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More than 100 forms, graphic organizers, and other teaching resources can be accessed in PDF format from this DVD. A full list of these resources can be found beginning on page 546.
While writing this volume we were reminded over and over again how our lives have been shaped by reading. Books have provided adventures to thrill us, information to surprise and satisfy us, places and times to explore, and friends that we can return to again and again. Over the past several years, we have investigated how readers are built over a period of time. Starting in early kindergarten and moving through the teenage years, we have gotten a picture of reading not as a skill to be acquired and used but as an integral part of the way we learn to understand our world. Comprehension begins with learning language in connection with experiences with text—listening to written language read aloud and engaging with and talking about books. We continue developing these processes throughout our lives as we experience written language through a wide range of genres. Even listening to the news or watching a movie involves engagement with written language! We are always encountering text, learning from it, and changing in response to it.

The title of this book emphasizes comprehending and fluency. These two words convey the active nature of reading as well as the ease that is essential for understanding and enjoyment. Readers are always actively working to construct meaning, so comprehending is an ongoing process rather than simply the outcome or product of reading. Readers apply many complex and interrelated systems of strategic actions in order to comprehend written language—not as single, disparate cognitive actions but simultaneously, as thinking. Readers work fluently, the processing occurring in a largely unconscious way as they concentrate on the information in the text. The few problems they experience in processing are solved quickly and efficiently, requiring very little attention. The book may be in the hand and the eyes moving across the page, but the reader’s thinking is somewhere else—climbing Mt. Everest or exploring New York in the 1800s.

Individuals who love reading do it voluntarily and often. They recommend texts to friends, love talking about them, and usually try to read the book before seeing the movie. They have their own tastes and preferences, as well as their own techniques for selecting books. They have no trouble finding books to read; in fact, they usually have a few “in reserve” at any given time. They look forward to the expansion of their thinking that comes from reading both fiction and nonfiction, a process that is made even better if they have a chance to talk about a book with others. We have seen these attitudes toward reading at all grade levels; it’s what we want for our students. If active, easy, fluent reading is not experienced from the beginning, it is difficult (although not impossible) to develop as a reader later in life.

Throughout this volume, we emphasize how we can support our students’ active processing as we work with them before, during, and after reading as well as in other instructional contexts. As noted in the second part of the title, we can support students by engaging them in thinking, talking, and writing about reading. Thinking, talking, and writing (or drawing) bring new dimensions to the reading process and help students of all ages continue to grow. In achieving our goals, we are always thinking about readers, texts, and teaching.

We begin with readers. Two introductory chapters offer three short portraits of readers—Sara, a kindergarten student; Luis, in grade four, and Natalie, an eighth grader who describes her literate life in her own voice—followed by an overview of how you can create a literate community in your own classroom.

Section I explores the dynamics of the reading process and the systems of strategic actions that readers develop over time. Two chapters focus on fluent processing and how it develops. The final chapter of this section discusses evidence of effective processing as revealed through dynamic assessment of your students.

In Section II, we investigate the next logical element in reading instruction—texts. During the last twenty years we have spent many enjoyable and productive hours analyzing the texts that we read to students and that they read for themselves. What supports does the text offer the reader?
What challenges will there be? What must a reader know and be able to do to read this text with understanding and fluency? As teachers, we have found that the more analytically we can think about texts ourselves, the more powerful the instruction that we can offer our students. In five chapters, we explore the text variety and quality needed to support readers across the elementary and middle grades. We discuss ten factors related to text difficulty, as well as a gradient from A to Z that can be used as a teacher’s tool to support and document students’ reading progress through the grades. The last two chapters explore the demands of nonfiction and fiction texts and poetry.

