

**FINDING THE COMMAS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF READING RECOVERY**

by

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“From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to *know* the world is to profoundly *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of researching - questioning - theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world.”

Max van Manen

Researching Lived Experience

(1990, p. 5)

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DEDICATION

This work is lovingly dedicated
to my wife, Cathy,
for her patience
her encouragement
her belief in education
and her belief in me.

I wish to thank my friend, supervisor and teacher, Dr. Kathleen S. Berry, who has taught me to challenge grand theories, to seek knowledge through lived experiences, and to find truth through interpretive thinking and writing. For her belief in my ability to write this kind of work, and for her flexibility and commitment to graduate studies, I am forever grateful.

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Thanks also to the children of this study and their families, for allowing me to step into their lives and research their experiences.

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And finally, my love and appreciation to my wife, Cathy, and to my daughters, Courtney, Meaghan, Mauryah and Kathleen. Thank you for our shared experiences.

This phenomenological study examined Reading Recovery as it was lived and experienced by three children. The study involved a series of interviews exploring the second graders' memories of the intervention programs I had delivered the previous year. Using hermeneutic writing, I interpreted our memories to reveal some of the personal truths of Reading Recovery as it was lived, experienced, understood, remembered and articulated.

In the process, certain themes emerged: these included *resistance, promises, tact and tactlessness, dialects and differences, withdrawal, sounding-out, adventure, play and work*, and *getting it right*. Issuing from the research and interpretation were five opportunities for thoughtful action: to question and challenge established routines and procedures; to embrace linguistic differences; to promote phenomenological research among other Reading Recovery teachers; to be conscious of my influence and power in the teacher/child relationship; and to try to understand instruction from the children's perspectives.

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Chapter 1

The Modernizing Of Children

Kathleen is in the process of becoming modern.

Kathleen is my five-year old daughter, a kindergartner learning the rules of her school and its culture. Learning her role, the limits of her role, in this place that promises to prepare her to recognize and seize life's opportunities. She's adjusting to school, a social and cultural construction that, some argue, privileges children of her race, class, and neighborhood.

Kathleen is learning to "read".

My use of the word *read* is narrow in that it refers almost exclusively to the reading of print text. Kathleen is already adept at other kinds of reading: her literacy is well developed when it comes to reading and analyzing everyday life situations. She knows to hold on to the eights until just the right moment when she plays crazy eights. She invents rhymes because she likes to tease the rest of us in the family: *Daddy's belly, fulla jelly, and his feet are kinda smelly!*

One morning, the Tooth Fairy left a letter for Mauryah, Kathleen's older sister.

"Hmm," said Kathleen as she examined the note. "The Tooth Fairy has the same writing as Santa Claus."

Mauryah snatched the paper from her hand. "Be quiet, Kathleen," she retorted. "What do you know? You can't even read!"

To say that Kathleen can not read is simplistic and restrictive. If reading is about making meaning from signs and symbols, then this little girl is a reader. Yet the world has convinced her that she can't read yet, that she is somehow disadvantaged because she can't make fluent sense of our language's print system. The reading that Kathleen can do is not the kind of reading that is valued by our educational system and, in turn, by our society.

If Kathleen is to function in this system -- and in doing so, some might argue, if she is to participate in the perpetuation of our social structures -- she needs to learn to "read". She needs to gain control over the literacy that our schools value. And because *that* is the issue at hand, and in the interest of simplifying my presentation, I will defer to the dominant view of reading as a process of controlling print text. Narrow as it is, this is the context that shapes our education system and that drives decisions about early intervention, remediation, assessment and evaluation, reporting, and enrichment. The literacy that Kathleen must develop is, as Mitchell (1991) writes, "an exclusionary literacy [that] seeks itself as the model for what should be" (p. xviii).

Why is it that Kathleen's literacy has been devalued? How is it that even she can express a kind of deficiency, a need to learn the skills of the so-called literate? It seems to me that Kathleen's literacy would be valued if she lived and learned in a postmodern world. According to Lyotard (1989), the postmodern world is one in which traditional science-based social structures are challenged by narrative forces.

He defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (p. xxiv), or, in simpler terms, a resistance to the grand theories we have come to accept as truths. According to Usher & Edwards (1994), “postmodern ideas and approaches challenge existing concepts, structures and hierarchies of knowledge” (p. 3).

School is a social construct. Its rules and structures are embedded with positivist ideologies. As educators, we like to believe that we serve the wide spectrum of needs, abilities and interests our students bring with them to school. We like to think that we can help each student achieve his or her potential. For that to happen, however, students must learn to *read*. And some children -- children like Kathleen -- adapt to this structure more easily than others.

According to the reading development continuum adopted by our school district (Cochrane & Cochrane, 1992), Kathleen is at the “take-off” stage of learning to read. That means that lately she’s been gaining more and more control over print, and that she’s starting to use the reading process to make precise meaning from simple texts. She can make predictions, as the continuum suggests, and she can confirm or disconfirm those predictions based on her growing reader confidence.

Control over print. Sometimes I wonder whether it might be the print controlling the child.

It’s not that I object to Kathleen learning to *read*. It’s clear to me that without print literacy she will be severely disadvantaged from social, political, professional

and personal perspectives. I'm thrilled that she's at the "take off" stage of reading development and I'm anxious for her to gain access to the books for which she has such longing.

"What about this one?" I asked one morning as we sat on the floor in front of her book shelf. I pulled out Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964) and handed it to her.

"Uh uh," she said, shaking her head. "I can't read that one yet."

"But you used to love reading it," I said. "You always loved that one."

"Daddy," she said, her frustration beginning to show. "I didn't really read it. I just looked at the pictures."

"Oh," I said. "Well, that's fun too, isn't it?"

"It's not real reading," she said. "There's too many words for me."

I decided to push a bit harder.

"Look," I said, opening to the end of the book where the old man was sitting on the stump. "Remember how you said it wasn't fair that the tree had to give up *everything* and the boy didn't give up *anything*? That's real reading, Kathleen."

"No it's not," she replied. At that she hopped up, ran to her school bag, and returned with a little book called *Look At Me* (Randell, Giles & Smith, 1995). She sat down next to me and began to read.

"I am painting. Look at me. I am drawing. Look at me. I am reading. Look at me."

Sometimes I think I liked it better before she actually *took off*.

It's not that I object to the little books Kathleen has been bringing home from school. In fact, I think that we as a school system must make it a priority to get these materials into the hands of our primary teachers. These books allow teachers to work with children using continuous text (as opposed to short passages or words and phrases in isolation) and to provide young children with print texts that they can control. They are essential for guided reading activities, an approach described by Fountas & Pinnell (1996) as "a context in which a teacher supports each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty" (p. 2). Simple, predictable books, arranged along a gradient of difficulty, facilitate that process.

