhat validating, to realize that the conclusion that I have sought for the last two years was something that I clearly knew when I was seven. This research began with the idea that I would use story to learn why some people became readers and others did not. What I found was that the story itself contributed to readers’ identities and in turn encouraged them to become and remain readers.

My initial research question was best articulated by Trealease (1989). He said, “we are creating school time readers rather than life time readers” (p. 12). This was my own concern that arose through my experiences in schools. It began with a conversation about reading with a seven year old. It was my common practice as an administrator in a large inner city school to do daily rounds into each classroom. During this time I tried to take time to speak to children about the work that they were doing. On one occasion, I sat with a student who was choosing books for home reading. I asked, “What kind of books do you like to read?” The answer I anticipated was a version of the answer I had heard
many times. I expected to hear about favourite authors, favourite genres, or even my least preferred answer, favourite series. The answer was not as I predicted, Van Allsburg, or mysteries, or Junie B. Jones. The answer given was, “I like to read “J” books”. The “J” referred to the level of the books in the classroom used for direct reading instruction or guided reading. As is often the case in education, a pendulum has begun to swing in terms of reading in the classroom. Guided reading and leveled books have become commonplace in classrooms.

Over the last few years I have heard teachers talk more and more about reading instruction. I think this focus is based on research about how students learn to read and the need for direct instruction of skills. The danger is in the assumption that skilled readers will read. Even in upper elementary classrooms, teachers were encouraged to present their libraries in guided reading levels. Children were identified by their level and read only at their level until it was identified that they could move up. While these levels may work well for instruction for some students, they do not represent a structure that works for reading for pleasure. Avid readers may read both below and above their reading level, just as athletes may cross train or vary workouts. What I saw was students who were spending more and more time learning the skills of reading, but rarely reading. And certainly not reading with the quality or variety that I had seen in the past. Teachers told me that silent reading time was replaced by more structured reading time because there just wasn’t time in the day to let students “just read”. These observations as well as conversations with parents who were wondering why some children became readers and others did not brought me to this study.
Defining Reading

Literacy is defined by The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1998) as “the ability to read and write” (p. 836). The definition of literacy is constantly being expanded and used in a variety of contexts. Terms such as “media literacy” (Andersen, 1992), family literacy (Auerbach, 1989), and “information literacy” (Breivik, 1994) extend the use of literacy from a focus on basic reading and writing to a focus on meaning making and purpose from a variety of information sources. In order to define the reading that this study refers to I considered the literacy continuum used by Goodwin (1996).

![Literacy Continuum Diagram]

Those who cannot read fall on the far left of the continuum. In the middle are those who have the skills to use literacy to function. They may read e-mails, labels, advertisements, travel brochures, or work related material. On the far right of the continuum are those who have, what Goodwin defines as, critical literacy. They read to inform or to make meaning from text, either fiction or non-fiction. At any point along this continuum, there are those who do not use the skills that they have. They are referred to as alliterates, those who can read, but don’t. This continuum helped me to clarify that I was not considering reading for survival. They type of reading that people do to apply for jobs or read a recipe is important but it was not what I was looking at. This study focuses on those adults who go on to choose to use their literacy skills for more than just survival. They continue to read fiction or non-fiction to inform or entertain them. I also needed to include not just the type of reading, but the behaviour
that defined a reader. Krashen (2004) defines “the kind of reading highly literate people do all the time” as FVR, or free voluntary reading.

I wanted to inquiry into why some adults choose to voluntarily read for pleasure or to inform.

**Narrative Inquiry**

In order to gather information on what factors may contribute to the creation of adult readers I chose to do a narrative inquiry. In the school system we are all readers. That is what we do. Because of this we all have a reading story. Not everyone has the opportunity to tell his or her reading story. If these stories were told, if these stories were analyzed, if the path of the journey were documented through story would it help us to understand how people end up at different points in their reading? Stories to understand stories; this seemed to be a good fit. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) say that all people lead “storied lives and tell stories of those lives”. Narrative researchers then “describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience”. These stories inform by allowing the reader to make associations between the stories.

