



PROFILE: "Some Lady"! A Conversation with Dorothy Watson, Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts

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PROFILE



Some Lady! A Conversation with Dorothy Watson, Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts

Rudine Sims Bishop

Editor's Note

Dorothy Watson is this year's Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts. Recipients of this annual award are selected by members of the Elementary Section Steering Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Dorothy Watson is deeply committed to teaching and learning and to teachers and children. She began her professional career as a classroom teacher in Kansas City, Missouri. Her work as a teacher educator also began in Kansas City, where she held a number of other positions including that of reading consultant and coordinator of the Kansas City National Teacher Corps. Her reach became international early on when she spent three summers working with teachers in Sierra Leone and in Kenya. In more recent years she has been invited to conduct inservice education programs for teachers around the world, from Tunisia to Taiwan, from Brazil to Australia. Even now, a few years beyond her official retirement from the University of Missouri, Columbia, she spends time working with doctoral students and helping in classrooms.

Those who know Dorothy value her sense of humor, ability to laugh at herself and to make others laugh. This sense of humor helps to endear her to teachers and children alike. Two stories shed some light on Dorothy. First, there is the famous mugging story. (Space will not permit the full-fledged and very funny narrative.) One night in Detroit a young teenager assaulted Dorothy on the street. After he knocked her down, Dorothy, ever the teacher, commanded him to help her up and retrieve her glasses and other things that had fallen out of her hand. Recognizing something about Dorothy that told him she could see right through his bravado, he obeyed her commands. Then in response to her questioning (Does your mother know you're out doing this?), he confessed that he needed \$5.00, and that his behavior, which included threats to do her physical harm, was the result of "hassling" by his friends. Dorothy lectured him about true friendship, opened her wallet containing airline tickets and money from her newly cashed paycheck, and gave

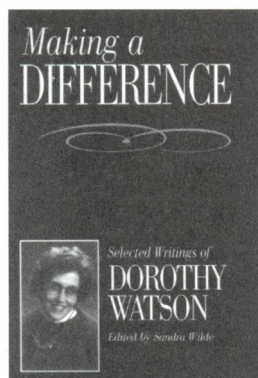
him \$5.00, directions to the bus stop, exact change for bus fare, and instructions to go straight home. In the end, he introduced himself by name and informed her that she was "*some lady*." Not many white middle-aged women would have seen the scared kid inside a black teen-age street mugger in Detroit in 1972.

The other story also took place in Detroit. Dorothy was hospitalized for a surgical procedure. Thinking that if the surgery should prove fatal (an unlikely outcome), it would be kinder for me to take the necessary steps than to have her aging, nearly blind mother travel from a distance, she listed me as the person to notify in case of emergency. When the anesthesiologist came to talk to Dorothy while I was visiting her, he surmised from the chart and our conversation that I was the person listed as next-of-kin. He sought to confirm that, and looking from Dorothy to me, her obviously African American friend, he asked what our relationship was. Without blinking an eye, Dorothy replied, "Sister." To his credit, he didn't blink either as he recorded "sister" on the chart. I recount that story to explain why it is that, as "next-of-kin," we can often finish each other's sentences.

Beneath the humor, however, is a thoughtful, theoretically grounded professional. Known as an advocate of whole language philosophy, Dorothy puts into action her belief that learning about teaching is enriched in the context of a supportive learning community, which for her is not just enrichment but a necessary condition for continued growth. She was one of the founders of the Mid-Missouri TAWL group, which began in 1978. TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) groups are local teacher-support groups, often sponsored by college- or university-based teacher educators. TAWL is designed to encourage teachers to empower themselves to solve problems, examine their practices, and seek answers that will enable them to be informed curricular decision makers in their own classrooms and communities.

Dorothy was also instrumental in the founding of the international Whole Language Umbrella (WLU), which is a confederation of teacher support groups with "chapters"

around the world. Dorothy was the first president of WLU from 1989 to 1991. For the past several years, WLU, now a conference of NCTE, has sponsored a Day of Whole Language at NCTE national conventions as well as a conference each summer.



