

## The Sears Catalogue Comes to School

By Marianne McTavish

*“Oh! Oh! Oh! Mrs. McTavish!” exclaims six-year-old Jonathan, wildly waving his highlighter pen in the air. With his other hand he emphatically points to the picture of the small wooden train located at the bottom of the page of the Sears catalogue. “Here! This is perfect for baby Brendan! And look, read this...it is only ‘ 9.99!’”*

Jonathan’s exuberance during this lesson was reflective of the attitudes of *all* of the students in my first grade class. And what was the reason for their exuberance? The students were engaged in a literacy event using an “authentic” or real life text for an authentic purpose. The *Sears* catalogue, an important text in the lives of my students outside of school, had made its way into the world of our classroom.

### Introduction

Last fall my inner-city, first grade class was working on a project that required pictures in order to make a collage. As my old magazine collection had dwindled, I asked my students to bring in items (e.g., magazines, flyers, newspapers, etc.) from their homes that contained pictures that we could cut out and use. As the collections started coming in, I was surprised to find that almost every child in the class brought in the same local department store catalogue. It appeared that almost all of the families in my community chose and bought goods from this catalogue and then had them delivered to their homes. I began to think about the unique nature of my students’ backgrounds and I saved the catalogues after our project was complete. Reading these catalogues was an important part of the literacy practices of my students and their families and this was something I knew I should not ignore. By happenstance, the *Sears* catalogue became an important authentic material that I would use with my students over and over again. The discovery of the *Sears* catalogue encouraged me to look further for possible texts in my students’ outside worlds, ultimately serving as my pathway to more authentic literacy instruction.

### Community of Walton

I teach in the community of Walton, a north end community of the larger city of Greenwood (all names used are pseudonyms), in a western province in Canada. Created to relieve the burgeoning need for house in this historically farming community, Walton is home to just under 50,000 people. Visible minorities account for 34% of the population; over 45% are of South Asian descent, twice as high as the distribution average in the province. The immigrant population is at 32%, with the highest percentages coming from India, the Philippines and Fiji. After English-only (84%), the most common home and spoken languages are Punjabi and Hindi.

The community of Walton spans an 11 square-mile radius. My school, Northwood Elementary, is located in the centre of the Walton community. A shopping centre, located within a mile distant, contains a grocery store, bakery, bank, liquor store, video store, pub and many ethnic and fast food businesses. Major

shopping malls including larger department stores and bulk food grocery stores are located within a five mile radius and are accessible by car and bus. The community centre and library are housed in the same complex, again within a five mile radius. Churches and temples of various denominations are frequent in this community (e.g. Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah Witness, Korean, and Sikh) and most operate child-care or pre-school programs on their premises.

Walton's fast growth has given way to the development of many strip-type malls, and the signage to advertise the stores within them is abundant.



These signs are usually in English or Punjabi. Due to the high incidence of crime, a great deal of the environmental print in and around the stores is regulatory or warning in nature (e.g., "You are on hidden camera"; "We are not responsible for lost or stolen articles"; "Do not leave valuables unattended"; "Do not wash dirty or greasy overalls in machines"). In addition, there is a great deal of graffiti and advertisements; both in a variety of languages. Community texts consist of ethnic calendars and papers, local and provincial newspapers, magazines, international phone card posters, and lottery ticket advertising. As well as English, the community library contains a number of books for adults and children in Punjabi. The community offers a number of resources and programs through provincial organizations. In addition, Walton is focusing on initiatives to make it safe and clean for its residents and is currently upgrading their leisure/community centre and local library.

### **My Class**

Northwood Elementary School is located in the community of Walton. Northwood has approximately 350 students with 10% of its population of Aboriginal descent and 25 % of its population designated as ESL students requiring support. Many of our students are socially and economically disadvantaged. Languages spoken at my school include English, Punjabi, Vietnamese, Chinese, Cantonese, Tagalog, Philippino, and Spanish. Northwood Elementary also has "inner-city" school status which includes, according to school district criteria, a high percentage of families who are on income assistance or who have an annual income of less than \$30,000 CAD.

### **Gathering Literacy Practice Data**

Having observed the *Sears* catalogue's prominence in my students' lives, my interest was piqued. I wanted to see what other texts were important in my students' worlds. I asked myself these questions: What are the literacy practices in

my students' community? What are people in the community reading and writing? What are some common texts? What languages are these texts written in?

To answer my questions, I began my personal research by setting out on a Saturday with my video camera, my still camera, and my notebook. I began at my school and drove through the community looking for the ways that people were engaging with text.