With knowledge of the reading process and an analytic view of text features as a foundation, we are ready to design effective instruction. Section III, Teaching, makes up the largest portion of this book. Teaching reading cannot be confined to one instructional setting. In the chapters that make up this section, we describe effective teaching for comprehending and fluency in whole-group, small-group, and individual settings. The first three chapters focus on building a literate culture in the classroom while at the same time providing a foundation for comprehending. Always, encounters with texts are surrounded by talk. Discussing books with others supports effective processing in many ways and makes the experience of reading richer for individuals, but it is learned behavior and for most students requires explicit instruction. In highly productive classrooms, students learn to talk about books during interactive read-aloud, literature study (which we also call book club), reading minilessons and shares, guided and independent reading. The fourth chapter of this section describes moving from interactive read-aloud to literature study; the fifth presents many practical tips for getting started with book clubs, including guidelines for the first thirty-five days.

In Section III we also describe shared and performed reading as a way to expand comprehending powers and build fluency. Two additional chapters provide information on elements of a reading workshop, including minilessons that will support thinking about texts. Three chapters are then devoted to an in-depth look at guided reading—small-group instruction explicitly focused on teaching for comprehending and fluency. Through guided reading, you can help students expand their reading powers by applying strategic actions to increasingly difficult texts. Teaching support makes this learning progress possible.

We also include two chapters on writing about reading, a powerful tool that can be used in all instructional contexts. As students experience more texts, they can move from talking to writing (and often drawing) about the texts they’ve read. These two chapters do not present a writing program or guidelines for writing workshop, an essential instructional component that we have described elsewhere. The writing described in this volume has a very particular purpose: to expand students’ thinking about reading. In these chapters we describe many genres and forms for writing about reading that can be used in connection with interactive read-aloud, literature discussion, and guided and independent reading.

The final three chapters also deal with teaching within these instructional contexts. One chapter is devoted to meeting the needs of English language learners. Another, based on the information presented in Section I, focuses on the many ways to teach for fluency. Finally, we describe a variety of instructional approaches to help students increase vocabulary.

The book concludes with some final thoughts related to teaching through the lens of comprehending. Reading, from the beginning, must be filled with meaning. We cannot assure comprehending and fluency through a few lessons; it must be fostered all of the time, at least throughout the nine years leading to high school. Children need year after year of effective instruction if they are to become highly effective readers. Primary teachers will benefit from looking forward through the years, understanding that what they provide in those early years forms the foundation for very complex learning. Upper elementary and middle school teachers will find there is much to learn by examining early learning. Our own learning as we worked on this book has been profound; it has led us to the production of a very detailed continuum of learning that will be published as a companion volume (Pinnell and Fountas, A Continuum of Reading Progress: A Guide to Teaching, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006). We hope that volume and the one you hold in your hand will provide invaluable support as you work with your colleagues to prepare literate world citizens.
Living a Literate Life: The Right of Childhood

“Learning to read and write ought to be one of the most joyful and successful of human undertakings.”

What does it mean to lead a literate life?
In this introductory chapter, we visit three children, each of whom lives a life rich with the gifts of literacy. They are Sara, a first grader; Thomas, a fifth grader; and Natalie, an eighth grader. You may want to read the portrait of the student closest to the age of the students you teach, or you may read all three, noticing the parallels in their lives as well as the expanding resources available to them as learners.

A portrait of a grade one student, Sara
First grader Sara is an avid reader and writer. Typically, she begins her day by eating a quick breakfast as her parents get ready to go to work. She sees them reading the newspaper and making lists of things to do or buy. Her mother writes notes to the babysitter and places
Sara’s library books and other school materials by the door so that she will not forget them. By observing these daily activities, Sara has learned that writing is a way of communicating with someone who is not present and that it also can serve as a tool to aid memory. She is aware that there are texts to read all around her. Her examination of the funny characters and cartoons on cereal boxes may lead to later examination of the nutritional characteristics of the food inside. Sarah is beginning to understand a range of texts—cards, lists, labels, newspapers, cartoons, books.