Much of Dorothy's writing, a substantial portion of which is collected in *Making a Difference: Selected Writings of Dorothy Watson* (Wilde, 1996), focuses on explicating whole language and demonstrating theory-based pedagogical practices consistent with that philosophy. She believes that theories about learning and teaching must be tested and retested against real situations with real

learners. Her writings on pedagogy, including *Ideas and Insights: Language Arts in the Elementary School* (1987), focus on sharing what she has learned as a teacher/learner/researcher in classrooms from elementary school to graduate school.

Dorothy earned her Ph.D. at Wayne State University in Detroit, where she worked as a research assistant in the Reading Miscue Research Studies conducted by Ken Goodman, who was major adviser to both of us. The experience at Wayne helped to solidify and further articulate the theoretical and philosophical foundations that support her work. The doctoral students/researchers who were working in the miscue research center constituted an informal learning community where Dorothy thrived intellectually and to which she contributed a great deal.

My hope is that this profile, transcribed from a telephone conversation on March 17, 2002, will provide insight into Dorothy Watson and her intellectual foundations, her humaneness, and her passion for teaching and learning.

Rudine: Dorothy, let's start with your early teaching experiences. I have heard you described as a "teacher's teacher," and I am interested in how you came to be in that place. What inspired you to become a teacher?

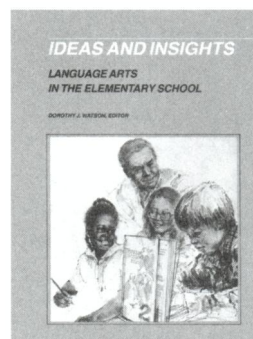
Dorothy: It started when I was a child. I couldn't resist playing the role of teacher. This was during the period of the depression, and we didn't have a lot of toys and such, so we made up our own entertainment. I always made up the school games, and inevitably I was the teacher. Everyone else was a student. I was one of those "teachers" we all dread. I crossed my arms, rolled my eyes, even stayed up nights making little worksheets for "my students." I did a lot of

direct teaching! I am not proud of that part, but I think I've always been a teacher. I loved it, perhaps because it has always been fun; my teaching emerged from play.

Rudine: That's lovely that it was born from play; it sounds as if teaching was a calling for you. Does whole language feel something like a calling, too? Do you think you were a whole language teacher even when you first started teaching elementary school?

Dorothy: I think many teachers use some of the principles of whole language. I've always read to kids; I've always shared with them my thinking while trying to explore their thinking. I've always known that they had a life outside the classroom, and that it would enrich us all if they brought some of that world into the school. On the other hand, I'm sorry to say, I did the "skill and drill" routines. I thought that was what I was supposed to do. But I became aware of the time and energy those exercises took and began to replace them with real learning experiences. My principals and the other teachers were always very supportive, but nobody tried to tell me what to do in my classroom. I did have a kind of "whole language head" on my shoulders.

My first teaching was in an Italian community, and I asked people from the neighborhood to come in and talk to us about their culture. We had a grandparent who visited on a regular basis. Roma Bakery was our favorite neighborhood haunt (all roads led to Roma), so we had the Italian baker visit us. We talked and wrote about those experiences. You'd see activities like that in a whole language classroom.



Rudine: That seems to speak to the journey that you took towards developing an articulated whole language philosophy. Your model of how a whole language philosophy develops shows different ways into whole language—through theories, practices and beliefs, examined and unexamined [see Figure 1]. So it seems that even back then you were on the path towards a whole language philosophy.