As Saturdays are busy shopping days for members of this community, my first stop was at the local strip mall. Here I found a grocery store, a liquor store, several fast food places, an ethnic bakery, a video store, two restaurants, a laundromat, and several smaller stores selling dollar goods and other household items. As I walked along the mall, I walked into several businesses and took notes on what I saw.

In the laundromat, people were reading newspapers in Punjabi and in English while waiting for their laundry to finish drying. One couple was laughing over their daily horoscopes in the local newspaper, and two men were watching and reading the rolling print at the bottom of the closed-captioned TV screen. I stopped and read the text with them for a brief moment. It was the national news station that was doing an update on one of the prominent news stories of the day.

I stepped out of the laundromat and made my way past several of the stores. As I passed a small alleyway that led to the back of the mall, I noticed two small children pointing to and talking about some graffiti which had been spray painted on the wall. They asked their father what it said. Unfortunately, the writing was not discernable, but it certainly piqued these children's curiosity.

After spending some time at the mall recording the types of texts that people were reading, I drove my car a short distance to the community centre complex which houses the library and the recreation centre. At the library, I was able to see a number of different texts being read as people engaged in various literacy events. For example, I observed many people using the public computers to access text from the internet in both English and Punjabi. Some were reading text on different websites and some were using email programs to read and compose emails.

As I continued to wander around the library, I noticed that young children were reading easy reader books to each other, and young adults were quietly reading novels. I observed an adult involved in finding a specific book by reading the catalogue information on the spines of shelved books. In another area of the library I observed a man reading the back of a video box in order to gain more information on the content of the movie contained inside.

I left the library and decided to walk the short distance to the recreation centre. Once inside, I saw a number of parents and caregivers sitting in a lounge area waiting for their children to finish their skating and swimming lessons. Here I observed a number of different types of texts being read. The first observation I made was of a man reading some sort of soft-cover book that looked like something one might read for school. I politely interrupted him to ask what he was reading. He told me that he was reading a flight manual in preparation for an exam that he needed to take in the next few weeks. A few chairs away from him a mother was reading aloud to her young adult daughter from a religious prayer book.

I continued my observations as I walked to other areas of the recreation centre. More adults were waiting for their children as the children participated in their activities. One woman was reading the recreation leisure guide in order to find some lessons for which to register her son. Another man was checking the TV listings portion of an abandoned newspaper. Further down by the ice arena, a man was checking his lottery tickets against the printed publication of a lottery results flyer.

Making my way out of the recreation centre, I walked a little further to a small news stand and coffee shop. I decided to order a cup of coffee to sit and observe the texts that people were reading. As I sat drinking my coffee, I saw people reading varied text types ranging from the labels on food packages and dispensers, to advertisements on car bumper stickers. One woman was writing in her journal and rereading entries she had made on previous days. Interestingly, she was writing in German. This shop also housed a lottery outlet and I observed many adults reading and writing out lottery tickets for purchase.

Having finished my coffee, I moved on to my final destination of the afternoon – the rapid transit station. As I watched people getting on and off the trains, I observed with fascination the huge array of texts that people were reading. For example, frantic travelers were reading text messages on their cell phones, others were reading the arrival and departure schedules, two men were reading the warning signage regarding taking bicycles on the trains, and another man was consulting house rental advertisements taped to a pole. People were reading the texts in a quick and hurried fashion. As I recorded these observations in my notebook, I couldn't help but wonder if the people in the community were aware of the great variety of texts they were reading, and the amount of reading they were doing. I hurried home to tally my results.

There were many, many different types of texts read in my students' community. However, the greatest numbers of texts that I observed were read for entertainment or information purposes (e.g., reading horoscopes, novels, and internet sites). The next greatest number of texts was read for the purpose of assisting in daily living (e.g., reading food labels, flyers or bus schedules). What became clear to me was that the texts I observed being read in my students' community were reflective of their cultural values and practices. This working class community read texts in their lives to support their daily life routines. In light of this information, I reflected once again on the abundance of *Sears* catalogues that had made it into our classroom. The *Sears* catalogue serves information, entertainment and shopping purposes for my students and their families. And it could also serve as a pathway to authentic literacy instruction.

### **Skills Pre-Assessments**

In September, the reading abilities of my class were varied, according to the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver, 2001). Most children were at the emergent stage, having little knowledge of the concepts of print, and only two were at the early stage (able to read and retell very limited text). But what is most alarming is the fact that a large number of my students have difficulty connecting with school texts. This disconnection with school texts is evidenced by yearly results

on the provincial standardized tests: Our schools' results on the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) for reading are well below the school district and provincial averages. Our school staff was very concerned with these results and was taking steps to raise these scores. I was particularly concerned and I wanted to find ways for my students to engage with reading so they could begin building their reading skills and abilities.