Sara regularly commemorates important occasions through writing. She plans Valentine and special-occasion cards that she wants to send to her godmother (“big Sara”) or her brother, who is away at college. She sees her parents reading and writing every day—material for work and books for enjoyment, certainly, but also texts related to simple daily activities. She sees them making lists, writing notes, doing email on the computer and wireless devices, consulting directions and recipes, finding and reading information on the Internet, and generally commemorating family events. Sara is learning that writing is a way of communicating with others, whether they are close or far, and can be a tool to mark significant events and express deep feelings. For example, when her goldfish died, one of Sara’s first actions was to write a simple tribute (Figure 1).

In a corner of the family room there is a small table and chairs where Sara does a great deal of her writing. She has paper, crayons, markers, and scissors. This inexpensive set-up teaches her to value these supplies and keep them in order. It is always there, which leads her to read and write often. (Sometimes
she makes place cards for guests when they come for dinner and distributes questionnaires for them to fill out.

Books are a part of Sara’s world. She brings books home from school, and there is a designated place to keep them so they do not get lost. She also goes to the local library every other weekend, where she hears stories and is learning to pick out new books. She already has some favorite authors: she wants to hear Kevin Henkes’s classic *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse* read aloud again and again, and the book has prompted Sara to take her own purse to school!

Sara’s first-grade classroom provides many opportunities to read and write. Her teacher, Ms. Peters, finds time to read aloud to the children several times each day, and she engages children in oral discussion before, during, and after reading. For example, in a discussion of *My Best Friend Moved Away*, by Nancy Carlson, the children talked about their own experiences with moving or having a friend leave, the feelings that the main character was probably having, what might happen next in the story, how the girl’s feelings changed during the story—and why! Ms. Peters has taught these young children routines such as brief “turn and talk” interactions with a partner so they have more opportunity for conversation and also learn they are expected to talk about their thinking in response to reading. These powerful conversations enrich Sara’s understanding. She is learning that reading can be a social activity.

Often, Sara and her classmates participate in interactive or shared writing, in which they compose a message or story together and Ms. Peters writes it. At times, children “share the pen” to help them develop greater ownership of the writing and also focus on letters, words, and sounds. In composing “Things We Like to Do With Friends” (Figure 2), the children twice turned back to the book *My Best Friend Moved Away* for more ideas. After completing each item in the list, they reread the piece so far together. When they had finished their list, they made a few comparisons between it and the events in the book. This list will be a good resource for them if they want to write stories about friends in a writing workshop.
Literary experiences like those related to *My Best Friend Moved Away* involve Sara in thinking, talking, and writing about reading. In every way except decoding the words she has processed a text—making predictions, noticing details, empathizing with characters, noticing character changes, and reflecting on the meaning of friendship and loss. With group support, she has helped to compose and write a text that she and her classmates can read first in a shared way and ultimately independently.

Phonics is an important part of Sara’s classroom. She takes part in a daily minilesson on some aspect of sounds, letters, and words, and applies her knowledge in a word study center or an individual assignment. More important, however, she has the chance to apply her knowledge of letters and sounds in writing and reading for real purposes. At the beginning of each day she has an opportunity for independent work: listening to stories and responding by drawing or writing; independently reading from “browsing boxes” (books she has read before or new books within her reading range); sorting words by first letter or pictures by first sound; putting together poems in the pocket chart and reading them to check for accuracy. In fact, Sara learns to read a new poem almost every day. She first encounters the poems in shared reading. After they become familiar, Ms. Peters hands out a photocopied version so that children can glue it in their personal poetry notebooks and illustrate it. When Sara finishes the year, she will take home a wonderful book of over two hundred illustrated poems that she can read.