Dorothy: I'm sure I was. I developed my whole language philosophy by entering the "beliefs" path. Not necessarily by somebody's "theories"; I hadn't read many theorists at that time. Not by "practices"; we didn't have much inservice training, although I borrowed what I thought were good practices from teachers I trusted. They were unexamined practices that we came to own when my students and I put our spin on them. But it was my beliefs about kids and about learning and teaching that were my way of developing a philosophy of learning and teaching. I

believed that learning and teaching ought to be intellectually stimulating and fun; I did *not* believe that kids should be seen and not heard; I believed that there were 35 teachers in our room—34 kids and one big person. I believed that every student is gifted, and I searched for the gift. It wasn't always immediately evident, but it was there—in every student. I don't think my beliefs were blind beliefs; I examined them in light of what happened every day in our classroom. I asked questions, real inquiry that came from my own teaching, and I believed that the answers would come from the students and me together.

Rudine: One of the things you always say is that you learn from your students. Sometimes that assertion can almost be at the level of a cliché, but you really have lived it. How have you been able to put that to action?

Dorothy: It isn't hard, especially when you *expect* to learn from them. I go into classes or meetings with students prepared with some ideas about what *might* take place. That is, I plan to plan, but the real planning takes place as I learn from students—what direction we need to go and how we should get there. For expedience in undergraduate classes, I set up an advisory group that helps me plan to plan. On-the-spot flexibility promotes learning from each other; it allows me to bend and learn, rather than break and be sorry later.

It was easy when I started teaching because the administrators in the three schools where I taught trusted me and trusted kids. They trusted me over curriculum guides and all the things that the curriculum engineers would send down to us, although there certainly weren't nearly as many of those sorts of mandates then as there are now. As I visit classrooms today, I ask myself, what if I were teaching in this situation? Would I have the time and energy to learn from students and encourage them to learn from each other? Could we build a caring community of learners while being told that students must score higher on standardized tests? Educators today aren't trusted. Teachers are expected to turn to someone outside the classroom for answers they, the teachers, can best provide.

Rudine: We were talking about your early teaching in urban settings. You also worked in Africa for a while?

Dorothy: Yes, but first, in addition to the Italian neighborhood school, I taught at the University of Missouri—Kansas City Lab School and then asked to move to an inner-city school that was situated right between two housing projects. I learned from all three of those very different situations. And fortunately again, I was always with supportive parents, colleagues, and administrators.

Rudine: What drew you to the inner-city school?

Dorothy: I came out of “near-poor” circumstances when I was a kid. I always knew that there were those who would help me to go to college and to do the things that I wanted to do, like become a teacher. I first taught in a working-class community with strong cultural ties; I then went to a middle-class school where most of the parents were professionals, including educators. In those schools I didn't see myself as a kid. I didn't see kids whose parents were struggling to make ends meet, who were so busy, often working two jobs, that they couldn't get to school for a conference.

My teaching in Africa was during that time. Africa was a life-changing experience. I was in two different countries, Sierra Leone twice and then in Kenya. Sierra Leone is the most poignant experience I've ever had. I think of it so much because of the heartbreaking life people there are living today. We pay attention to other places of conflict in the world, but rarely turn our eyes, or open our purses, to this troubled West African country. We ignore the horrible experiences both children and adults are enduring. It's hard to find out if schools and hospitals are open there. I remember the teachers; how dedicated they were. They worked for \$14 a month and walked miles to school. I wrote to two of the teachers for years, but no more. I think every teacher I worked with is dead—all the warring that raged on and on.