Given that literacy is a priority of the modern world, I believe we have a responsibility to help children learn to control print media. So, when Kathleen hauls a book out of her school bag and reads it proudly to her mother, I feel good about what's happening in our schools. It's not the schools or the teachers that bother me. Rather, I'm annoyed at the modernist paradigm in which we live that has forced Kathleen to accept certain deficiencies in herself. In *taking off*, you see, she has left the runway of wonder behind. Who knows whether she'll find it again when she finally touches down.

Where exactly did Kathleen take off from? It seems to me that the pre-print-literate state is actually a premodern, prestructural kind of state, one in which the reader brings his or her own rules, meanings, strategies, structures, biases and interests to the experience. Now that she's leaving this period, I look on it longingly as one of liberation.

No structures.

No patterns.

No certainties.

How odd, I find myself thinking, that reading acquisition – the modernist kind of reading acquisition that is supposed to liberate the masses – is instead a process of de-liberation. A process of conforming to structures, of seeking preconceived patterns, of relying on certainties that do not really exist.

Still, she evolves as she knows she must. She continues the process of modernizing.

“Okay, look,” I persisted. “You *love* this book.” I handed her Sheree Fitch’s *There Were Monkeys In My Kitchen* (1992).

“Too many words,” she insisted.

“But we could read it together,” I said.

“Hmmmm.” Kathleen opened the book and looked at the text. “I see ‘*my*’ she said, and I see ‘*so*’. But I can’t read the whole book because somewhere it says ‘*PROMENADE! LEMONADE! DO-SI-DO!*’ and I never learned those words yet.”

“Is reading just about getting all the words right?”

“Du-uh!” she said. “Of course you have to get the words right.”

“Well, could you just make it up?”

“Daddy,” she said, and I knew this was the end of it. “I used to make it up when I was a baby. But I’m learning to read now. I don’t need to make it up if I read an easy book.”

Oh yes, I forgot. *I am reading. Look at me.*

Alice Walker (1992) writes that “Resistance is the secret of joy” (p. 279). Some children, I want to argue, resist the modernizing process that Kathleen is now undergoing. I’m not suggesting that this is a deliberate resistance, it’s more of an unconscious, unwitting challenge to the modernizing process. It seems to me that they leave the premodern, prestructural state and adopt a postmodern, poststructural *kind* of thinking; their resistance to “reading instruction” challenges a structure that the modern world values and insists its citizens participate in. It challenges one of the most powerful and revered structuralist inventions. We have traditionally looked on these children as reading impaired or, at least, as Clay (1993) writes, “not able to learn

in the classroom programme" (p. 7). We've identified them as being at-risk of experiencing reading failure. We've viewed them as strugglers.

Strugglers or resistors? I wonder which term is more relevant, more useful to us in helping them to achieve personal autonomy? To resist, one is seen as having a certain power and energy that is directed against an opposing force. To struggle, on the other hand, implies that one lacks that power and energy.

I suggest that children explore the world on their own terms before we place academic structures in front of them and force them to adopt a rigid way of thinking through and tussling with life's challenges. The knowledge that is forced upon them is culturally constructed; it will shape the lives and the ideologies of these children in such a way that they will come to view their preschool experiences as "childish", and in that sense, less important, less valuable than the *real* learning that takes place at school.

Hegemonic discourse would suggest that these children accept what is taught to them without the kinds of significant questioning that marked their early childhood experiences. In essence, children like Kathleen accept a deficiency in themselves and place trust in their schools to make them whole. It is learning to *read* that will undo the deficiency.

One day, when our Meaghan was about three, she proudly announced that she could count to ten.

“1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 10” she said, and she took a bow.

“That’s good,” I said, smiling. “You almost got it right.”

“I *did* get it right!” she said, sternly.

I tried to explain it to her, but Meaghan was adamant that she could count to ten.

Although Meaghan continues to challenge -- or at least question -- authority and knowledge at home, she quickly learned when she started school that one shouldn’t argue with the teacher. Those who resist get their names on the board.

It seems to me that Meaghan’s ability to count to ten emerged from her own interaction with the world. By challenging my knowledge of the number ten, she was creating her own knowledge. Did it really matter that at *that* particular moment she left out a few numbers? Her resistance was the engaging catalyst in her own new understandings.

To resist is to be counter-hegemonic. The power structures in our school system are such that the teacher’s word, especially in the early years, bears an enormous weight. It is little wonder that children learn to accept dominant theories and ideologies, to consent to their own modernization. Cultural critics seek a counter-hegemonic consciousness, they seek to explode the prejudices, the class structures, the sexist, homophobic, racist underpinnings that they believe are so firmly embedded in our social institutions.

Perhaps what we need is not a move forward, but a move back. Perhaps that elusive counter-hegemonic consciousness existed somewhere in the preschool phase and we managed to yank children out of it. Perhaps we need to examine the rash, turbulent, exuberant, self-confident kind of thinking that marks the preschool experience.

The children who resist their modernization are happy to stay in that premodern state that characterizes their pre-school, explorational years. Traditionally, we have regarded these children as deficient or disabled: they enter school, we say, deprived of the kinds of rich experiences typical of white middle and upper class children. It's time to reject this elitist, condescending view. I offer an alternative way to look at these children: maybe they don't *struggle* at all. Maybe they vigorously -- albeit unconsciously -- resist the forces of modernization.

This thesis is about coming to know three resistors, Monica, Mandy and Danika. It is about trying to understand what happened to them, what they experienced as we taught them to read, and in so doing, how we curtailed their own knowledge constructions and replaced them with our own. It's about, I believe, examining the premodern preschool state and what it was like for them to have to leave it behind. It is not about judging the experience, nor is it about judging the school structures that have necessitated and facilitated this process. It is simply about recognizing that this is what has happened, and this is what it felt like for Monica, Mandy and Danika. That this is what it felt like for me, their teacher.

Kathleen has not resisted her own modernization because she sees reading acquisition as something of value. She sees her sisters enjoying something that is outside of her own abilities, and she wants desperately to share in whatever it is they've been up to.

The morning after our episode with *Look At Me*, I sat with her in front of her book case again. I thumbed through the spines and stopped at *The Wheels On The Bus* (Kovalski, 1987).

"Here's a good one, Kathleen," I said. "I know you can read this one because we sing it all the time." I started to sing the song and she joined in.

"Now," I said. "I bet you can read it because you already know the words."

Knowing that the book began with a narrative frame about a girl and her grandmother waiting for the bus, I opened the book to the page where the chorus of the song began. Kathleen began to read.

"'The d-d-d' What's that word, Daddy?"

"Think about the song," I said. "How does it go?"