Narrative inquiry is “increasingly used in studies of educational experience” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990). Education is the study of relationships between people. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) state that in “understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations” (p. 3). Through this study I have sought to gather school and home reading experiences from a retrospective stance. Through these experiences the stories or relationships between
teacher and student, student and readings, student and family were told. These stories were considered for the insight they provide on adult reading habits.

The Study

Participants

The research has indicated that family culture plays an important part in the development of readers (Dix, 1976, Goodwin, 1996, Lowe, 2001). In order to explore that in this research, the participants for this study were members of the same family. Recruitment of these participants was through a book club. The use of members of the book club ensured that one member of the study did some reading for pleasure. Participants of the book club were presented with the information on the study and asked to consider if they had two other members of their family available for the study. Several families expressed an interest. One volunteer family was a mother and two children. Another was three siblings who had grown up in different decades and with different rural and urban experiences. The third family was three generational: a grandmother, her daughter, and grandson. The daughter and grandson were aunt and nephew. Another woman suggested that I interview her and her two friends. One had grown up in Canada, one in Australia, and one in Britain. They were interested in telling their stories to compare and contrast their experiences. I had initially presented the information asking for multiple generations. I was surprised and intrigued by both the number and the variety of families that came forward. My concern that no one would volunteer turned into a bounty of riches. This alone suggested to me that people were interested in telling their reading stories.
I chose to interview the three generational family. This family best fit my initial image of this study. They provided the longest time frame to study and also gave me a gender mix. They were immediately available and all were anxious to participate.

**Time Frame**

Each participant was involved in two individual one-hour interview sessions and one one-hour family interview session. The sessions for the grandmother and her daughter took place simultaneously as this was most convenient and comfortable for the grandmother. The initial interviews took place in June and July of 2007 and the group discussion took place in November of 2007.

**Data Generation Process and Data Analysis**

The development of these stories began with an unstructured interview process designed to initiate discussion and have the participants recall important events in their reading lives. The interviews evolved from initial questioning to conversation. As a researcher, I responded to the comments made by the participants in order to further develop stories.

Following this initial interview, the conversation was transcribed for analysis. The transcribed interviews were open coded based on themes that emerged to me from the data. Riessman (1993) suggests that after this initial rough transcription the researcher should “go back and retranscribe selected portions for detailed analysis” (p.56). These sections would shape the narrative. This narrative would be “linked to the evolving research question, theoretical/epistemological positions the investigator values, and, more often than not, her personal biography” (Riessman, 61). Once I had coded my interviews I began to develop the narratives by using the participants’ own words to retell the story.
Once the stories were written, I re-analyzed them for themes that emerged. The three narratives, while they represent individual stories, when read together are the family narrative. A second conversation was used to further develop the key incidents, clarify misrepresentations, and add to the narrative. With further transcription, analysis, and writing a developed narrative for each participant with plot and sub-plot, was defined. These final narratives were provided to the participants for feedback and to ensure that the participant’s voice had remained central to the narrative.

As with all good stories, plot elements should develop the themes. The initial research questions became the guiding purpose for re-reading the stories. I looked for indications that reading was important to my participants, why reading was important to them, and what events in their lives may have contributed to them becoming readers. The final larger themes of identity, ownership and memory were examined in light of current research on similar topics.

**Interpretation**

The three narratives represented over eighty years in a family history. The participants vary in age, in gender and in occupation. Irene is an 84-year-old grandmother. Linda is a 55-year-old retired teacher. Robert is Irene’s grandson and Linda’s nephew. He is a twenty five year old real estate agent. Yet, despite these differences, I found some common themes in the stories. In some ways they are not themes that I anticipated. Although I had left myself open to possibilities, in my own considerations I thought that there would be clearer linear connections between past events and current habits. What I found was that the events did not stand alone as moments that affected reading behaviour. The events were parts of the plot of a longer
story. Each event moved the plot along to a conclusion where the character read or didn’t read as an adult. The participant or the character in the story used memories, experience, and book ownership to develop this reader identity.