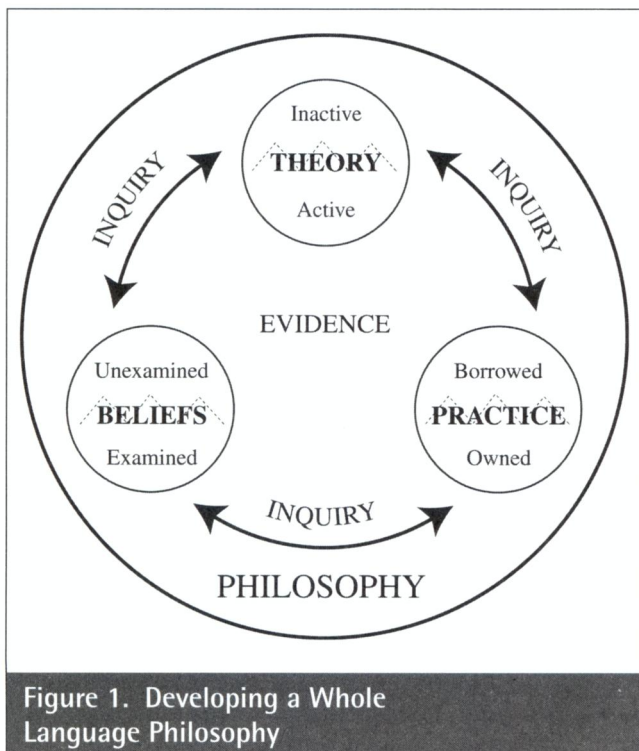


Figure 1. Developing a Whole Language Philosophy

I remember the first time I walked into a classroom there. I learned something about testing that day. The students had just taken the 12-plus test. The head master was despondent about it because some of the pupils that he thought were so bright had not done well on the exam. As we walked to the classroom, he said that maybe I'd be able to tell the kids who had passed from those who failed the test. No problem. The teacher had separated the kids right down the middle—those who had passed the 12 plus and those who had failed it. Happiness on one side and heart-breaking defeat on the other. I cried with some of the teachers later as we talked about what this meant for the ones who failed. That may have been my first experience with high-stakes testing, but unfortunately not my last. I wish all those who think that the way to "leave no child behind" is by giving damaging tests could have been with me that day.

My experience in Africa added to my beliefs about what teachers, what I, ought to be; I learned that education was political and that teachers must advocate for what we know is right for students. But Africa was also confirming in terms of how I was beginning to think people learned. I learned that relevance truly matters; for example, the texts used were all British, inappropriate and irrelevant. Africa confirmed my perspective about learning and teaching and made me see that bad politics got in the way of good pedagogy.

Rudine: Let's move on to Wayne State. You have written that it was the late Dave Allen, Wayne graduate and professor at the University of Missouri—Kansas City, who steered you in that direction. Talk about the impact that Dave and other Wayne mentors had on your thinking.

Dorothy: At the time I met Dave I was directing a Teacher Corps program that focused on teaching literacy. The students had heard of Dave and asked if we could have him as one of our speakers. Every one was just blown away with what he had to say. I sat there shaking my head yes, and I looked at the interns who were doing the same. Dave and I became good friends and colleagues. Once when we were giving a workshop for the Teacher Corps and VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America] interns he said to me, "You really don't believe in the rubbish (not Dave's exact word) you're using in this program. You keep turning things over to me because you think the curriculum I can provide is better for our future teachers. You need to go to Wayne State." I looked at the costly (in more ways than one) phonics worksheets, skills workbooks, controlled vocabulary and flash cards, Word Masters, SRA Kits, Sullivan Readers, basals, Words in Color, and tachistoscopes, and said, "maybe you're right." At which point, he got up and called Brooks Smith [late professor of Education at Wayne and co-

author of *Language and Thinking in School: A Whole Language Curriculum* (Goodman, Smith, Meredith, & Goodman, 1987)]. He may have called Ken Goodman, too, but I know he talked to Brooks, and they decided I would go to Wayne State. Once there, it was as Dave promised—everyone was caring, smart, and supportive. As always, I needed a learning community, my support group. I was revitalized by the team.

Dave Allen had also given me Ken's 1965 article, "A Linguistic Study of Cues and Miscues in Reading" [Goodman, 1965]. I remember thinking that maybe I believed what Ken was saying, but I had been taught to immediately correct a child's errors; that was my job. I had kids "read" words on lists, without any context. Ken's article spoke to me, and then later getting to work with Ken in the Miscue Center and meeting you and Yetta Goodman, Carolyn Burke, Dorothy Menosky, Peter Rousch, Bill Page, Cathy Buck, Merv Thornton, and all of the others was the beginning of a life-long learning community.