"The wheels on the bus go round and round," she replied. "But it doesn't say that because that word starts with 'w'."

"Wheels starts with 'w'" I said.

"No," she answered. "'W' sounds like 'duh'. Duh-duh-double-u."

As I paused to think of a response, Kathleen exclaimed, “I know, maybe it’s ‘*driver*’! Duh-duh-driver of the bus!”

“It could be driver,” I suggested, aware of the trickiness of my territory. “But it’s not. The word is ‘wheels’.”

“Oh,” she said. “Okay, ‘The wheels on the bus go round and round round and round round . . .’ I can’t read that, there are too many words. Give me my easy book.”

Kathleen has embraced her structural indoctrination. She has accepted that if she follows the plan set out by her teachers, she will, as Smith (1988) writes, join “the literacy club” (p. 1). She wants books that are controlled, structured, easy and predictable. She wants, I suggest, to participate in a structuralist community.

Monica, Mandy and Danika, on the other hand, resisted modernization with a vengeance. I worked with them a year ago when they were in Grade 1 and they were identified as being “at risk” of experiencing failure in reading and writing. None of them recognized the importance that print plays in text reading. They loved to invent stories to go with the illustrations in their favorite books, and their own distinct language patterns were far removed from the structures of English language print texts. In short, they resisted on the basis of their own language patterns and experiences; to teach them to read the words as they were written would involve forcing them to adopt new, unnatural structures.

The three girls learned to read, at least to the satisfaction of standards set by our school district. They have all reached a level of independence consistent with the benchmarks that have been set for their age and grade levels. The purpose of this project, though, is to try to go beyond that measure, to try to understand what it was like for these children to become modern. There is a certain satisfaction that comes with teaching a child to read. We tend to romanticize the whole thing, feeling we have made a difference for the child, opened doors, created possibilities. To a certain extent, I believe these things to be true.

I wonder, though, how the children feel about it.

The intervention that was used to help these children “catch up” to their peers is called Reading Recovery. As a trained Reading Recovery teacher, I worked with each of them for several months until they had achieved a level of competence that will, theoretically at least, allow them to be full participants in classroom literacy activities. In keeping with Reading Recovery principles, the focus of the interventions was accelerated progress, as the theory states that the quicker a child reaches independence, the more successful has been the intervention.

Reading Recovery is all business. You pick up a child, provide a jump start, work towards independence, pick up another one, and so on and so on. There is an efficiency to the program that satisfies parents and administrators. Teachers feel good about their work. Children, we tell ourselves, will be forever grateful.

Somehow, though, amid the record keeping and the decisions that are made about children, we have forgotten to ask them what it's like to be put through this intervention. Ultimately, this project is about seeking the children's own meanings. How did they live these experiences? What do they remember about them? What did they like? Dislike? How have they changed? What would they change?

Who are they?

When I was a young boy, my parents went to Ireland. They returned with the expected range of souvenirs: shamrock seeds, little bottles of Irish Mist, fisherman knit sweaters, a wooden rosary decorated with shamrocks.

And something else.

They returned with a plaque shaped like a shield: the McLaughlin family crest.

There's an inscription on that crest, right over the two lions that stand facing each other, something written in Latin that means "Remember Your Promises". I remember my father translating this for my brothers, my sisters and me as we sat on the floor of our newly finished basement rec room. We watched him hang the crest on the new wood paneled wall next to the closet.

How important we were! Imagine, our own family crest! Just like the Queen of England!

"Don't forget," my father said, straightening the crest and stepping back to admire his work. "A McLaughlin always remembers his promises."

This is important.

Monica and I were reading *The Dolphin Pool* (Hunt 1986b). We spent a few minutes previewing the book, looking at the pictures, talking about meanings and connections that she might make to her own semantic understandings. Monica was usually impulsive with these book introductions. She tended to rush through them, eager to turn the pages to see what was going to happen. This time was different.

I remember that she picked up the book and held it in front of her, a departure from her regular approach which was to keep it at a distance, flat against the table top. She lingered over each picture, saying very little as I talked about the illustrations and the story.

The central characters in this book were Wilf and Wilma, two children of African descent who appear in many of the books in the *Oxford Reading Tree* series (Hunt, 1985). In the story, the children visit an aquarium and interact with dolphins and a killer whale.

After we talked about the story, Monica began to read. She continued to hold the book in front of her -- *Just like a real reader*, I remember thinking -- and she didn't point to the words as she read. Her interaction with the book was unusually confident, her delivery uncharacteristically fluent. I remember being pleased with myself that I had made a good book choice.

When Monica finished reading, she looked up at me and said, "Did you and your kids ever see some dolphins?"

"Yes," I replied, "I saw them at Sea World in Florida." In my arrogant, swaggering, self-congratulatory state of mind, I wasn't aware of how crass I must have sounded, how I was showing my privilege, how unfair Monica must have thought the world to be.

"I never seen no dolphins," she said. "Could I bring that book home tonight?"

"Sure," I said. "And you can read it to your brother so he'll know about dolphins too."

The next part is the important part, the real reason I remember that day. I walked Monica back to her classroom and she touched my hand. "Mr. McLaughlin," she said, and she stopped walking.

I looked down at her upturned face. I'll never forget her eyes.

"What is it, Monica?" I asked, and I crouched down next to her.

"I'm just wondering," she began, hesitantly. "You know them dolphins?"

"Yes, what about them?"

"Well, if they ever bring them dolphins to Bathurst, could you take me to see them?"

I didn't know how to respond. I was suddenly overwhelmed with affection for Monica, and overwhelmed, also, by a staggering awareness of my lack of tact.

Tact. This elusive concept is at the heart of phenomenological research, for it is the search for tact that leads to sensitive action. To be tactful is to understand the implications and ramifications of one's every word, every action, every breath. To act tactfully is (or should be) a teacher's goal and guiding principle, and to develop tact should be at the core of his or her professional development.

Sometimes we act tactfully. Sometimes we don't. In either case, the teacher's influence on the personal and professional relationship, and, indeed, on the child's learning, is staggering. Yet it is rarely understood. Phenomenological research helps teachers to understand tact and how they use or neglect it in their daily routines.

I didn't tell Monica they don't bring dolphins to places like Bathurst. I just said, "Of course I will. I would love to take you to see the dolphins."

It's been a year since my work with Monica ended. Since that time, and until I began my interviews with her for this project, I had seen her only a few times, and briefly at that, when I happened to be back in her school. I have thought about her many times, though, and about my shallow promise to show her the dolphins.

I hear my father telling me, "A McLaughlin always remembers his promises." The curse of our family crest. I notice, for the first time, that the crest didn't say *Keep your promises*, it said *remember* them. There's a difference.

Promises kept are quickly forgotten.