Identity

Gee (n.d.) talks about the idea of discourse as “being part of an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 1). It was clear from my participants that reading was not just something that they did. Robert says, “I am a reader”. He had the ability to use “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network” (Gee, n.d., p. 1). Reading, often thought of as a solitary activity (Long, 2003), is actually a highly social activity. Long (2003) refers to studies that conclude that “most readers need the support of talk with other readers”, and that “social isolation depresses readership, and social involvement encourages it” (p. 10) For my three participants, reading was not an isolating activity; it involved belonging to a group of readers who had similar reading identities. All three participants discussed giving and receiving books. Irene speaks of getting “secondhand books” from her aunt for school. Linda and Irene give books to each other all the time. Irene has purchased books for her daughters, her sons, and her grandchildren. Linda searches for certain books to buy for her mother. Robert began reading by being given books by his mother. His girlfriend gave him “a book called The Millionaire Next Door by Thomas Stanley” for his birthday. “Someone had given it to her. I saw it on her nightstand and said, ‘Oh that’s on my list’. Then she got it for me and we both started to
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read it together”. Robert clearly articulates this idea of social identity when he says, “usually I discover books through the people that I associate with. Once you start reading you seem to attract people in your life that read the same books as you do and then if they recommend a book or you recommend a book you know they are going to like it based on what they have read”.

Irene came from a home where her dad read. Linda’s dad valued reading and library membership. Robert’s mother was an important influence in his adult reading habits. He “didn’t start reading for pleasure until university” and this was when his mother began introducing him to motivational/business books. Both Irene and Linda married men who were readers, and Robert’s girlfriend is a reader.

Irene belongs to a reading group at her church and she started a second-hand bookstore at the St. Boniface hospital. Linda belongs to the MYRCA (Manitoba Young Readers Choice Awards) Committee. Both of them have engaged in social reading activities.

The three participants in this study have a well-developed sense of identity because their definition of literacy matches with their own behaviour. We all have an idea of what the identity kit of a reader is, and our own behaviours must fit with that idea in order to identify ourselves as a reader. Identity involves judging oneself and others based on the criteria that establishes that particular “kit”. For Irene and Linda, reading is clearly about fiction. Irene says, “I like to read, I read mostly fiction”, while Linda says, “Mum and I are fiction readers and novel readers”. But even within that idea of reading fiction there is judgment. Linda’s niece “is really into Stephen King and that kind of horror. That doesn’t fit with my idea of fiction.” Irene’s daughter in law “used to read a
lot of fiction, a real lot of fiction. But now she doesn’t read anything that isn’t inspirational or something.” For Irene this type of reading doesn’t seem to have as much value as fiction reading, whereas for Robert “almost all the books I read are non-fiction. I can’t remember the last fiction book I read. It was probably in high school. That was when I had to read a book for class. I like to read something useful. I just don’t have time for fiction these days.” His purpose for reading is different from Linda’s. For her “its about the story, its all about the story.”

Irene makes an observation about her son, “Rick doesn’t read anything.” Then she corrects herself, “Well, he reads the paper and the auto trader that sort of thing.” This is not Irene’s definition of reading. Linda’s background as a teacher becomes apparent when she makes a similar observation about her brother, “if you were to ask my brother if he was a reader he would say no, but yet, he goes through the auto trader. His wife is a reader, she reads a lot of self-help but still it’s a lot of reading, it doesn’t matter what it is”. Linda knows that the research says that fiction and non-fiction should be promoted as reading choices for students, but the use of her term “but still” indicates that she still has reservations about what is true reading. Others reading behaviour is judged against one’s own reading behaviour.

_Be_**_motional Memory_**

One possible limitation in this research is the reliance on memory. Particularly in Irene’s case when the memories are being recalled over almost a century. My concern when I planned for this research was what I thought might be the limited ability of my participants to recall memories about reading throughout their lives. My participants not only were able to recall memories, but could recount many, and in great detail. Irene told
a story of her husband reciting “The Cremation of Sam McGee” while he was being put out for open-heart surgery. In fact, the doctor told him as he prepared for an additional surgery, “Don’t bring that poem with you this time.” Linda remembers the importance of seeing L.M. Montgomery’s house and making her husband take her picture in front of it “so I can show it to my mother.” Robert remembers his dad reading to him before he could read. He even remembers the title, *Just Me and My Dad* by Mercer Mayer. These memories were not just recalled by the participants, but many were confirmed through conversations with the other two participants. The references to L.M. Montgomery and the Scottish mysteries were recounted in both Irene and Linda’s stories. Their interpretation of others’ reading habits was similar to each other. When we met for a final member check, the participants reminisced about many of the memories and built on each other’s recollections. I was able to see Linda’s book collection that she spoke about and Robert went through his virtual book list with me during our conversation.