Rudine: Many people know that you and I were part of the group who have jokingly been called "Miscueteers," since we all worked in the Reading Miscue Research Center. Ken Goodman's work had a major impact on us as doctoral students and researchers, but you also credit Brooks with having had a major impact on your thinking. Can you talk about that?

Dorothy: Brooks was the first person I met who insisted that language and life are at the heart of learning. I wasn't sure what he meant by that. He said we must bring the outside world into the classroom. He took us to movies, concerts, revival meetings, events of that sort. I kept thinking that I may have been on the right track when I took my classes to the airport, the farmers' market, even an opera rehearsal. (One of the kids told me, "We ain't ready for opera yet, Ms. Watson.") This is so long ago. When the first car wash came to Kansas City, we loved that car wash. We went to a judo place; we went to the zoo; we went to a court in session and of course, to Kansas City Chiefs' football games. There were never any problems getting my kids to talk, write, and draw about our experiences. Brooks filled in the thin spots by providing the theory that supported my gut feelings that this was good practice and that we were, as I was once told, not "just entertaining the kids and wasting time." Brooks also articulated another whole language tenet that learning ought to be filled with joy—not only should we talk the talk and walk the walk, but we should sing the songs and dance the dances.

Rudine: Whose more recent work are you reading that you think has profound things to say about issues of teaching and learning and schooling?

Dorothy: Right now, my reading is in two categories. The first has a political bent—work by Steve Krashen, Elaine Garan, Gerry Coles, preceded by Carole Edelsky, Denny Taylor, and Bess Altwerger. These writers, along with Ken and Yetta, have the courage to set the record straight, and I admire them. Curriculum and whole language experiences continue to interest me; I suppose these might also be called political.

I'm not sure how to label the second category, but I read and reread the work of two women, because they speak first to kids, and then to teachers and parents. They, too, are brave in the face of the politics of the time, and they both write beautifully. Katherine Paterson and Mem Fox are not afraid to stand up for what they believe about learning and literature and teaching. Their books for children and young people are in my critical literacy category, meaning that when kids read or hear their stories, they are changed and sometimes are ready to change the world; they are empowered to go beyond the story. Children's inquiry springs from these books. I mention these two authors, because they not only write for children and young people; they also speak to teachers and parents. All legislators, all politicians ought to read the writings of the authors from both of these categories. Katherine Paterson's *The Gates of Excellence* [1981] and *The Spying Heart* [1989] are wonderful books, as is Mem Fox's *Radical Reflections* [1993]. Mem's latest one, *Reading Magic* [2001], is for parents. Katherine's latest is a collection of her essays and speeches, *The Invisible Child* [2001]. Both authors are straightforward in their writing, and they both, thankfully, have a sense of humor.

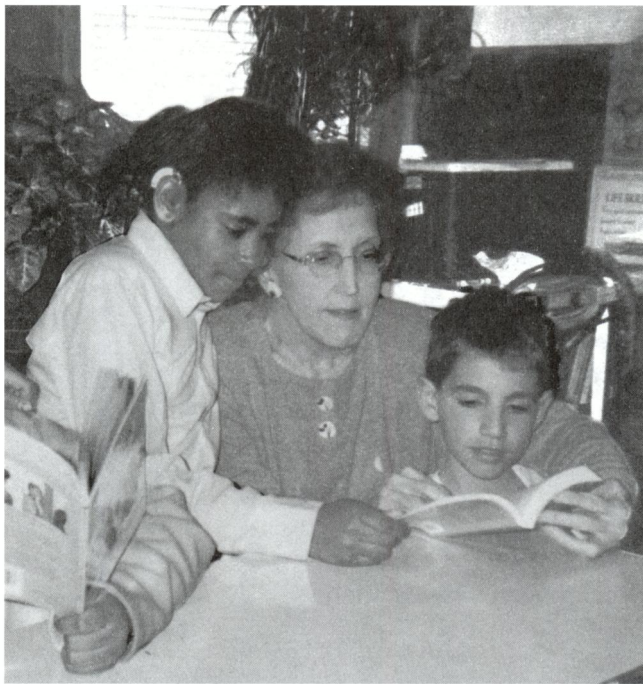
Rudine: Let's move on to some of the political concerns. Talk about TAWL and WLU and why you think whole language is such a hot political issue.