Promises we can not keep are the ones we are condemned to remember.

I never really knew Monica. Neither did I know Mandy or Danika.

This research project is changing that; it is helping me come to know them through their memories of how it was last year. As I write these words I come to know them more. Their memories . . . my memories . . . my interpretation of our memories: these things will inform my understandings of the phenomenon called Reading Recovery. Perhaps others will recognize some of our experiences, and because of this, will be somehow more sensitive to the living, longing, learning human beings in whose lives we intervene.

Chapter 2

Phenomenology, This Study, This Researcher

What she sees now isn't in any life of her own.

- Alice Munro, "Open Secrets"

But what Maureen does see, I add, as I respond to Munro's story, is some process, some emotional turbulence between two people. She glimpses guilt and punishment. She catches threads of truth that others can not see.

If you read "Open Secrets" (Munro, 1994), you may well ask yourself, "What does Maureen see?" I answer that she sees significant moments in the lives of other people. She seeks themes. She reflects and, through her reflection, she experiences little epiphanies, little moments of meaning and truth.

It's a big leap from the sinister tone of Munro's story to this research project. My aim is to examine the lived experiences of young children who have participated in the Reading Recovery program in New Brunswick School District 15. Why, then, do I need to frame my research with references to this story? Surely I could have found a warmer, more pleasant symbolic frame. Peter Rabbit, maybe, or a Narnian experience.

The answer, at least part of the answer, is in terms of positioning. This project is a phenomenological study of the Reading Recovery experience. As a qualitative researcher, I need to examine my own position in all this. I need to understand where I

am coming from and how my own sensitivities will impact on my research and presentation.

If I were to describe myself to somebody who didn't know me, I would say that I am one who learns about life through the great writing of great writers. I was drawn to hermeneutic phenomenology because of the importance it places on metaphor in helping us to know the truth of a particular phenomenon. In this case, I was drawn to Munro because I think she understands the nature of phenomenological research. In essence, though my academic understanding has been influenced by van Manen (1990), more personally, emotionally and psychologically significant to me have been the words and the images and the metaphors of Alice Munro.

The power of metaphor: for as long as I've been a reader I have felt its influence. The greatest writers, I believe -- the Alice Munros and Timothy Findleys, the John Irvings and Margaret Atwoods, the Eudora Welty's and Alice Walkers -- know it and exploit it. They cause me as a reader to say to myself, "Yes! I've felt that! I've lived that! I recognize that!"

van Manen (1990) called this sense of understanding, of having lived the experience that is revealed or portrayed, the *phenomenological nod*. It is at the heart of my project. My hopes are that others who read this work will catch my wink: "You know!" I hope to say, in not so many words. "You've been there, haven't you?" Phenomenology, which was developed by Husserl, Heidegger and others (as cited in Berry 1989) as a challenge to the positivistic philosophy of scientific empiricism,

attempts to capture the inner life of the subject as he or she is living and experiencing reality. Hegel (as cited in Gillespie, 1984) describes phenomenology as *what is*, but adds that *what is* “*is as it appears*” (p. 63).

Sartre (1967) writes that “it is the effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind” (p. 29-30). This work of the mind is the work of meaning making, the creation of personal truth and understanding. Munro writes, Sartre might argue, “to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader” (p. 43).

And in that task I have always found joy.

Ask me about a book I have read -- a book that I claim to have found personally significant -- and I may not remember the plot or the characters, the setting or the conflict. I will, though, remember the metaphors. I will remember stunning turns of phrases and vivid images.

“Did you like *The Kitchen God’s Wife?*” (Tan, 1991) my sister asks me.

“Oh!” I say, almost breathlessly. “Wonderful! Wonderful!”

“What did you like about it?”

I don’t even have to think about it.

“The commas,” I reply, without realizing how silly I must sound. “Did you notice Amy Tan’s exquisite use of commas on the last page?”

Another example.

Based on Oprah Winfrey's televised recommendation, I recently read Ursula Hegi's brilliant novel, *Stones From The River* (1994).

I pestered my wife, Cathy, until she, too, read the book. When she was almost finished she said, "I can't stand it any more! Does Max come back in the end?"

"Who's Max" I asked.

"You know," she demanded. "Max -- he's like the second most important character. He goes to Dresden and the place is bombed. Does he come back?"

I had to think about it. "Hmmm," I replied at last. "I don't remember."

My wife was shocked. "What do you mean, you don't remember. It's the big finale! It's what the whole book leads up to!"

"Look," I said, feeling rather silly, seeing as I was the one who had raved about the book in the first place, "I don't really remember *everything* that happened. But you know that part about the *stones* and how Trudi *threw* them back in the river! Ah! God! It was so symbolic! I just *had* to read that part over and over again."

Cathy rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Never mind," she muttered. "I should have known better than to ask. I'll read the stupid book and find out for myself."

These are the things I remember. Amy Tan's commas. Ursula Hegi's stones. My own little epiphanies.

This research project is about just that, seeking relationships and themes, sifting through children's memories for snippets of shared experience. It's about the writing down of those themes and meanings, and through that, about finding flashes of truth. As Heidegger (1971) suggests, when we truly experience a phenomenon, it "strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us" (p. 57).

Reading Recovery: we can't know this phenomenon in its entirety for in reality, *it* doesn't exist. It is too big to know, too muddled with individual differences and local circumstances to ever be held down and examined in detail. To attempt this would be, as Prigogine and Stengers (1984) describe it, like "putting nature on the rack" (p. 42). The most we can do is try to find meaning through the lived experiences of some of its participants.

I have chosen to study the experiences of some of the children who have "lived" Reading Recovery. While phenomenology is the methodology I have employed to conduct my research, narrative is the form I have chosen to interpret the essence of the phenomenon. Following the lead of Berry (1989), I have relied on "the strength of story in understanding the phenomenon as-lived" (p. 47).

What Is Reading Recovery?

Reading Recovery is an early intervention program designed to give a second chance to students who have begun to fall behind in literacy acquisition. It emerged from the work of Marie Clay, a New Zealand educator and developmental psychologist, who worked with primary school teachers to develop an individualized program to help at-risk students achieve reading and writing abilities consistent with their average peers. It is considered a preventative program because while Reading Recovery children have started to fall behind, they have not yet experienced outright failure. The goal is to bring “the hardest-to-teach children to a level where they can be full participants in [their] classroom programme” (Clay, 1995, p. 1).

From 1972, Clay’s *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* has been widely used by New Zealand teachers who have wanted to observe young children engaged in literacy activities. This work was published as a result of Clay’s research in which she asked whether it is possible to detect reading difficulties close to the onset of instruction. Later rewritten and renamed *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 1993), this work is used to assess children for possible Reading Recovery interventions. The recorded data is then used to inform a teacher’s instruction of those children selected for the program.