### **Creating the Context for Authentic Literacy**

Since September, my first grade class had been participating in a "buddy" program with a fifth grade class in the school. The original purpose of the buddy program was based on a two-fold need: first, to give the fifth grade students an opportunity to practice their oral reading skills and second, to give the first grade students an opportunity to be read to. My class soon became quite attached to their buddies and to their buddies' teacher--they were like our "family."

It soon became apparent that the teacher of the buddy class was expecting a baby. After the winter break, my class received the news via email and pictures, that baby Kevin had been born. After much discussion, the class decided that we needed to buy a small gift for the baby with the money we had collected recycling juice boxes. Suddenly, I remembered the *Sears* catalogues! Perhaps we could buy the baby a gift from the catalogue?

My mind started racing. My students were highly familiar with this text and they are also familiar with the practice of choosing gifts (e.g., birthday, Christmas, baby, etc.) from it. One of the most important *Sears* catalogues to my students is the Christmas catalogue due to its large section on toys. This catalogue is usually pored over by my students at home, usually for making a "wish list." Even children who don't celebrate Christmas delight in looking through this catalogue to discuss the latest inventions and additions. Could I use this authentic activity opportunity to also teach some critical early literacy skills? I decided to give it a try.

### **Embedded Skills Lesson**

This lesson, while flexible enough to accommodate all learners at all levels of literacy development, was specifically designed to teach the critical early literacy skill of concepts about print. The lesson was targeted at those children who were having difficulty in connecting with school texts. For varying reasons, these children do not perceive these texts as important and therefore were not learning the skills necessary to become readers. The purpose of this lesson was to build on home literacy practices and to use texts that were found in the home that were important to the students.

#### *Concepts to be Learned*

By using this highly authentic, interesting and familiar text, I intended to teach to the needs of my students. For my students at the emergent level, I wanted to teach concepts of print. This included the various conventions for reading and writing such as: front of the book; print, not pictures, tell the story; first letters in a word; big and little letters; directionality; concepts of letter and word; and identification and functions of punctuation marks (Clay, 2002).

For a group of my students who already have the concepts of print, I tried to meet their needs by having them develop a bank of sight words from the

catalogue. For one student in particular, I taught him the skill of using a table of contents and an index. But for the purposes of this chapter, I outline below the specific lesson on concepts of print.

I had a small group of students for whom print is not familiar or functional. I wanted to show these children that there was print embedded in a text that was familiar to them. These children needed to know that while pictures are important, it is the print which communicates information about the picture, and that there are letters and words which enable us to do this.

### Choosing a Gift for Baby Kevin

Based on the skills that I was teaching, I chose to work with small groups. Gathering a group of students at the back table, we reviewed the purpose of the activity which was to choose a gift for baby Kevin. With the catalogues (stacked "every-which-way") in a pile in the centre of the table, I led a discussion about what the catalogue was and what their families used them for.

*Front of the book concept.* I asked the students to take a catalogue. I observed how they handled them, and then introduced the concept of the front of the book and the back of the book. Each child was guided to point to the front of the catalogue and the back of the catalogue. At this time I compared the cover with a regular book from the classroom library.

*Print, not pictures, tell the story.* I opened my catalogue and discussed with the children that although the pictures in the beginning were exciting and that's where I wanted to look first, it was the print that I needed to look at to tell me what to do. (For example, the first section tells me that it contains gifts for under \$10, a perfect amount for our baby gift). I had them turn to page 4 of the catalogue. While our purpose was to look for a gift for a baby, the print would help us learn more about the gift, rather than just the picture.

*Directionality.* On page 4, I instructed the children to look at the first picture.



I taught the children that when we read a book or a catalogue, we need to start on the left hand side of the book, and at the very top left hand corner. That way we wouldn't miss any information. I instructed them to look at the picture of the slippers first. Then I told them that we would look at the

catalogue in the same direction that we would read a book, starting at the top, going along left to right, sweeping back to the left until we reached the bottom of the page, and over to the top of the next page. This concept would be reinforced throughout the lesson as we moved our way through finding a gift.

*Concepts of letter and word.* I instructed the children to focus on the picture of the women's slippers. When asked what they were, they replied, shoes. In order to find out if they were indeed shoes, I showed them how to look at the print to see. I pointed to the words and read "women's slippers." They followed with their fingers. I read each word and talked about the concept of word, and how there were two words here: *women's* and *slippers*. I asked them to use a highlighter pen and highlight each word in a different colour. We went through the next section of print and highlighted each word. I also stated that these words were made up of individual letters.