As children work independently, Ms. Peters provides small-group instruction called guided reading. Each year, she closely observes children in the class and systematically assesses their reading strengths and needs. She uses this information to form groups so that she can do some explicit teaching. In guided reading, Sara is introduced to a new book that is just a little more difficult that she can read independently. With teacher support, however, she stretches her reading powers. Working in her small group allows Sara to use everything she knows about reading to solve words, follow and understand a text, and apply different strategic actions. The process is supported by conversation with Ms. Peters and the other group members.
Living a Literate Life

One of Sara’s favorite parts of the day is writing workshop. It begins with a minilesson from Ms. Peters on aspects of the writing process; then students work independently on self-selected topics, such as this piece about Sara’s blanket (Figure 3). Notice that there are some conventionally spelled high-frequency words, that every syllable has a vowel, and that the sounds of most consonants are represented. She has produced complex sentences with embedded clauses and is developing her own voice as a writer. Sara connects her life with school and expresses her unique meanings through writing every day. She is beginning to use conventions in the service of meaning and is growing as a writer. In Section III you will see a letter to an author that Sara wrote in second grade.

As part of her school day, Sara hears several texts read aloud, reads several texts herself, responds to texts in writing, writes about topics of importance to her, and talks about her reading and her thinking with others. She examines the details of written language through phonics and spelling lessons and learns to apply her knowledge while writing and reading continuous text. She takes books, poems, and her own writing home with her and brings her home experiences to school. During each day, at home and at school, Sara has the opportunity to live a literate life. Her everyday experiences incorporate some aspect of literacy at almost every moment. She uses language in the form of talking, reading, and writing to expand her understanding of the world.

A portrait of a grade five student, Thomas

Through books, Thomas and his classmates expand their knowledge of times, events, and people beyond their own experiences.

Thomas, a fifth grader, lives with his mother and two younger brothers in a small suburb within a large city. He walks to the neighborhood school, a very large K–8 complex. Thomas’s mother has designated the kitchen table as the “homework center.” His grandmother, who stays with the boys until their mom gets home from work, is firm about the activity. Thomas usually works on spelling, math, and writing assignments. Each evening, he spends thirty minutes reading a book that he has selected for reading workshop; he may also work on the weekly...
letter he writes to his teacher about his thinking regarding the book. He also
writes for fifteen minutes each night in a writer's notebook, a writer's tool intro-
duced to him by his teacher, Mr. Ruiz. At first, Thomas didn't know what to do
with the notebook, but after classroom demonstrations and instruction, he now
uses the notebook fluidly, recording his thoughts and experiences, noting observa-
tions, making lists of interesting topics he wants to write about, sketching interesting objects he sees. In fact, just about anything goes into this notebook. While
Thomas does his homework, the two younger boys read, draw, and write. Plenty of TV is
watched in this house, but this short time reserved for homework really pays off!

Even though Thomas can read proficiently for himself, Mr. Ruiz regularly reads to the
class. Often, he chooses sophisticated picture books, like The Cats in Kracinski Square, by
Karen Hesse; Rose Blanche, by Roberto Innocenti, and Faithful Elephants: A True Story of
Animals, People, and War, by Yukio Tsuchiya. Mr. Ruiz also reads chapter books in a variety of
genres, like Jerry Spinelli's Milkweed, which gives students a chance to hear a new book on a
sophisticated theme by a favorite author, and Firewing, a volume in the animal fantasy trilogy
about silverwing bats, by Kenneth Oppel. For literature discussion, Thomas has read and talked
with others about Max the Mighty, a sequel to Freak the Mighty, by Rodman Philbrick. This
story about a kid who is large for his age deals with some serious issues, like child abuse.

Through books like these, Thomas and his classmates expand their knowledge of times,
events, and people beyond their own experiences. Mr. Ruiz refers to the times he reads aloud as
“interactive” because he intentionally guides his students in conversations that will expand
their understanding of themselves and the world. Interactive read-alouds have helped the stu-
dents in this class develop favorite authors and illustrators, notice writing styles, compare
themes, and analyze aspects of the writer's craft. Always, literature discussion surrounds the
interactive read-aloud session.

Thomas experiences direct lessons on spelling and engages in a five-day sequence of word
study. He has direct instruction on vocabulary, with the opportunity to notice the connections
between word parts and meaning. He also learns a great deal about spelling and
vocabulary from participation in reading and writing workshop.