Dorothy: Whole language has become a political issue because teachers were empowered; they found their voices. That's one of the reasons we need WLU today; we need the choral union of educators—it's another support group—whether you've got a small voice that's just emerging, or a loud, sometimes even strident, experienced voice. We've got to have this right now if truth is to emerge from the barrage of misinformation about learning, research, curriculum, and teaching that is sanctioned by the government, the press, and, of course, big business publishing companies. I've mentioned some of the folks who are willing to dig deep into the half-truths and then have the courage to present their findings at local and national forums. Through TAWL we can have a local chorus of voices that may be heard beyond our area. TAWL supports those teachers who are well informed and brave enough to go to committee meetings and to curriculum planning meetings and say, "I refuse to do

away with literature study groups," or "I won't accept Open Court as my reading program," or "I won't subject my students to 20 minutes a day of phonemic awareness exercises," or "I'm not going to submit my syllabus for approval." Before and after making such statements we must be prepared to explain why we are taking such a stand. And we need to offer reasonable alternatives.

I think the reason we're a political football is, as Ken says, whole language teachers have succeeded. We're good teachers. What we didn't do was look over our shoulder to see if people were following and understanding us. We were so busy doing our job—understanding kids and teaching—that we didn't explain things well. We assumed that everybody understood what we were doing and why we were doing it. There are so many factors involved in why we have become a scapegoat. There is a notion held by many fundamentalists that there is one right way, and one way only, to learn and one right source of information. Forget creating a parallel text that comes out of the richness of the learner's world. No new translations are acceptable. When we advocated that students bring their world to their reading, all our detractors heard was "anything goes." We should have made it clear that that wasn't what we were saying; we know that readers have a responsibility to the text. Detractors hear us saying "you learn to read by reading," but they don't hear the rest of what Frank Smith said, possibly in the same sentence. You learn to read by reading with—I don't know if he said a teacher or used a Vygotskian notion of a more knowledgeable other—but with support. We have never discounted the importance of supportive teaching.

We're a political football because publishing companies have made us such. They're making money not only off their texts but their tests and the materials that get students ready for tests. It's mind-boggling to follow the money of a company, say McGraw-Hill. Who gets their big awards? What is the theoretical base of their literacy materials and where—who—did it come from? Who wrote their materials? What's the company's connection with the National Reading Panel? Who gets invitations to the White House, not only for dinners but to serve on important committees? Who is behind the gigantic efforts to discredit public education? Who would take over if our schools were privatized? Just an aside about the NRP [National Reading Panel] results that are used to support doing away with whole language curriculum and promoting a skills program (materials available at your favorite multimillion-dollar publishing company). I recommend that we all read Joanne Yatvin's [2000] NRP minority report and Elaine Garan's [2002] book *Resisting Reading Mandates*. I was struck with the panel's inaccuracies and omissions—for example, the exclusion of valu-



able qualitative research, because, we are told, it's not reliable, it's not replicable, it's not scientific.

Rudine: I had been planning to ask if you think this is a situation in which intelligent and well-meaning people can reasonably disagree, and we're honestly arguing different theoretical positions, or if you think this is really part of something much deeper. Obviously you think this is something deeper.