Generally, the memories that my participants recalled about reading were positive. But by their own assessment, all three were skilled readers. Irene doesn’t have “any difficulty reading and I pronounce things right.” Linda remembers clearly having reading instruction. When the teacher would say a word, she would think “doesn’t everybody know that?” The teacher would say, “that’s Dick” and Linda would say “Well of course that’s Dick. I never did not know what the words were. I never had to figure out a word”. Robert recognizes that he was “pretty blessed” in his ability to read. Like his aunt, he was “pretty good from the get go”.

As well as having memories of their own reading. They all recall memories of struggling readers in their class. These memories range from frustration, “I didn’t like
the whole class reading thing because it was so slow. I found it a waste of time because I
could have read the whole thing on my own in half the time” or “I felt really sorry for the
kids who couldn’t do it. I would be thinking ‘Oh, why does he keep asking them,
because it’s hurting them inside.’ I was feeling sorry for the person that they had to read
out loud and everybody had to know that they weren’t good readers”. These memories
were not restricted to school time or childhood. Irene shared a recent memory of a
struggling reader in her church group. Skilled readers and struggling readers continue to
exist right into seniors’ groups. Adults have less opportunity to directly compare their
reading skills to others. School is where these memories are formed for both types of
readers.

The ability of my participants to recall memories with such detail was fascinating.
Initially, I named this theme in the narratives “diarizing life”. Reading seemed to give
road signs to my participants’ memories. They remembered when other things occurred
by the books that they read. After many varied searches, I could not come up with
research done on diarizing life. What I did find, was research on “emotional
memory”(Dolcos, Lebar, Cabeza, 2004, Carver, 2007). This idea of memory being tied
to emotions seemed to fit what I was seeing in both my own reading story and that of my
participants. Emotional memory occurs when the emotional centre of the brain, the
amygdala, interacts with the memory related brain regions. Dolcos, Lebar, and Cabeza
(2004) state that this interaction gives these memories “their indelible emotional
resonance”. Carver (2007) found that “the brain has the ability to store not only memories
but emotions as well-as they occurred at the time the memory was made” (p. 1). My
participants had positive memories of reading. They were always fairly skilled readers
and this contributed to these positive feelings when reading. When they recall memories of reading, the positive emotions are triggered as well. This encourages them to do further reading. In contrast, people who have stored negative memories along with reading memories would be reluctant to repeat these experiences. In a study by Lowe (2001) the reading histories of failed readers were investigated. Lowe states “There was a remarkable similarity in the participants’ memories of their early school days. All recall specific incidents in year one or two that they associated with their literacy failure. These memories were often so vivid that the color of the teacher’s dress, the print on the page arranged in narrow columns and where and with whom they were sitting are recalled in great detail” (p.4) Lowe concludes that “they were pre-occupied with experiences that reinforced their failure. The same feeling of humiliation surfaced whenever they attempted to engage with print”. Belzer (2002) in a study of failed readers found one participant reported “she has no memories of school before the age of about 11”(p. 110 )

The creation and storing of these early memories has a great impact on how people view themselves as readers in adulthood. Readers own their identity. In this study the importance that participants placed on ownership went beyond the idea of an abstract personal connection to a concrete idea. The prevalence of this idea in the data suggests that physical ownership of books is part of a reader’s identity.

Ownership

The term “ownership” is used throughout much of the literature to explain the idea of people taking responsibility for their learning and therefore defining their identity. Atwell (1998) maintains that student ownership is the defining feature of her reading and
writing workshop approach to literacy learning. Ownership is used in education to describe “student independence, autonomy, and choice” (Dudley-Marling, 1994, p v). When students take responsibility for their own learning, they are said to have “ownership” in the learning process. The ownership that my participants refer to is much more concrete than this abstract idea of student role in learning.

