

# *Building Wings:*

*How I Made It Through School*

*Authors: Don Johnston with Jerry Stemach*

## *Reader's Theater*

*Help Your Learners*

**TAKE CHARGE** of

*Their Learning Potential!*

# *Building Wings:*

*How I Made It Through School*

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*Reader's*

*Theater*

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***Special thanks to Margaret Lee, Caron Gibbert, Kathleen Hillner  
and Judy Nimmo of School District 54 in Schaumburg, IL***

# Tools That Guide Students Toward Self-Advocacy

| Implementation Tools   | Build Self-Advocacy Skills | Make Connections | Increase Fluency | Summarize | Identify Important Ideas | Analyze Strengths, Weaknesses & Learning Strategies |
|--|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------|--------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Reader's Theater</b><br/>Learners work as a group to dramatically read and/or act using a short script that represents (and models) the most important idea from each chapter.</p>   | X                          | X                | X                |           | X                        |   |
| <p><b>Visualization</b><br/>Learners work individually and as a group to illustrate a summary of Building Wings. Encourage learners to create their own complete books, or give each learner one chapter to illustrate. Combine the chapters to create a class picture book.</p>         | X                          | X                | X                | X         |                          |   |
| <p><b>Compare/Contrast</b><br/>Learners work individually to identify their strengths, challenges and strategies and compare their own learning experiences to Don's. Encourage learners to express their thoughts using words and/or pictures that will benefit a diverse audience.</p> | X                          | X                |                  |           |                          | X   |

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### Reader's Theater Implementation Toolkit

Special education learners enrolled in the Schaumburg District 54 Extended School Year Program required summer intervention to ensure that they maintained their academic skills. Because the focus of this program was strengthening literacy skills for special needs learners, they were also provided with social work services. These services helped to assist learners in understanding their own learning styles and developing self-advocacy skills.

The autobiography *Building Wings* by Don Johnston offers a unique way to explore learning differences. It could be easily adapted to a whole-class discussion that teaches tolerance of differences. Appropriate target groups are 4<sup>th</sup> grade and up. Learners will learn to recognize that we all have strength areas as well as weaker skills that we need to develop. Learners can develop an understanding of strategies they benefit from and communicate this to others. By developing a greater understanding of their needs and self-advocating tips, learners can become more successful in the educational setting.

*Building Wings* was used with learners in grades 3-8. Learners read the autobiography as a whole class and participated in a variety of implementation tools from the *Building Wings* Reader's Theater Implementation Toolkit. The tools in which they participated were dependent upon grade level and reading/writing skill levels. You can find these tools on the pages that follow. Print as many copies as you need. The tools are:

#### Reader's Theater

Learners act out a short play (written by Caron Gibbert, Special Services Teacher, Literacy Specialist and Junior High Special Services Chairperson of School District 54 in Schaumburg, IL). This tool gives learners an opportunity to discuss how the characters are feeling during various scenes.

#### Visualization

Learners draw illustrations (written by Margaret Lee, LSCW with 24 years of experience in various settings including outpatient therapy, residential treatment and school settings of School District 54 in Schaumburg, IL) of a shortened version of *Building Wings*. This tool gives learners with low reading/writing skills an avenue to express what the characters may be thinking through creative art work.

#### Compare/Contrast

Learners examine the author's strength areas, weak areas and strategies and compare them to their own (written by Margaret Lee, LSCW). This tool gives learners an opportunity to examine the author's use of both avoidant, disruptive and successful strategies. They can also discuss their own positive and negative actions with regard to their own learning.

# Building Wings:

## How I Made It Through School

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*Help Your Learners*

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**Reader's Theater**

## CHARACTERS

**Don Johnston** - the author of the book and main character (big part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Kindergarten Teacher** - (small part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Don's Parent** - (small part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Mrs. Arns** - first and fourth grade teacher (medium part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Mrs. Crowshore** - second grade teacher (small part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Jack** - the bully (small part) \_\_\_\_\_

**A Friend** - (medium part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Rudy** - Don's friend (small part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Mrs. Tedesco** - eighth grade teacher (medium part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Narrator** - (big part) \_\_\_\_\_

**Al Joe** - Don's friend (small part) \_\_\_\_\_

## CHAPTER ONE - Welcome to My World

**Don Johnston** - "This is a story about my life, but I think you may find some things are the same in your life. Teachers told me I had a learning problem. I found out I learned in a different way. Some people said I was stupid or lazy. I was not, but I did get into trouble when I had to read. Maybe you do the same thing. It is hard work to figure out how to learn best and solve problems, but I did it, and you can do it too!"