Dorothy: I wish we *could* have reasoned arguments, reasoned talks and discussions, but we have been misinterpreted to such an extent that it will take time to get the facts out. In the March *Scientific American* [Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, and Seidenberg, 2002], for example, there is an article that is filled with inaccuracies. The authors call whole language the successor of whole word. They equate "look-say method" with "whole word." An attempt to confuse the readers? They say that the "whole-language method" uses only—*only*—curiosity and enthusiasm to help children learn to read and write. Tell this to a teacher who has studied hard and worked diligently to help her students become proficient readers and writers! They show a picture of a child's story filled with invented spelling but don't bother to tell us how old the child is. They tell us that NRP and the National Research Council looked at all the available studies, and they all support the programs that use readers and phonic drills. Do they want us to believe the comparison groups were whole language based? It's hard to find even half-truths here. But this is the group that is promoting scientifically supported research as they exclude

ethnographic studies, miscue analysis, case studies, all the classroom action research whereby teachers are asking the important questions.

Rudine: But you're seeing that TAWL groups or similar kinds of groups of empowered teachers might be a hopeful way out of the current dilemma.

Dorothy: Yes, I remain optimistic. We've survived distortion before, and we can do it again, *if* we've learned our lessons, and I think we have. We've got to be able to make parents and legislators and the media understand what whole language is. We need to be able to define whole language in understandable language and present evidence from classrooms. We've got to keep asking questions and gathering evidence.

Rudine: What questions are you asking now? Do you have a systematic inquiry going at the moment?

Dorothy: I'm asking the political questions—how and why did this misunderstanding happen? But my real love is to study literacy learning and teaching: How can I help this kid become a proficient, joyful reader? What strategies will help this child? How can we share our findings with other teachers and get their responses? How can we learn from our colleagues? My inquiry emerges every time I watch a great teacher like Jean Dickinson with her "kiddos," as she calls them. It emerges when I join my fifth-grade literature study group, or when I pull my chair up to a child and listen to him read. I don't mean to sound romantic, but I'm seeing once again the giftedness in kids. They can be so sincere, and so helpful, and so smart. There are also times when the kids make me laugh right out loud. And they can make me feel unbelievably sad. I felt an overwhelming sadness the other day when [one of the children] said, "I don't read. My dad don't read. I don't read!" He didn't say, I don't *like* to read, or I don't *want* to read, but I *don't* read. It was a challenge.

We underestimate kids. I was awed when we were discussing *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* [Taylor, 1976]. Here are kids who score low on standardized reading tests drawing on metaphor as they talk about the meaning of "roll of thunder." Briana said, "It's scary, dark, terrible. I shiver. It's—the worst thing in the world—oh, it's slavery."

These kids are involved in critical inquiry. Jean [Dickinson] sees that they have rich literature and invites them to inquire into that literature. They bring their lives to the story, they allow the story to change their lives—maybe in small ways, but they aren't the same at the end of the story, at the end of our discussions.

Rudine: It's easy to see why you continue to feel the need to be in classrooms with kids. Can you talk about NCTE and its importance in your professional life?

Dorothy: I've worked on committees and commissions, but for the most part my contributions to NCTE haven't been significant. But NCTE's contributions to me *have* been significant, both professionally and personally. I know this will make you laugh, but NCTE reminds me of my grandmother. No matter how widespread everyone in the family got, she brought us all back together a couple times every year. Also, when I was a kid my grandmother used to slip little notes in my lunch box, and now every time I get an NCTE journal, I feel like I've gotten a note from my grandmother. Somebody who is important to me is sharing something important. NCTE is another family, another community. I need it.

Rudine: Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you would like to show up in this profile?

Dorothy: Yes. People who exercise regularly say that they feel something is wrong if they miss their workout. I wouldn't know about that, but for a semester I didn't get into classrooms, and something felt wrong. On September 11th I knew what it was; I realized that I needed to be in a place that made sense and had substance. I needed to do something worthwhile, to return to something sane and familiar. Being in Jean's classroom was a far better way to return to normalcy than to take a trip or go out and buy something, as the president suggested. The very best advice I can pass on to teacher educators, curriculum designers, test makers, even authors who are writing for children is to get back to the learners—listen to kids and teachers.

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