To articulate the meaning of ownership that was important in my study, it is necessary to redefine it. Although I am using the term in an educational context, the known meaning in this context needs to be replaced with the definition from The Canadian Oxford Dictionary:

Own: 1a. Belonging to oneself or itself; not another’s b. Individual, peculiar, particular. 2. used to emphasize identity rather than possession. pron 1. Private property 2. Kindred verb 1. Have as property, possess 2a. Confess; admit as valid, true 3. Acknowledge paternity, authorship or possession of.

What stands out from these narratives is the importance of “possessing” books, having books as “private property”. Somehow this definition seems much more pedestrian in the educational context. Can something as concrete as buying a book be as important to creating readers as the ideas of identity and literacy definition? “Reading is about the collecting and the owning.” This is how Linda’s story ends. It begins with her telling the “best thing that ever happened” to her. “I got fourteen books for Christmas”. Throughout the stories of my participants, the idea that took the greatest prominence in these discussions about reading was not the idea of “reading”. There was some discussion of the practices that they had or used to read, but very little about the actual time they spent reading. What was important was the “having read” a book. These
books became part of what they owned, either physically or through the idea that this book was now theirs because they had read it. Linda says, “I read Trixie Belden. I had them all. I also read Nancy Drew. I have some of them upstairs in my little library. Those were my books and I kept them”.

Irene’s story begins some eighty years ago with her own childhood. Books were clearly a luxury. She says that “we didn’t have any books to read in our house, and sometimes we couldn’t afford to get the weekly paper, which we all liked in our family.” But book ownership was still valued, “everybody knew you could give a book and it would be welcome”. Readers in Irene’s life were identified by the books that they owned. Her brother “was a real reader. He had whole sets of Zane Grey”. And the little girl whose parents owned the store also owned “all the L. M. Montgomery books, all the ones about Anne, about Emily, about Pat of Silverbush. She was very generous about letting the rest of us read these books, because her mom and dad could afford to buy them”.

When Irene could afford to buy books, she passed this idea of ownership onto her children, “books were something we could afford by then. We would buy books for them. The same as we did for our grandchildren”. Her early love of The Anne of Green Gables series continued through life, “I bought my sister the Anne books. She started with a set of maybe four. We kept on giving to my sister after she’d grown up and had a family of her own, so that she would have a complete set. Linda’s story repeats this theme. She tells of sitting down for tea in a bookstore, “and right in front of me was one of these Anne books that my mom needed. And I thought ‘I’m sure my mom doesn’t have this one. We just keep collecting.”
Irene’s owning of books became so prolific that moving her from her house to a suite became a bit of a problem. Linda said that she “didn’t ever want to pack up another carton of books. We found skating magazines from the 1960s. And an Ice Capades program from 1949. My nephew and I figure we could do and eBay business sometime”.

But each of these books is important to own for Irene. She says, “I have Flint and Feathers, several copies, poems by Pauline Johnson. I also have her life story. That’s part of my stuff that I don’t want to throw out. I have several copies of Song of Sourdough”. These books represent moments from her life, and each one has the story within the book and the story that the book recalls, much like a photograph. The idea of owning books being a way to diarize life is repeated in Linda’s story. Linda refused to throw out her University textbooks because they “tell your journey, about who you were and what you did”.

Times change, and so does book ownership. Irene’s books are in boxes and crates in her house. Linda’s are found in a lovely library in the beautiful Bed and Breakfast home that she owns.

Robert represents a new era in book owning. He says, “I keep a list of my reading. It’s in my phone. I have a ‘books that I have read’ list. I keep adding to it. Every time I read a book I try to put it on my list. I can say, “I’ve read this. I always have my phone with me”. And with this statement book ownership enters the digital age. The books that Robert has read become part of an ever-growing list that he keeps with him all the time.
There is limited research on this topic. My participants took pleasure in owning books, not just reading them. They responded to the feel of them, the look of them. There was an element of the hunt as they sought to add to their collections of books.