## **CHAPTER TWO - I Start School**

**Don** - "When do I get to go to school?"

**Don's Parent** - "Sooner than you think."

**Narrator** - Don and his mother got into the car and left for school.

**Kindergarten Teacher** - "Hi Don. You can sit at this table."

**Don's Parent** - "Bye Don, see you after school."

**Don** - "When do we start learning? I am ready to start!"

**Narrator** - While Don was stacking blocks into a very tall tower, his teacher told him to stop and go back to his desk.

**Don** - "But I'm not done!"

**Kindergarten Teacher** - "Return to your desk right NOW!"

**Narrator** - Don could tell his teacher was mad, but he did not understand why. Maybe first grade would be better.

### CHAPTER 3 - What's Wrong with Me?

**Narrator** - The next year, Don went to the first grade classroom and met his teacher, Mrs. Arns.

**Mrs. Arns** - "By the end of the first grade, you will be able to write a letter to a friend."

**Don** - "Wow! That's cool. I'm going to work really hard this year and be a great student!"

**Mrs. Arns** - "Don, I've heard that you are a troublemaker, but you won't be a troublemaker in MY class."

**Narrator** - Don felt sad. He did not think he was a troublemaker. As the days of first grade went on, Don could not remember the alphabet letters.

**Don** - "I learn the letters of the alphabet but the letters won't stick in my brain."

**Mrs. Arns** - "Don, pay attention!"

**Don** - "I am paying attention. The stupid letters won't stay in my brain!"

**Narrator** - Mrs. Arns wrote the letters H—O—W on the board.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Don, what is this word?"

**Narrator** - Don just stared at the word. He had no ideas what it was.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Pay attention, Don. You are SO lazy."

**Narrator** - The rest of the class was laughing and thought Don was stupid. Don's stomach started to hurt. As soon as the bell rang to go home, Don forgot school and played baseball with his friends. Baseball was something Don was good at.

## **CHAPTER 4 - The Worst Moment in My Life**

**Mrs. Arns** - "Starting today, there will be four groups for reading. I'm going to call the new group the Baby Reading Group."

**Narrator** - Don could feel the pain in his stomach. This news did not sound good.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Jimmy and Don are the Baby Readers. They can't read what the rest of the class is reading, so they will start over with the reading book that we used at the beginning of the year.

**Narrator** - Don felt like crying. He didn't hear Mrs. Arns talking because he was trying so hard not to cry.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Don, you are not paying attention again. I said come to the back of the room. This is why you are in the Baby Reading Group. You just don't pay attention."

**Don** - (whispering to himself) - "Maybe I am stupid. At least I can play baseball. Maybe I can be a baseball player when I grow up."

## CHAPTER 5 - Hiding It from Jack

**Narrator** - Another year had gone by, and Jack was now in the second grade.

**Mrs. Crowshore** - "Good morning, students! Let's start off today by reading out loud. Don, would you please read the first sentence?"

**Don** - "The wo... the wor... ral..."

**Narrator** - Many of the kids in the class started to whisper and laugh.

**Mrs. Crowshore** - "It's not nice to laugh at others. You don't know every word, either."

**Don** - (whispers to himself) - "I am glad Mrs. Crowshore will keep the kids from laughing at me this year."

**Narrator** - On the way home from school that day, the class bully, Jack, stopped Don on the sidewalk.

**Jack** - "Can you believe that Don didn't know how to read the word WORLD today? Don, you are such an idiot. You are soooooooooo stupid."

**Don** - "I am not!"

**Jack** - "OK Don, what word is this? H—O—U—S—E? Or try this word, T—A—B—L—E."

**Narrator** - Don didn't know the words and all the kids laughed at him. Don went home and cried in his bedroom. Soon two of his friends, Raymond and Dana, came over and asked him to play baseball.

**Don** - "I don't feel like it."

**A Friend** - "Don't worry about Jack. He makes fun of all of us."

**Don** - "Yes, but he does not call you stupid."

**A Friend** - "He calls us plenty of other names. Come out and play baseball. We need you. We play the team on Main Street next week. We have to get ready."