As Lyons, Pinnell and DeFord (1993) write, “The goal of Reading Recovery is acceleration” (p. 5). Because Reading Recovery children have been making slow progress in the classroom, it is believed they must make faster than average progress so they can catch up to their classmates. Beginning with the children’s strengths, Reading Recovery teachers design individual programs that allow this kind of acceleration to be achieved. According to Clay (1995), teachers can not impose or direct this acceleration, they can only foster and support it

as [they move] the child quickly through his [or her] programme, making superb decisions and wasting no unnecessary time. . . It is the learner who accelerates because some things which no longer need his [or her] attention are done more easily, freeing him [or her] to attend to new things.

(p. 9).

Reading Recovery teachers operate within a 30-minute standard lesson format. The interactions, decisions and responses, however, are vastly different from teacher to teacher, from child to child, and from lesson to lesson. Nonetheless, each lesson involves the rereading of familiar text, the taking of a running record on a text that has been seen once before, work on letter identification and/or word making-and-breaking, writing activities, and the introduction and first reading of a new book. In all but a one-to-two minute section of the lesson (that which is devoted to letter identification and/or word making-and-breaking), all work is done on continuous text and in context. This is consistent with Clay’s theory that reading instruction should promote strategic problem solving on continuous texts.

Holdaway (1992) writes that Reading Recovery teachers use "all the classic features of holistic teaching" (p. 3). With its emphasis on strategic self-regulation through the reading and writing of continuous texts, Reading Recovery is consistent with the basic principles of Whole Language. Indeed, as Holdaway reports,

In . . . the beginnings of Whole Language teaching, Dr. Marie Clay's research, and her very active involvement in the work of classroom teachers, proved both vital and integral . . . It led [teachers] to respect the fundamental drive of young learners to take control of their own learning and to avoid dependence on formulas which were unintelligible to them -- to turn away from basing their learning on outside advice of *any kind which made no sense to them*.

(p. 2).

Also consistent with the Whole Language paradigm is the way Reading Recovery teachers treat the learners as individuals. Teaching strategies are only used when they are appropriate for particular children. Thus, observation and analysis of each child's processing is a key component of the program in order to ensure that each child's intervention is finely tailored to his or her particular needs. In this way, Reading Recovery can not be categorized as, for example, a "phonics approach" or a "skill and drill approach". It is best explained as an early intervention that fosters the development of processing strategies by which students reach out to more difficult reading and writing tasks. It is a multiple variable theory, not a theory that looks to a single variable as the *key* to successful teaching and learning. Phonics activities are *sometimes* used for *some* children. Repetition is *sometimes* used for *some* children.

Most of the time, though, emphasis is on the reading and writing of continuous text, and all teaching is directed at the development of a self-extending system of reading and writing strategies.

There are ways, of course, that Reading Recovery is unlike Whole Language. By nature, the intervention involves the teacher and child working in an isolated setting, far from the commotion of the classroom environment. It could be argued, then, that Reading Recovery is missing the element of student interaction that is central to Whole Language. Also, the emphasis on independent processing means that children are rarely read to; unlike current approaches to emergent reading instruction, there is little to be found in the way of guided reading or peer group reading, although some degree of importance is placed on shared reading between the teacher and the child.

Acceleration in Reading Recovery is achieved through a scaffolding process in which teachers pitch a level of difficulty just above that which the child can control on his or her own. This process is consistent with Vygotsky's (1962) theory of social learning, particularly in terms of the zone of proximal development. Clay and Cazden (1990) write that the Reading Recovery teacher provides a scaffold of support which is "always at the cutting edge of the child's competencies, in his or her continually changing zone of proximal development" (p. 219).

In a period of twelve to twenty weeks, children are expected to achieve the kind of inner control that will allow them to reach out independently and successfully

to new and more difficult material. Clay (1991) calls this phenomenon a “self-extending system” (p. 317), although other researchers have written about it under different names. Stanovich (1986), for example, compared it to a boot-strapping process in which learners are able to lift themselves to higher and higher levels of achievement. Holdaway (1979) spoke of it as a self-improving system. According to Clay (1995), the goal of Reading Recovery is “to produce independent readers whose reading and writing improve whenever they read and write” (p. 43). In other words, a child is not said to be successfully discontinued unless this self-extending system is firmly in place.

Because Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention program (it is expected that successful children will not require any further literacy remediation for the rest of their academic careers), there is an acknowledgment that some children will not develop that self-extending system. Research in New Zealand (Clay, 1995), Ohio (Lyons et al., 1993), and Canada (Gregory & Earl, 1995; McLaughlin, 1996) indicates that at least 80% of students who receive full Reading Recovery interventions can be expected to discontinue. Those children who do not achieve appropriate acceleration are referred for long-term specialists’ help and are removed from the program.

Outside of Reading Recovery, Clay’s influence in literacy instruction has been impressive. Yetta Goodman (1991) writes that “Marie Clay’s scholarly work in understanding early literacy development has had a profound effect on curriculum and

programs for school entrants in English-speaking countries all over the world" (p. 55). Her research has been widely quoted and used as the basis for other research projects. A brief review of some of these applications is useful in order to appreciate the breadth of Clay's influence on the field.

Daniel (1996) utilized Clay's system of manipulating magnetic letters to teach how words work. She found that this approach helped to convince students that they were "capable learners and would succeed" (p. 421). While this project has no direct relationship to Reading Recovery, it shows how one small part of Clay's program has had an impact on the fields of teacher action research and spelling instruction.

Of particular significance to my project is the impact Clay has had on professional development in New Brunswick. *Frameworks* (Turbill, Butler, Cambourne and Langton, 1991), for example, refers repeatedly to Clay, particularly with regards to observation strategies and running records. These tools, which play an important role in every child's Reading Recovery intervention, allow teachers to make inferences about a child's reading behaviors and use of strategies on any particular text. Another resource that has been widely used for professional development purposes in New Brunswick is *Early Literacy In The Classroom* (Depree & Iversen, 1994). It, too, espouses some of the principles and procedures of Reading Recovery, such as scaffolded learning, the emphasis on strategic self-regulation, and the use of running records.

These are only a few of the references to Clay's work that can be found in the reports of leading early literacy researchers. While a complete list would be too large to incorporate in this paper, some are certainly worth noting. Maria (1990) points to Reading Recovery as one of the only literacy interventions that actually addresses students' learning and reading styles. Yetta Goodman (1991), while expressing reservations that "there is evidence that [Clay] believes that the search for meaning during reading is a precise meaning that resides in the text and not a meaning constructed by the reader," acknowledges that Clay's work is nonetheless "important" (p. 55). Goodman writes that the reader of Clay's *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control* (1991) "needs time to savor the richness of the offerings and to understand the issues and concerns that Marie Clay raises" (p. 55).