Reading workshop is Thomas's favorite part of
the school day. It begins with a couple of “book
talks,” very short descriptions of books students
might want to read. Often, Thomas jots down a title
in his Books to Read list in his reader's notebook.
This reader’s notebook is the repository of his records and responses to reading. In it, he also keeps a list of books he has read, with appropriate dates and comments. The major part of the notebook is devoted to the letters that Thomas exchanges with Mr. Ruiz. Each week, he is expected to write a thoughtful letter that shows what he is thinking in response to what he is reading. He can comment on any text (for example, one that he has listened to on tape or heard in interactive read-aloud), but he is particularly expected to address the book he has selected for independent reading. The notebook has space for “short writes” and other directed and open responses in a variety of genres that may occur in any reading context—guided reading, literature discussion, or interactive read-aloud.

Early in the year, Mr. Ruiz spent some instructional time explicitly teaching students how to select books for themselves, and that has paid off. Thomas has favorite topics, genres, and authors, but he also regularly explores new genres. He chooses books that are just about right for his current strategies and skills; all it takes is reading a few pages as a test. He also is well aware of his own interests in both nonfiction and fiction.

At the beginning of reading workshop, Mr. Ruiz provides a minilesson that demonstrates some aspect of reading to the students. He tries to express the principle in a clear statement that students can understand and act on, like “readers think about what the author is really trying to say.” Often he uses texts that he has read aloud and students have discussed as examples. About *An Angel for Solomon Singer*, by Cynthia Rylant, he says: “I’m thinking that Solomon was a very lonely man who missed his home in the country. When they made him so welcome in the cafe, he still missed the country but he was not so lonely anymore because he had connected with other people.” Each day, Mr. Ruiz encourages students to think about the deeper meaning in the texts that they are currently reading, and then, after the minilesson, students settle down to read individually and silently.

Look at Thomas’s letters to Mr. Ruiz shown in Figure 5. About *Firewing*, he says he has recommended it to his friend MacKenzie. He also comments on *Max the Mighty*, which he had discussed with peers; *Mariel of Redwall*, which he has selected for independent reading; and *The Journal of Douglas Allen Deeds: The Donner Party*...
Expedition, 1846, which was introduced to him in guided reading. In these letters, Thomas’s goal is not to summarize the text, except perhaps as background evidence; his real purpose is to explain his own responses and thinking. He writes freely about his own preferences and hunches; he raises questions and makes predictions. He feels free to ask questions of his teacher.

Mr. Ruiz’s response is also shown in Figure 7. He responds to Thomas’s question and prompts him to make connections between two works by the same writer. He comments on Thomas’s reading of the genre of fantasy during the year.

Thomas’s next letter shows that he is truly enjoying the book about the Donner party and has noticed some of the graphic language used by the writer. He seems to be a devoted reader of fantasy, since he is finishing Mariel of Redwall and simultaneously beginning Dragonflight, by Anne McCaffrey. He provides some summary information about Redwall and makes a prediction.

While students are reading silently or writing in their notebooks, Mr. Ruiz has the opportunity to work with small groups. He alternates guided reading instruction with literature discussion groups. In guided reading, he selects and introduces texts that will give his fifth graders an opportunity to learn more about reading, he carefully varies genre and type of text. In literature discussion, which he calls “book clubs,” students usually have a limited choice. They sign up for a small-group discussion and prepare by reading and making notes. In both guided reading and book club, students often write in response to what they’ve read. For example, after a discussion of Bridge to Terabithia, which Mr. Ruiz read aloud, Thomas wrote the short comment shown in Figure 6.

At the end of reading workshop, students engage in a brief discussion that effectively sums up the minilesson and promotes further conversation. Students often “turn and talk” about their reading, focusing on the minilesson principle. About the series Among the Betrayed, Thomas says, “In these books a group of people are in charge and they keep everything for themselves. The rest of the people have no power and live a very poor life. They even have laws that say a family can have only two children. These books really show you how when one group gets too much power they can oppress the other groups.”