**Don** - "OK, I'll be right out."

**Narrator** - For the next several years Don played baseball well, but still had trouble with reading. He tried going to the library and reading books for younger kids called picture books. It seemed to help, but when the other kids found out, Don stopped.

## CHAPTER 6 - Mrs. Arns Returns

**Narrator** - Don was shocked to see first grade teacher, Mrs. Arns, was now teaching fourth grade and was the teacher in his class.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Hello, Don. I think you are going to be a troublemaker this year just like your brother."

**Don** - (whispered to himself) - "The more you embarrass me, Mrs. Arns, the more I AM going to get into trouble!"

**Narrator** - Later in the year, the class was taking turns reading a book out loud.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Class, I want each of you to take a turn reading. Don, you start."

**Don** - (coughing) - "I need (cough cough) a drink (cough cough) of water!"  
(Don leaves the classroom.)

**Narrator** - When Don came back to room after getting a drink, his first reading turn had passed.

**Mrs. Arns** - "Now it is your turn again. Don go ahead and read."

**Don** - (moving around in his chair) - "Uh... Uh... I REALLY have to go to the bathroom now, it is an EMERGENCY!" (Don leaves the classroom.)

**Narrator** - When Don comes back to the room after using the bathroom his second reading turn had passed.

**Mrs. Arns** - "NOW you can take your turn reading, Don. We are on page 246."

**Don** - (He stood up looking like he was going to read) - "OK, uh, page 2... uh what page? Oh, page 246, OK... LOOK OUT!" (Don stumbles on purpose and falls over on the kid in the next desk.)

**Mrs. Arns** - "DON, GO RIGHT TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE. YOU ARE SUCH A TROUBLEMAKER!"

**Narrator** - Don leaves to go the principal's office.

**Don** - (whispers to himself) - "I am SO glad I did not have to read out loud. I did not want my friends to think I am stupid."

## CHAPTER 7 - Spaced Out and CHAPTER 8 - Rudy to the Rescue

**Narrator** - Don becomes very interested in outer space. He talks about it with his Dad, but wants to find out more information about it. He meets a boy named, Rudy, who is also interested in outer space. Rudy and Don become friends.

**Rudy** - "I wonder how long it would take for a spaceship to reach Earth from another planet?"

**Don** - "How far away ARE the planets? How about the stars? How much farther away are the stars?"

**Rudy** - "Come over to my house and we can look up stuff in my books on outer space." (The boys walk to Rudy's house.)

**Don** - "Rudy, this is exciting stuff!" Don whispers to himself, "I wish I can really READ all the words about outer space instead of just looking at the pictures and guessing the words."

## CHAPTER 9 - We Make a Rocket

**Rudy** - "Hey, Don, come over to my house and let's build a rocket in my basement."

**Don** - "OK, I know just how to make one!"

**Narrator** - Don and Rudy mixed chemicals and made projects in the basement. They had a lot of fun together. They continued to learn a lot about space, rockets, and launching.

**Don's Parent** - "Don, I think you know more than I do about the space program. At dinner tonight, maybe you can tell me and the rest of the family about all you know."

**Don** - (whispered to himself) - "Maybe I am NOT stupid after all!"

## **CHAPTER 10 - Mrs. Tedesco Believes in Me**

**Narrator** - Don begins the eighth grade. He is worried about his new teacher, Mrs. Tedesco.

**Rudy** - "You have Mrs. Tedesco? She is hard. You won't get away with anything."

**Don** - "Great, now I'm in for another bad year."

**Narrator** - The first day begins.

**Mrs. Tedesco** - "Don, I want to talk to you. Don, I expect you to do well in my class this year."

**Don** - "OK, I guess."

**Narrator** - Don worried about what Mrs. Tedesco wanted him to do. He soon found out. The next week, Mrs. Tedesco talked to him again.

**Mrs. Tedesco** - "Don, I expect more from you."

**Don** - "I've never been a good student. I'm probably the worst student in your class."

**Mrs. Tedesco** - "Don, you have the POTENTIAL to be a good student, but you are not working up to your potential. I expect you to do much better. I expect you to work hard this year. I'm putting your homework at the top of my pile so I will look at it first every night. Don, YOU CAN DO IT. I KNOW YOU CAN!"