Booth (1994) refers extensively to Clay in his writings on emergent readers in a language-based learning classroom. Newman (1985) acknowledges how Clay "helped us accept [young children's] non-conventional approximations as important for writing development" (p. 15). Morrison's (1993) writings on strategy-based teaching, which focus on the use and analysis of running records in the classroom, apply Clay's theories and principles to the group setting; indeed two of Clay's books appear on Morrison's list of suggested reading (p. 63).

In short, Clay's theories have become part of the current discourse on literacy acquisition. Indeed, the rate at which school districts have invested in training teachers and implementing Reading Recovery programs is staggering. As a trained

Reading Recovery teacher leader, one who has worked in the field for the past two years, I see real value in the endeavor. The teachers with whom I work feel good about what they do. The school district is pleased with the numbers of children who are given that “second chance” at success in literacy. It would seem, then, that I ought to continue doing what I’ve been doing, that I should just try to reach more and more children.

Perhaps this is the case. Perhaps, though, it is time to ask the kinds of questions that have not been addressed in the Reading Recovery research and implementation. It seems to me that the time has come for phenomenological research.

A Review Of Existing Reading Recovery Research:

The Need For Qualitative Data

It is my contention that from its very inception, Reading Recovery has operated within a framework of quantitative research. Its development was justified and guided by empirical, numerical data, and its international implementation has been driven by promises of success rates, cost benefits, and the replication of original inservice and instructional designs. In fact, a vigorous review of the literature turned up only a few reports of purely qualitative research projects. Most of the projects focus on empirical factors such as discontinuing rates, control groups, numerical levels of achievement, and long-term tracking of Reading Recovery children. Indeed, Clay (1987) has written a guide to “Answering The Critics” (p. 47) in which she uses positivist research data to answer the seven most asked questions about Reading Recovery, questions such as “Could the results be replicated?” “Did the programme produce differential effects for different ethnic groups?” and “Were the results maintained as school work increased in difficulty?”

Clay’s dominant empirical methodology is found throughout her writings on observation and early literacy instruction. Reading Recovery teachers-in-training are introduced to this early on when they begin their assessment training by examining *An*

Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (1993). In it, Clay, whose background is in developmental psychology, writes that

I have come to regard normative, standardized tests as having a place in education . . . but . . . they need to be supplemented at the classroom level with standardized or systematic observations of children who are in the act of responding to instruction, observations that are reliable enough to compare one child with another, or one child on two different occasions.

(p. 1-2).

Thus, while there is an ethnographic flavor to the extensive observation component of Reading Recovery, these observations are almost always translated into numerical data rather than more reflective descriptions, summaries and analyses.

Numbers are calculated and assigned over and over again in every child's program. In the assessment battery, scores are calculated for each of the six subtests: Letter Identification, Concepts About Print, Word Tests, Writing Vocabulary, Hearing and Recording Sounds In Words (Dictation), and Running Records of Text Reading. Within the instructional period of the intervention itself, percentages, ratios and levels are generated every day for performance on independent text reading, and once a week progress is plotted on a Record of Book Level graph.

It is my belief that people who are not knowledgeable about Reading Recovery tend to focus on this quantitative side of the program and criticize it as being too scientific. Reading Recovery teachers understand how scores and calculations are only one small part of the assessment procedure; while they help teachers make

decisions about a child's program, they are secondary to a teacher's understanding of the child as an individual, a learner, a reader and a writer. Clay (1995) writes that:

Reading Recovery procedures have sometimes been questioned because they appear to require correct responding from children. This is not true. There is a particular opportunity for revision and reworking in the one-to-one teaching situation. Child and teacher are talking about the reading or the writing as it occurs . . . the programme sets the highest value on independent responding, and this must involve risks of being wrong. What the teacher will do is set some priorities as to which kinds of new learning she will attend to – just one or two things – and let the other behaviors that were incorrect go unattended at this time.

(p. 15)

Numerical data allows a teacher to conceptualize the degree of difficulty a child is experiencing on a particular text, and it also allows a teacher to look for change over time. At the same time, there is a significant demand on teachers to engage in critical thinking and problem solving within each child's program. It is unfortunate, then, that these techniques for recording progress have become, for many, an erroneous symbol of the program's principles, procedures and theoretical underpinnings.

It is not surprising, however, that critics of Reading Recovery would focus on its empirical nature, since that is the very nature of the research that has been done to justify its genesis and existence. In effect, Clay and her colleagues set themselves up for this problem when they chose a scientific methodology in their original research

projects. With a natural science approach, Reading Recovery has left itself open to the criticism that human beings can not be controlled and generalizations can not be made. As van Manen (1990) writes, "We explain nature, but human life we must understand" (p. 4). On the other hand, had Clay not chosen a positivist methodology, she would have had difficulty convincing administrators and politicians that Reading Recovery is worthwhile.

It is not surprising, then, that the research projects outlined in Clay (1995) , which describe the genesis and growth of Reading Recovery in New Zealand and internationally, are almost all purely scientific in nature. These include The Field Trial Research (1978), The Analysis of Lesson Content (1978), The One-Year Follow-up Research (1979), the Replication Study (1979), The Three-Year Follow Up (1981), National Monitoring (1984-1988), and The Reading Recovery Subgroups Study (1991). The only research report from Clay [1995] that is purely qualitative is The 1976-1977 Development Project which involved action research, brainstorming and critical evaluation.

What has been the result of this focus on experiment and control? Reading Recovery administrators and researchers continue to engage in longitudinal studies, critics continue to refute claims based on *more* empirical evidence, and the Reading Recovery community responds with more studies, more numbers, more graphs and more generalizations. The process is endless and exhausting.

Exhausting to whom? one might ask.

Exhausting to me.

I am a Reading Recovery teacher leader, having participated in a year-long training program at The Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery in Scarborough, Ontario. In that capacity, I am now responsible for the implementation and maintenance of Reading Recovery in New Brunswick School Districts 14 and 15 (Bathurst and Dalhousie). While I appreciate the need for data and statistics (they are useful in helping us to maintain a quality program, to inform our decisions about future plans, and to deal with the administrative and political realities of our educational system), I am sometimes disheartened by the sense that the real-life drama of Reading Recovery has never really been explored.

A search of literature on Reading Recovery has turned up a large number of pieces of writing, almost all of which are overtly quantitative or at least underscored by references to quantitative data. Exceptions to this might be the unpublished case studies that Reading Recovery teacher leaders-in-training must write in order to complete their courses of study. While these are ethnographic in tone, there is certainly evidence of statistical data. For example, in my own case study I wrote, "To determine reading ability, a running record of text reading was taken on a series of books leveled for difficulty, complexity and language patterns. [This child] read the Level 1 book (16 running words) with 100 percent accuracy. Beyond that, however, her strategies were insufficient to allow her to sustain meaning" (McLaughlin, 1995).