*First letters in a word.* Using the same picture, I pointed to the first letter in the word "Women's" and taught first letter concept. I asked the children to then take a pencil and circle the first letter in the word "Slippers." We did this for the next section of print.

*Big and little letters.* Still in this same box, I pointed out to the children that the words *WOMEN'S SLIPPERS* were all in big, or capital letters, and that the words underneath (e.g. *padded*) were in little or lower-case letters. We went through this section pointing out with our pencils the big and little letters that we knew.

*Identification and functions of punctuation marks.* As we moved through the catalogue in looking for a gift, I directed the children's attention to the punctuation marks that were present. Since this genre does not use punctuation in the conventional ways, I tried to find those marks which would illustrate this concept. We were able to find commas, and periods, and an exclamation point. With the punctuation, I had the children use their highlighter pens to accentuate the mark.

After the instructional part of the lesson, we went through the under \$10 gift section to look for a baby gift. We carefully went through each item as we would if reading a book and we would stop at a particular item and read more about it to judge it suitable for our gift. Each time, I reinforced the concepts of print that I had taught above. Interestingly, the children soon became careful consumers in choosing our gift because of their *attention* to the print. For example, they originally thought a stuffed animal pictured in the catalogue would be a good gift, until we read that it was not a stuffed animal, but a backpack; not very suitable for a baby. After much debate and deliberation we finally decided to order the wooden construction train (see photo).

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

**MAGNETIC DART BOARD**  
 • 6 magnetic darts with flat heads  
 • roll-up dart board • ages 5 years & up  
 062 592 051 • each 9.99

**WOODEN CONSTRUCTION TRAIN**  
 • coloured wood pieces • includes 4 cars  
 • ages 3 years & up  
 062 564 169 • each 9.99

**HARLEY-DAVIDSON® MOTORCYCLE**  
 • 1/8 replica from the "American Legend" series  
 • 2002 FLSTC Heritage Softail® classic  
 • chromed display stand included  
 • ages 3 years & up  
 062 558 102 • each 9.99

**★ WOMEN'S GLITTER SLIPPER**  
 • 1/2" heel • man-made materials  
 • medium (fits 8 width)  
 • (15)black, (16)gold, (17)red, (18)silver  
 • Sizes: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
 • for 1/2 sizes, order the next size up  
 542 526 48Y A • pair 9.99

**GAME TWIN-PACK**  
 • Includes "4 in a Row" and "Sink the Fleet"  
 games • 2 players • ages 5 years & up  
 062 592 047 • each 9.99

**512 GAMES IN 1**  
 • arcade-style display • sound effects  
 • batteries included • ages 6 years & up  
 062 592 914 • each 9.99

**4.5" SPIDER-MAN™ DIE-CAST CAR TWIN-PACK**  
 • 1 SPIDER-MAN Dodge Viper™  
 • 1 Doctor Octopus® Chrysler® panel cruiser  
 • both have pull-back friction motor  
 • ages 3 years & up  
 062 558 098 • each 9.99

**MAGNETIC DART BOARD**  
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 062 558 098 • each 9.99

www.sears.ca  
 GIFTS UNDER • \$10

our package had arrived and we took a short walking field trip to pick it up. We arranged for payment when we picked up the gift, so we brought our juice box money with us. As a class we purchased the gift and went back to the school to wrap it. The following Friday we were visited by our buddy teacher and her new baby. We ceremoniously presented her with our gift much to the delight of the entire class. She loved it!

### Skill Post- Assessments

It now became necessary for me to find out if the students did learn the concepts of print as I intended. Therefore, I intended to collect my evidence in two ways. First, as an informal measure, I used the catalogue once again as the text, and asked them questions based on the concepts they had been taught in the lesson (e.g., show me the front of the catalogue, show me where the print is, where to begin,

directionality, show me a big letter, show me a little letter, etc.) A day later, to see if the skills were transferred, I used a regular small classroom library book as the text and asked them the same questions. A week later, I used Clay's (2002) specific Concept of Print assessment using the *Follow Me Moon* book. The results from my assessments showed that the children gained the concepts of print while using the catalogue as the text. As we moved into the school texts, the children continued to succeed.

### **Reflections**

The discovery of the *Sears* catalogue as an important community text not only changed the way I taught literacy to my students, it connected me to their world. Although I am an experienced teacher, I never really examined the texts that had a “lived” importance in the homes and community of my students. The *Sears* catalogue certainly went beyond what I would ever envision as a literacy resource in my classroom.

While the authentic circumstances for using the authentic text of the catalogue came purely by chance, the experience certainly shifted my thinking to extend beyond the basal reader. What I thought would be a fun activity for the students turned into an effective literacy lesson. But what was most surprising to me was how engaged and excited my students were.