**Narrator** - Don was confused because he had kept his learning problems a secret, and didn't think he would ever be successful in school. Now a teacher was demanding he be successful. Mrs. Tedesco called on Don to explain to the class about many things he knew. Other kids started to listen to him. Kids stopped laughing at him. Don's stomach stopped hurting when he went to school. Don started trying harder and doing a better job on his homework.

## CHAPTER 11 - The Movies in My Mind

**Narrator** - Don always had trouble remembering facts. One day Mrs. Tedesco gave him another way to think about schoolwork.

**Mrs. Tedesco** - "Don, I don't need you to tell me the facts that we are learning. I want to know what you THINK about the facts. I want you to give me your opinion about the facts. Can you do that?"

**Don** - "I'm not sure that I understand what you mean."

**Mrs. Tedesco** - "Do you remember when you asked me questions in class the other day? Those were really good questions. You have to be a good thinker to ask good questions. Learning is about thinking."

**Don** - "I do know that when I think about something we learned in school it helps to think about the events like pictures that change into a movie as I keep learning. This kind of thinking can help me do a better job with school work."

**Narrator** - Don became more confident with his schoolwork. He began to get better grades. He respected Mrs. Tedesco and Mrs. Tedesco respected Don. Years later when Don was an adult he looked up Mrs. Tedesco to thank her for being such a good teacher to him.

**Don** - "Mrs. Tedesco, you made me believe in myself. You were truly interested in my opinion. You showed me that I could learn and become a successful student. My life is different because of you. Thanks."

## CHAPTER 12 - The Puzzle

**Narrator** - Don went to ninth grade and told his parents and teachers he wanted and needed to take harder classes. He was willing to work harder to be a more successful student. One class he took was algebra.

**Don** - "My grades are getting better and better in algebra. I am feeling proud!"

**Jack** - (the bully from first grade) - "Well, Don, do you know how to do problem five?"

**Don** - "Yes, Jack, but there's a trick to it. Here let me show you."

**Jack** - "I still don't get it. Show it to me step by step."

**Don** - "Step by step? I don't use steps when I solve a math problem. I make pictures in my head."

**Jack** - "Don, what happened to you?"

**Don** - "What do you mean?"

**Jack** - "How did you become so smart?"

**Narrator** - Jack and other kids never laughed at Don again, and many asked him for help with algebra. Don started to think that he was smart and he could probably learn to read. He practiced with reading by making pictures of the words and sentences and ideas in books and thinking about them. It worked! He became a better reader.

## CHAPTER 13 - Success at Last

**Narrator** - Don kept learning more and more ways to help him be a more successful student. He spent a lot of time studying and thinking about his schoolwork. Don started playing football and met a new friend, Al Joe.

**Al Joe** - "Don, let's study for our test together."

**Don** - "OK, how should we start?"

**Al Joe** - "Let's write one fact or idea from class on each note card."

**Narrator** - The boys did that.

**Don** - "OK, now that it's done, when are we going to start studying?"

**Al Joe** - "What do you mean? We ARE studying!"

**Don** - "Just talking about this stuff isn't studying."

**Al Joe** - "Oh, yes it is. Talking about what we learn is really important. You'll see tomorrow when we take the test. Talking will help you remember."

**Narrator** - Al Joe was right. They both did well on the test.

Don did better and better in school. He thought of some goals for himself. He wanted to study about students with learning problems, start a school, become a photographer, travel all over the world, start a business and fly an airplane. Guess what? He DID all those things, and no, it wasn't easy. But it was worth it, and he is still learning new things every day.

**YOU CAN TOO.** We know you can do it!

**The End**

**Help Your Learners TAKE CHARGE of  
Their Learning Potential!**



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## **How I Made It Through School**

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## **Visualization**

**Illustrated by:**

Learner Name

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**Don can't wait to start school.**

**Don's kindergarten teacher doesn't like him.**

**Mrs. Arns thinks Don is lazy and just doesn't pay attention.**

# Don dreams about baseball.

# Don is in the Baby Reading Group.

Don learns to hold his breath to keep his feelings  
from exploding.

**Mrs. Crowshore makes Don feel safe in her class.**

# Don secretly uses picture books.

Don has Mrs. Arns for fourth grade.  
He learns some tricks to get out of reading.

**Don becomes interested in space and wants to learn about it.**

**Don's eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Tedesco, believes in him.**

**Mrs. Tedesco teaches Don that learning is about thinking.**

**Don learns to make pictures and movies in his head.**

**In ninth grade Don is good at algebra and other students  
ask him for help.**

**Don starts studying hard so he can catch up with  
his classmates.**

Don learns from his friend Al that talking about what you are learning is a good way to study and remember.