It would be incorrect to assert that these case studies are dominated by this kind of numerical interpretation. In fact, the overall tone is reflective and anecdotal. There is, however, an expectation by Reading Recovery trainers that teacher leaders-in-training demonstrate an understanding of the scientific nature of observation, data collection and analysis.

There is, in fact, a body of qualitative writing about Reading Recovery, but by and large this has been purely descriptive in nature. Clay and Watson (1982a), for example, describe Reading Recovery without mentioning statistics or success rates. In "Reading Recovery: The Wider Implications of an Educational Innovation", Clay (1992) places the program in the wider context of early intervention with only sporadic references to empirical research data. Clay and Cazden (1990) employ qualitative methodology to place Reading Recovery within a Vygotskian paradigm. DeFord (1991) examines the various parts of a Reading Recovery lesson to see how the program fosters fluent reading. Finally, Wong, Groth and O'Flahavan (1996) posit classroom implications of Reading Recovery training and procedures.

The remainder of the research, however, is almost entirely based on the scientific method. Although it would be impractical to deal with all of these, it is worth noting some of the most significant projects that have been reported. Clay and Watson (1982b) used traditional scientific practices to prove that Reading Recovery could be implemented across cultures. Dyer (1992) found that Reading Recovery was "not only educationally effective but also *cost-effective*" (p.18) – a recurring theme in

Reading Recovery research – and recommended that it be given careful consideration by school and district administrators. An analysis done by Sylva and Hurry (1995) found that Reading Recovery was effective in improving children's performance on a wide range of skills, and was particularly beneficial to socially disadvantaged children. Pinnell, DeFord, Bryk and Seltzer (1994) created strict comparative conditions to determine that "Reading Recovery is an effective intervention program for helping at-risk first-grade children learn to read" (p. 32). Finally, Wasik and Slavin (1993) compared research data from five different early intervention programs and found that the effects of Reading Recovery instruction were the most lasting.

There is, of course, a body of research that has challenged the promises of Reading Recovery. In responding to claims made by members of the Reading Recovery community, these other researchers also employed scientific and statistical analysis. Iversen and Tunmer (1993), for example, found that Reading Recovery was not as effective as a similar program which included systematic instruction in phonological decoding skills. Rasinski (1995) challenged the conclusions of certain Reading Recovery studies, and asserted that the program, while somewhat effective from an instructional point of view, had not been proven to be cost-effective. Center, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred and McNaught (1995) contended that about thirty percent of the children who successfully discontinued from Reading Recovery would likely have achieved similar progress without the intervention. Hiebert (1994) found that Reading Recovery did not make any significant difference to the achievement of an

age cohort. More recently, Rozelle (1996), undertook a comparative study of the long-term effectiveness of Reading Recovery and Chapter I. While recognizing the effectiveness of the program “for children who struggle to learn to read,” Rozelle cautioned that “Reading Recovery is not a quick fix, nor is it the only strategy for addressing the problem” (p. 7).

With such intense focus on empirical research and data, it seems to me that we have lost sight of Reading Recovery as it is lived every day in schools around the world. I remember my trainer from the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery telling our class, “Look, you people, administrators want numbers. They want to know that every teacher is going to put through eight to ten to twelve students every year. They don’t want the warm and fuzzy testimonials.”

How sad, if that is true. As one who has lived the Reading Recovery experience day after day, it is the warm-and-fuzzy moments I cherish the most. The problem is that I’ve become so tangled up in numbers and in demands for efficiency that these moments tend to pass by unnoticed. Sometimes I feel as if I am adrift in a sea of statistical data without any nautical sense to guide me.

I want to drop anchor.

One evening last fall I was discussing my thesis with a colleague. I complained to him that we have become so defensive about what we do, so wrapped up in cost-effectiveness and statistics, that we’ve forgotten about the human element.

"So what you're saying, then, is that Reading Recovery has a life of its own," he said to me.

I thought about that one. Without the people involved, Reading Recovery has no life of its own, no meaning to explore. At the same time, it has been experienced by so many people that it has become a phenomenon in and of itself. In that respect, it must have some kind of meaning. It must mean something to the people who have experienced it. It must be more than numbers and graphs and arguments over how much it costs and whether or not it "works".

"You're right," I said to my friend. "It does have a life of its own. I guess that's what I'm trying to find."

Chapter 5

Hermeneutic Phenomenology:

“You Mean They Actually Let You Do This?”

As luck would have it, I enrolled in Dr. Kathleen Berry’s research course.

As luck would have it, she introduced me to hermeneutic phenomenology.

Given my frustration with the nature and direction of Reading Recovery research to date, hermeneutic phenomenology is the only methodology that satisfies my need to study the metaphors, the symbols, and the themes of my profession. In essence, a phenomenological approach has allowed me to ask, “What is this thing called Reading Recovery? What does it mean to the people who experience it? What is it like to live it?”

I am attracted to phenomenology because it has allowed me to study Reading Recovery as it is experienced by various players, to seek vivid images in their recollections, and *then* to look for themes in the big picture rather than to seek answers to predetermined questions. There is liberation in knowing that there are no answers; it’s comforting to know that my study is helping me to understand, given that I can never know anything for sure.

“I don’t have a stats course,” I lamented on that first day in class.

“Well,” Kathy Berry replied, “have you considered phenomenology?”

Even the word was frightening.

She gave me Max van Manen’s books. I was mesmerized: here at last was a research methodology that allowed me to break free from control groups and standard deviations. I sensed the importance of metaphor in hermeneutic writing. For the first time, I started to get excited about my thesis.

“This phenomenological research,” I said, tentatively, the next time our class met. “You mean they actually let you do this?”

There was something about this open-ended, uncontrolled, liberated methodology that made me suspicious. All along, I had been avoiding my thesis because I mistrusted quantitative research and all its trappings. Here, seemingly out of the blue, was hermeneutic phenomenology, and though I connected with it immediately, I worried that it lacked legitimacy in the academic community.

I look back on that moment and recognize how much I’ve learned, how much I’ve grown. I see now how modernist thinking, rhetoric and jargon were so firmly entrenched in my personal realities. Through reading and discussions with my fellow graduate students, I came to understand that there are multiple ways of looking at the world; we don’t always have to defer to dominant views and explanations. As a society we value the kinds of thinking that have been legitimized by science and positivism. We cheer for scientific breakthroughs. We long for hard facts and truths to support our endeavors. We want to know what “the research says”, and the research

we want to listen to is the kind that is controlled, the kind that can be replicated, the kind that says “this is this, and that is that.”