Thomas has been involved in writing workshop since kindergarten. In fact, he has learned to write in both Spanish and English. Using his writer’s notebook as a resource, he regularly constructs “discovery drafts” to get his thinking down and then works through the revising and editing processes.
then works through the revising and editing processes. His portfolio has many “final drafts” and a few published pieces. One piece he has published is his report on sharks (Figure 7). The report provides evidence that Thomas has had some experience in reading informational texts. He has created an interesting lead page and an ending. He has organized his information into three categories: appearance, food, and behavior. Notice that he receives interesting feedback from his classmates (see Figure 8)! As directed by Mr. Ruiz, he saves his drafts and regularly reflects on his progress as a writer. For each piece, he is expected to write what he has learned from it. For this piece, Thomas wrote: “I learned to organize my information and use headings to help readers know what kind of information I am writing about.”

Writing workshop sometimes begins with a couple of “author talks,” short sharings of information about writers that students can learn from. Thomas always participates in a minilesson about some aspect of writing—procedures for the workshop, strategies and skills, or the writer’s craft. These short lessons often involve the use of “mentor texts” that students have heard read aloud. Through studying the craft and technique of other writers, Thomas is trying on new roles and techniques.

Throughout his day, Thomas does a great deal of reading and writing. At the end of the day, Thomas takes his independen-
ent reading book home. All in all, he spends about five hours reading every week (this does not include hearing texts read aloud or reading textbooks in the content areas). He reads about a chapter book a week of his own choosing and many other texts as directed by Mr. Ruiz. Daily instruction and focused support in reading and writing are just as important to this fifth grader as they are to students in younger grades.

A portrait of an grade eight student, Natalie

Natalie is an eighth grader who lives in a large city and is excited about moving on to high school. Below she describes her own literate life.

A Portrait in Literacy by Natalie Marie Cole

My name is Natalie Marie Cole, and I am happy to describe how reading and writing fit into my life. I will start with my school. I think of my classroom as a real community, and it is nice to be part of it. We have all known each other for at least three years and most of us for five years. None of us really wants to leave our school and be split up. In a farewell to the school this year, I wrote:

To all the teachers, I leave the memory of a class so tight knit that no matter how much you put into a seating chart, everyone can just turn around and spark a conversation with anyone.

Some of the books I have read this year have really made me think. I like reading history. I’m particularly fascinated with information about early America so I can see the roots of American ideals. I also like reading about wars and how political strategies are used. Alexander the Great is probably my favorite figure in history because he started his legacy by being the only person observant enough to figure out why a horse was being rebellious. I first learned about him in sixth grade when we studied ancient history. That shows that you don’t have to wait until you are an adult to actually accomplish something important. I liked how Alexander did not see himself as being greater than his men. He looked at soldiers as peers.

We all read To Kill a Mockingbird and then had student-led discussions. At the end, we all wrote essays about it. I found it interesting that it was the only book that Harper Lee ever wrote. Even though I had read a lot about the author and the setting, I still had no idea what to expect from the book. To me, Boo Radley was very important. It may seem like he was only in part of the book, but he was actually there all the time. When Scout was standing on Boo’s porch looking out on the road, seeing what Boo would have seen throughout the timeframe of the book—that really explained his character (that is, if you didn’t get it from the first!). Boo was just all about protecting Scout and Jim.
I also read *The Giver*. When we read that book, we were supposed to write about a memory that we wanted to keep, just like in the story. I wrote about a day at sailing camp with six of my friends. This memory was special to me. The wind was good, so we stayed on the heel the whole time. We were on the high side and sailing was fast. At one point the cleat on the mainsheet was twisted so that it would stick and wouldn’t let the mainsheet go through. We tied a knot on the mainsheet and we were on a heel and this supposedly uncapsizable boat capsized! We ended up capsizing that boat a third time! We were all in the water—just hanging out. It was just a fun day. We thought we would get in trouble but we didn’t. I wanted to pass on this good memory of just being a kid and having fun and doing crazy things—the simple pleasures of life.