Don starts getting good grades.

Don is successful! He starts a company called  
Don Johnston Incorporated. His company helps others  
with learning problems.



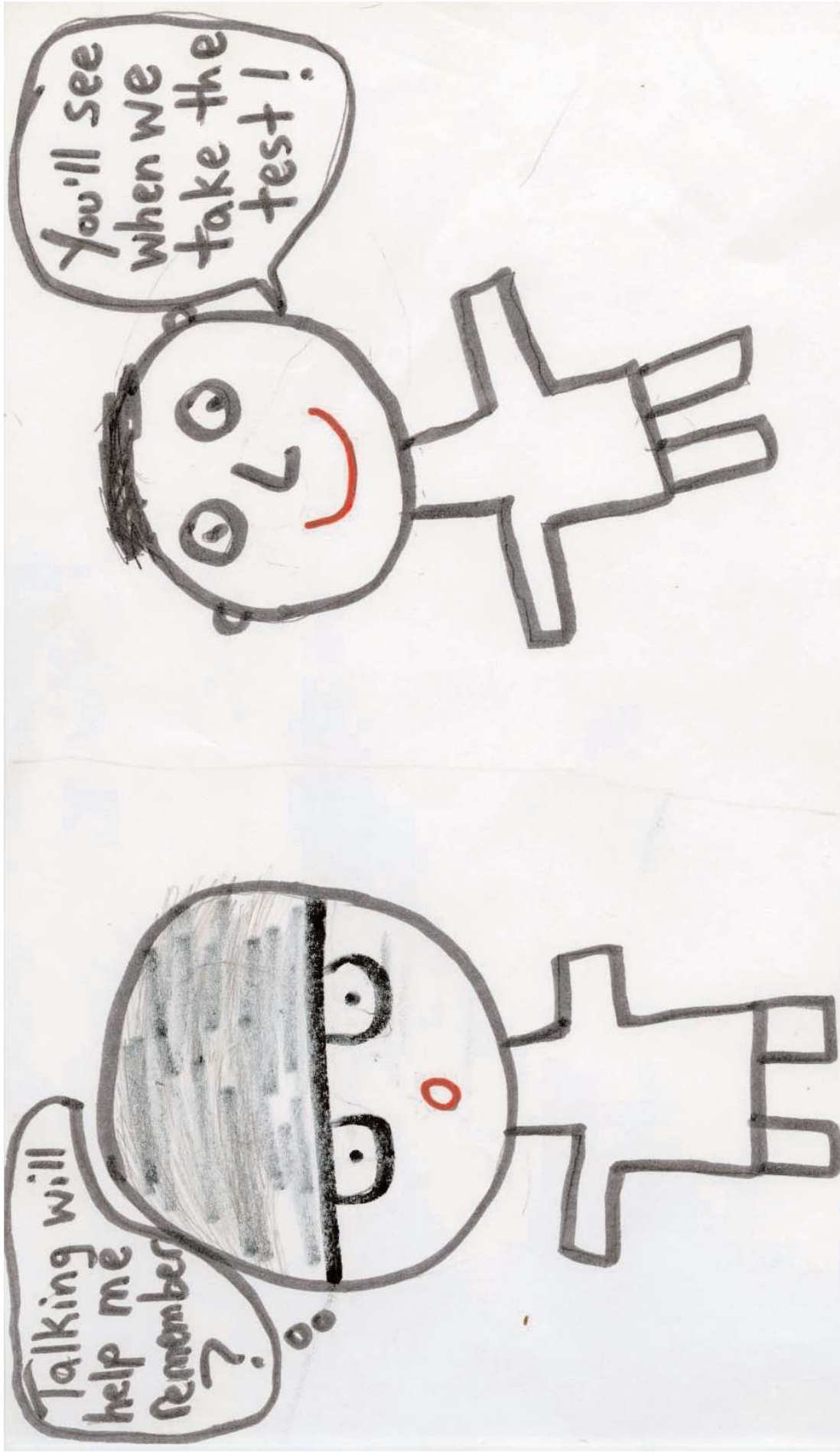
Don has Mrs. Arns for fourth grade. He learns some tricks to get out of reading.