As characters in their own stories, my participants define and describe themselves as readers. They self-identify and socially identify as people who partake in the type of reading that I defined for my study. They are critical readers who use text to inform and entertain. Within these stories are elements that help to develop this identity. They are able to document their reading journey by both the memories that they recall with clarity and detail and by the books that serve as road markers.

Conclusion

There is a common literature response strategy used in classrooms called a story vine. Following the reading of a story, students collect artifacts that represent the important events in the story. These artifacts are attached to a “vine” and used as prompts to retell the story. Although there is little research on the concept of ownership of books, this is what the books in my participant’s lives seem to parallel. The books that readers own are the concrete representation of their reading journey. Each book connects them to the moment that they engaged with that text. They are able to recall the emotion that was generated at that time. Sumara says, “as readers identify with and interpret the experience of characters, they learn to reidentify and reinterpret themselves” (1998, p. 205). Reading therefore creates readers. I started this process looking for a definitive point in a person’s life that made them a reader. What I found was a continuum of experiences that leads them to identifying themselves as a reader. The recording of this continuum is their reading story.
My interpretation of the narratives and the research indicates that not only can people encourage the development of a reading identity in both themselves and others but they can also discourage this development. I also asked where the habit of reading was formed? Was it in schools, homes, or were readers born? Again, the complexity of reading makes a simple connection difficult if not impossible to make. What is clear is that it is not an issue of place. The setting of a story is an important backdrop, but it is the plot that moves the story towards its conclusion.

Sumara (1998) says that identity emerges from remembered and lived experiences (p. 203). Therefore, “school reading and writing have a particularly strong influence in defining literacy for these learners and that these definitions stay with them in adulthood despite practices that may contradict them” (Belzer, 2002, p. 107). Teaching students to read is not enough. They must recognize themselves as readers not just people who read.

The stories that were told by my participants informed me about the journeys that these readers undertook throughout their lives, but the stories also informed the participants. Stories, memories, and identity are intricately linked. My participants were able to retell their reading stories by using the emotional memories that they had collected throughout their lives. Like all good stories, these events moved them along the plot line. But an event on its own does not make a story. It is the connection between those events that is important. For readers, reading books and stories are themselves events in their own story. Each time they read a story they reinterpreted their own identity in light of the new information that they have from the text. Positive experiences moved them towards an ending where they were readers. Alternatively, people with
negative experiences with books and stories are can be taken in a direction that concludes with them being non-readers. Just like stories with plot twists and turns, the end of the story is not a foregone conclusion based on the beginning. Early non-readers may go on to become readers with later positive experiences. Robert, for example, did not begin to read for pleasure until University. Before that the reading events in his life were either negative or non-emotional. There were other stories being written in his life, but not a reading story. The fact that my participants not only had a reading story, but also could recall it with such clarity suggests that the stories are journey stories that have led them to the point that they are at now. Each recalled experience is a road marker on that journey. The research on emotional memory (Dolcos, LaBar, Cabeza, 2004) suggests that powerful memories can be formed through positive and negative experiences. Although all of my participants did end up as adult readers possibly because of their generally positive memories, if they had become non-readers, their memories would still have documented their journey.

**Implications**

Educators and parents need to make thoughtful decisions that help children become readers. As those children grow up, they need to be prepared to take an active role in their own identity formation.

*Students need to be provided with opportunities to develop, think, and talk about themselves as readers.*

If, as Allison (2004) says, “The story is the thing needed”, then the implication from this research is that people need the opportunity to learn, know, and tell their story about themselves as a reader and as a learner. In recent years, there has been a
considerable movement to include the ideas of metacognition or “thinking about thinking” into classrooms. Teachers are much more aware of the range of learners in classrooms and many teachers engage students in discussions about their own learning style or multiple intelligences. These ideas of including the learner in discussions about their learning need to be reframed to include students in the creation of their own story. As teachers we often record parts of students’ stories through anecdotal records or on report cards. These are not our stories to tell in isolation from the character in the story.