Over the last few years I’ve been reading the *Ender* series, which includes eight books by Orson Scott Card. I started reading this series when somebody gave the book to my mom to give to me. (This was Christmas of fourth or fifth grade.) I didn’t read it then, but one day over the summer, I picked it up and started reading it. The books in the series are classified as science fiction, but they are really political and philosophical in many ways. In the end, all the countries join the Free People of Earth except for the United States, which was holding out and deciding to do things on its own, still thinking that it was the superior country. Even though the series is set many years in the future, I can see that America has this kind of attitude today.

At first I didn’t think I would like *Animal Farm*. It seemed kind of weird. George Orwell did make a lot of statements about Trotsky and Stalin—but it wasn’t just that. It was all about how people can be so easily controlled if you just send them the right message. I took the position that in the way the book was portrayed in the film, they lost the message that George Orwell was trying to send.

About December, we started to get ready for our trip to Spain. We studied the Spanish culture and learned what to expect. We made sure that everybody had a good foundation in Spanish so we could talk to people who do not speak English. We had many meetings and fund raisers. Working together in our last year and getting ready for this trip made us close, which is why we actually talk to each other now even though we are spread out to other schools. It also tied us to the school and our teachers. I want to go back to Spain someday and see more. One of the best things about the trip to Spain was that my mom went, too. We liked having that experience together. After the trip, I wrote thank you notes to both my dad and my mom. Here’s the one for Mom (Figure 9). Notice my Spanish signature!

How do I use reading and writing in my daily life? For one thing, I am happy that I read and write Spanish, especially because my mother
and grandparents are Puerto Rican. I write to my grandparents in Spanish. Here is a sample from one of those letters (Figure 10).

I’m in sports right now, and that requires a lot of study. Before games and practices, I check the labels of what I am eating to make sure I have enough potassium and carbohydrates so that I have enough energy for the game. I also write about sports. Right now I am working on a piece called “Soccer Is Like Life.” It may be an essay or a poem. Here is a bit of it (Figure 11).

Our family likes to play cards and games together. I remember that when I was younger, I read all of the instructions for Texas Hold’em and taught the family. Before we have company, I study the Cranium cards to make sure I know all of the answers. I’d say I’m a little competitive.

When I’m home in the summer, I usually make dinner for the family. My mom will write recipes for me and notes for what she wants me to do, but I do a lot of experimenting on my own. One night I wanted to make dessert, but we did not have a lot of ingredients. So I searched through the cookbook to find something that I could make with what we had. Peanut streusel pie—3 layers! It was delicious.

Reading and writing also come into my music. I can play the trumpet, and I study the lyrics of CDs until I learn them. I am self-taught. I listen to the song, look up the notes, play the song and then change things around. Somehow, working at the keyboard helps me play the trumpet. I can play it on the keyboard and see how it is supposed to sound.

I do instant messaging just about every day. My friends and I come home from school and talk to each other about what’s going on. In a way, it is a different language and kids like it. I find talking on the computer more expressive than talking on the
phone. And also, it’s a lot easier to multitask while on line. I can be doing my homework, listening to music, AND talking to several people all at the same time! You can also just go into a chat room, and everyone can communicate—coordinate events and get things done.

Speaking of events, my thirteenth birthday was a night to remember. Here is the invitation I created [Figure 12]. On the front you’ll notice my logo, which I designed myself—NA.7! This invitation had to be persuasive. The party was late at night so I had to appeal to the parents and convince them that the kids would not be with big crowds of strangers. I needed to maximize the number of guests so that we could have the Family Fun Center all to ourselves. Notice that I put the minimum number needed. It was a fun party!