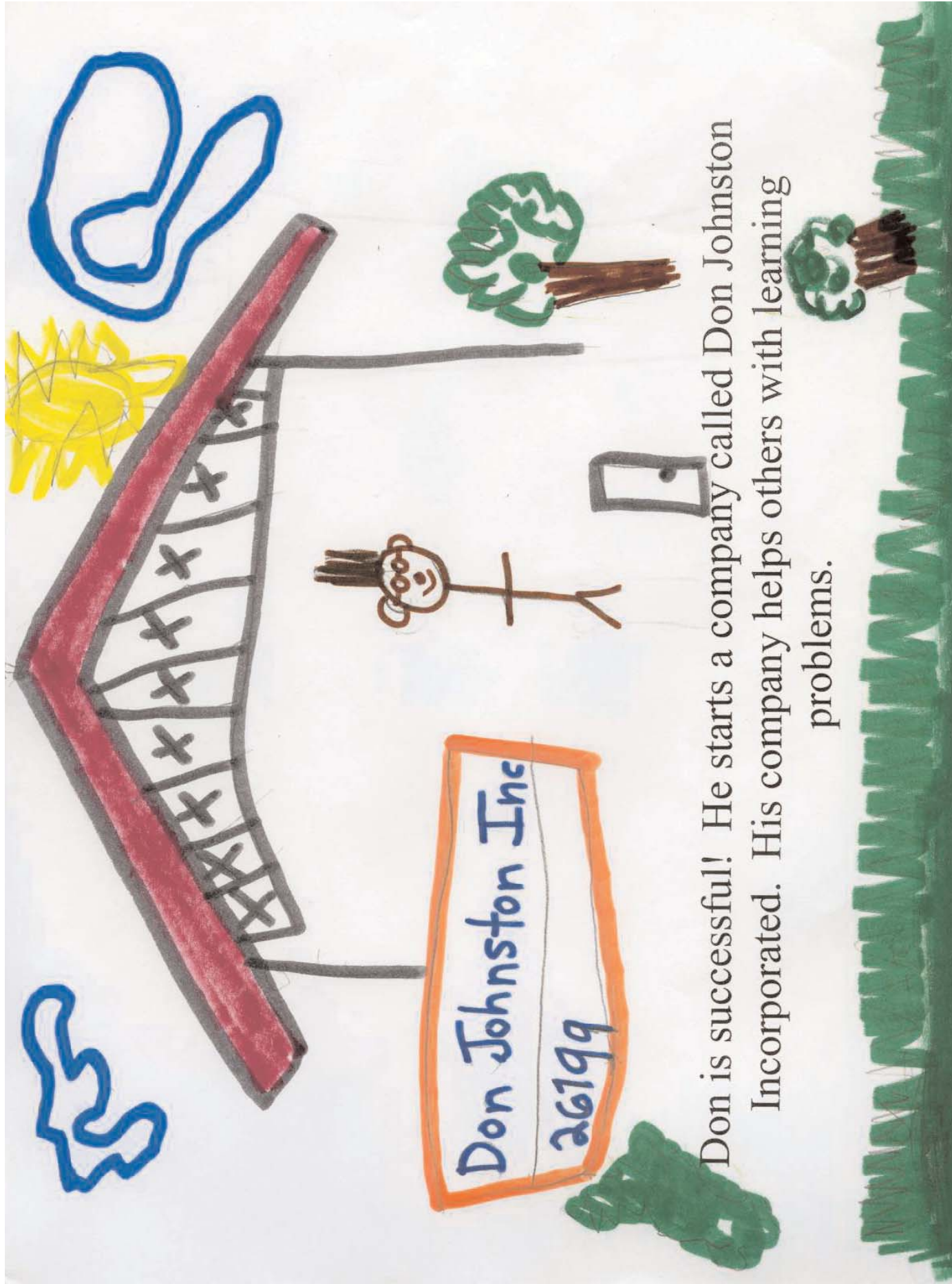
Don becomes interested in space and wants to learn about it.



Mrs. Tedesco teaches Don that learning is about thinking.



Don learns from his friend Al that talking about what you are learning is a good way to study and remember.



Don is successful! He starts a company called Don Johnston Incorporated. His company helps others with learning problems.

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## **Compare/Contrast**

**By:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Learner Name



**Don's Strong Areas**



**My Strong Areas**


**Don's Weak Areas**



**My Weak Areas**



**Don's Strategies**



**My Strategies**