The new Manitoba Social Studies Curriculum has a focus on the idea of identity. As early as grade one, students are encouraged to “Give examples of groups with which they identify. Examples: cultural, linguistic, community...” (Manitoba Department of Education, Training and Youth, p. 38). Having students recognize that they are a part of a family, team, or club helps them to develop their identity. This idea could easily be used to have students think about their identity as a reader or a learner. In order for students to have rich reading stories to tell, they must have positive emotional memories and artifacts to use as prompts to retell their stories.

*Teachers need to be thoughtful about providing experiences that create positive memories about reading and books.*

As always, our neighbours to the south influence us. Movements that focus on accountability, back to the basics, and standardized tests results sway our instruction for learning to read, as in decoding and functional reading, instead of learning to read for pleasure. Students need opportunities in schools to see that reading for pleasure can entertain and inform. What happens in school must assist in creating positive emotional memories involving books, text, and reading. Schools need to give students the opportunity to “own” their literacy practices. For all readers, particularly for adolescents,
choice is crucial. Robert comments that he appreciated when he was given the opportunity to choose what he read in school. Yet, common practice is to give less choice as students become more skilled, “middle school students are expected to become independent readers, yet they get limited opportunities to explore their own interests in reading, to read at their own pace, or to make their own decisions about whether or not to read a book” (Ivey, 2001, 368)

School reading and school literacy practices must value the literacy practices that students value. Norton (2003) investigated the popularity of Archie comic books with adolescents. Teachers reported that although they had enjoyed comics as youngsters “they now considered them unsuitable reading material particularly in the school context” (p. 142). Teachers commented that “they are not very educational, a lot of children might be distracted by the pictures, or I would prefer an actual book” (p. 142). These comments led Norton (2003) to ask “to what extent we as literacy educators take seriously the enjoyment value of reading for preteen children” (p. 142) This idea of enjoyment, which in schools often comes secondary to skills, may be an important factor in developing lifelong readers. Belzer (2002) maintains, “without engagement, learners will eschew opportunities to read. Thus, enthusiasm and engagement are extremely important in developing proficiency” (p. 104). When schools fail to support students’ love of reading, what develops is a “literate underlife”. Finders (1997) said that students “played out a range of social roles in this “literate underlife”, they “read, wrote, and talked about issues that were not sanctioned for them in typical classrooms” (Ivey, 2001, p. 354).

Students will separate school reading from “real” reading. If schools do not make connections “between various literacy practices inside and outside of school, and if they
devalue learners’ cultural and personal experiences, preferences, strengths, and vulnerabilities, they risk creating disengaged readers for life” (Belzer, 2002 p. 105). Robert recognized that his reading needs were not met at school but his family structure supported other types of reading. If that support is missing, struggling readers may “be impeded by a belief that (a) school style reading and reading materials are the only legitimate way to improve reading and (b) school learned behaviours are the only legitimate way to engage with texts” (Belzer, 2002, p. 112).

**Parents need to invest in owning and keeping books that are road signs in a child’s life.**

More research is required in the area of book ownership. This study suggests that books that readers own become artifacts that help them to recall, retell, and reidentify with events on their reading journey. The participants all found a way to keep, catalogue, and revisit books that they had read. These books were important to their identity. Parents need to value reading by committing to the development of a child’s personal library. Similarly to collecting photographs, books can be used to document a child’s life. Schools can assist in this endeavor by promoting the use of inexpensive, accessible book clubs and holding book fairs in their schools. Children can be encouraged to save to purchase their own books, both new and secondhand. Children also need to be taught to make quality choices about books and learn to look after them as they would any valuable collection. Adult readers all seem to have a way to own and keep books. Again, more research in this area could clarify the links between ownership and reading identity.

In the 21st century we have a constantly evolving definition of literacy. Young people are confronted by multiple literacies and required to read and write in a variety of
ways. The eighty-four year span of stories represented in this study illustrates the evolving nature of literacy. Irene and Linda had much more traditional views of reading. They connected with the fiction that was read in schools. They lined their shelves with the books that they had read. In contrast, Robert had to redefine in adulthood his purpose for reading. His virtual book list reflects new ways of belonging to a community of readers. Yet the stories of the participants reflect the common theme that readers need a reading identity and teachers, parents and readers themselves can all take a role in developing that identity. This reading identity takes the form of a reading story, a narrative journey.
References