I read for pleasure all the time and sometimes I read books over and over. I also like to write about my thinking and to write poetry. I like science fiction because to follow the story you have to think logically. I loved The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy and The Restaurant at the End of the Universe by Douglas Adams. Science fiction makes you explore a lot of ideas that you don’t think about every day, and it’s easy to just get lost in the story, especially the Adams books. You think it’s really crazy, but then you think about it again, and then you think it could happen.

What started me reading? As a child I had Dr. Seuss books and I read them over and over. (That’s what started me reading books more than once!) After a short time, those were easy. In fifth grade, I read the book Hatchet, and in sixth grade I discovered there was another book called Brian’s Winter. That may have started me reading books in a series. I remember Maniac Magee. That book took my reading to a higher level and it started my thinking about people’s mindsets. I used to collect rocks and find books to read about them—how they were formed and how they got their names, and that would start me reading.

The only magazine I still read is Nickelodeon. It has a little bit of everything that pertains to kids—sports, comics, puzzles, stories. Each book has its own theme, which makes it really easy to read straight through instead of skipping around.

I would like to become a lawyer and after I get into a pretty good position, then become a politician to work against corruption. I see politics as controlling people and using things to your advantage. If you want to get elected, you say and do things that you think people are going to like or that they think are good qualities to have. Take Animal Farm, for example. The pigs, to have all the animals follow them, showed that the pigs were more qualified. They only told them all of the bad things about the humans and none of the good things. When Stalin took over, he manip-
ulated the people and told them it would be a Utopia. If everyone worked as hard as they could, they would all be prosperous and live happy lives. The idea seemed without flaws, but his execution was corrupted because of the power. Once someone gets control over a group of people or even one person, the power they have can corrupt them. Even if they start out with good intentions, it doesn’t end very well. You can learn a lot from history. I’ll end with a poem I wrote about Alexander, my favorite political figure [Figure 13].

Learning Across Contexts

Children are learning how to comprehend their world during every moment of every aspect of their lives. Given our increasingly busy schedules, weekdays include very little time for families to interact around literacy or structured learning; yet, as the stories of Sara, Thomas, and Natalie make clear, they manage a good deal of it. All three students carry out their search for meaning before, during, and after school. The kinds of things that families do on weekends also contribute to the comprehending process: fishing, helping or watching adults fix a car, taking care of babies, listening to family stories, participating in family cooking, riding bikes, and helping or watching someone sew, paint, or build. Many children have the opportunity to go to the aquarium or the zoo, go shopping at the mall or supermarket, go to movies. Activities such as church attendance offer opportunities to sing, read, listen, discuss. Going to club
meetings or summer day-camp helps children develop independence and social skills and enables students to participate in dance or music.

Ideally, teachers and families work together as partners to support students’ developing literacy. School personnel need to be aware of their students’ community and culture so that they can enrich their conversations with students with meaningful examples. The more teachers know about children’s home languages, for example, the better they can help them build bridges to English proficiency.

Teachers can encourage children to talk and write about their own lives, and can demonstrate daily that they value the children’s experiences and the community in which they live. If you are teaching children who live in constrained economic circumstances, it’s very important to remember that most of them do not think of themselves as “poor.” They are interested in the exciting things that are happening around them and usually appreciate what they have. Of course many children do experience hardship and tragedy, and our job as teachers is to support our students in any way we can. The central goal of literacy teaching, though, is to create a literate life for children in classrooms and to enrich their home literacy as much as possible and appropriate.

Sara, Thomas, and Natalie provide evidence that lives are shaped by opportunities. These three children are in different places in their lives. They have different backgrounds, interests, and aspirations. All three children bring many strengths to their education, but all three need school to experience the high-quality literate life that is their right. They remind us that school is more than passing tests or becoming proficient as a reader and writer. The greater goal of school, and particularly of literacy teaching, is helping children grow into adults whose lives are enriched by the reading and writing they do every day and whose futures offer every opportunity.