Hermeneutic phenomenology has offered me an escape from that positivistic kind of thought. It has offered liberation and an opportunity to bring creativity and humanistic sensitivities to the research field. It has forced me to commit to my own research.

My work has been – and continues to be – influenced by van Manen who wrote that “to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (1990, p. 5). My own positioning, then, as a Reading Recovery teacher leader, has been as important to my study as have been the experiences of the players I have involved. This has been a humanizing experience, one in which I have turned away from positivist and empirical structures and towards the emotions and memories and significant moments of those who experience Reading Recovery every day.

In planning my thesis proposal, I considered two ways to get at this meaning, one being to interview Reading Recovery teachers and the other to talk to the children. I chose to work with the latter, partly because I am most interested in what it means to experience Reading Recovery from their position, and partly because I felt I would get a more honest account from them. I had already established a relationship with a

number of children from my work the previous year. I was eager to pick up where we had left off.

Eidetic memories are those that are unusually vivid or life-like. These are the kinds of memories I sought in conducting my research: eidetic recollections, not well-meant but artificial compliments for something that might be viewed as "my" program. By studying the lived experiences of teachers, I was afraid I would elicit a kind of false tact, or as van Manen (1991) writes, "tact that is not driven by a selfless and authentic orientation to otherness and goodness" (p. 134).

The Reading Recovery teachers in our school district are my friends; we're nice to each other. When we want to help one another through a teaching snag, we tend to accentuate the positives. We're only human; we hate to hurt one another's feelings. Children, I have found, tend to be more brutal in their honesty. Teachers, I feared, without the comfort of anonymity in the research process, might cushion negative criticism. False tact was not a concern when I thought about possible child participants. As will become evident in the next chapter, I have found children to be less worried about hurting an adult's feelings. Monica, Mandy and Danika tell it like it is. Or should I say, like it *was*.

There would, of course, be limitations to the study. The ultimate limitation of any phenomenological study is that it doesn't prove anything. Because the focus would be on understanding and interpreting rather than knowing, there would be no proof, no sure knowledge, no new announcements or absolute discoveries. There

would be no generalizations unless others who would read my thesis were to make personal connections, and even then, the generalizations would only be between/across our lived experiences.

What would there be? There would simply be a description and an interpretation of the lived experiences of three children as observed by a Reading Recovery Teacher Leader. That is not to say, however, that the study would have no value. On the contrary, phenomenology seeks to create a kind of thematic understanding that is available to others who have had similar experiences. It seeks too, as van Manen (1990) writes, “to produce *action sensitive knowledge*” (p. 21); now that you know what the phenomenon means, it urges, how are you going to act more tactfully? Hopefully, others might read this thesis and say, “Yes, I understand! I’ve felt that way too!” In this manner, I sought threads of truth, bits of meaning that would tell of what it’s like for a child to experience Reading Recovery.

My plan, then, was to select three children who experienced Reading Recovery last year and to record their memories of the experience. I would talk to them, asking probing questions and helping them dig into the mines of their memories. I would have them guide me around the rooms where they experienced Reading Recovery, have them think about where they sat, what it felt like, what time of day it was, what they were missing when they were withdrawn from the classroom. What did they remember about me, their teacher? I would read to them and with them, and I would

have them read to me. Together, I decided, we would search through the book collection to find their favorites and the ones they didn't like.

I would attempt to search for, develop and use the tact of teaching, despite "the unplannable nature of tact" (van Manen, 1991, p. 144), and to elicit eidetic memories and meaningful responses. I would seek themes and threads of common experiences, and collect these (thoughtfully and sensitively, I hoped), making use of my need to see the world in terms of metaphor and symbol.

Did I seek facts?

No. Memories are not facts; memories are not accurate representations of the way things were. Memories are personal constructions of the way we choose to know things. Yet in those choices, in those representations, are elements of personal truth, and it was those moments that I sought.

Thus, my intention was to operate within a paradigm of hermeneutic phenomenology: I would use phenomenology to describe the lived experiences, and hermeneutics to interpret them. I didn't know what my written account would look like because the format would have to emerge from the study. As van Manen (1990) writes,

A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project.

(p. 162).

Why is this study important to the field? The scientific approach that has dominated Reading Recovery research has caused us to ignore the human, real-life significance of what we do. We need quantitative data because that's what school systems demand. At the same time, we need to remind ourselves, and others, of the reasons why we do what we do. I didn't get involved in Reading Recovery to justify and defend, nor did I get involved to create reports and graphs. I didn't want to operate within a numbers milieu. I *did* want to help children learn to read.

Our Reading Recovery continuing contact group meets once a month to discuss our teaching and to learn from each other's expertise and experience. More and more, I've been noticing positivist language entering our discourse. Maybe it was there all along and I just wasn't aware of it.

What level is he on?

She always scores above ninety percent on her running records.

How many weeks has he been in the program?

Her book graph shows a leveling off.

How can we get more kids through the program in the run of the year?

I don't hear us asking phenomenological questions. Sometimes, I guess, we do share stories about our experiences, but these are generally peripheral to the prescribed kind of talk that goes on about proper prompts and appropriate book levels. The odd

thing is that *I'm* the one who set this up; *I'm* the one who makes sure we don't get too far *off track*. My job as teacher leader is to bring the discussion back to "The Guidebook" (Clay, 1995).

I'm sensing a need to ditch "The Guidebook" every now and again. It seems to me that strategies and procedures should be examined in the context of our experiences, our feelings, our own professional beliefs. It shouldn't be the other way around.

This study has helped me to understand the kind of influence I've had in creating something that has become so confused by numbers and positivist dogma. I began this project hesitant in knowing that the children's lived experiences might not match my perceptions of how they might have felt. Despite my passion for my work, and despite my economic and professional dependence on its continuation, I was committed to keeping an "open mind" (whatever that meant), to not resisting each child's memories, and through this, to staying alert for those valuable eidetic moments of personal truth.

The question I began with, then, was this: what does Reading Recovery mean in the lives of the children with whom we work? It seemed a logical question to ask. How strange, though, to realize that we've been so busy asking children what they can do, that we've neglected to ask them what it feels like. For better or worse, we in Reading Recovery have constructed something, and as I embarked on my research, I

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felt it was time we started asking the kinds of questions that will allow us to sort out exactly what that something is.

In many ways, Reading Recovery is like reading instruction in scores of primary classrooms throughout North America, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Likewise, parts of it are similar to other early intervention programs. To know and understand the experience of Reading Recovery, then, is to be better informed about what it is like to learn to “read” in these other circumstances as well. While this thesis focuses on Reading Recovery, it is ultimately a search for tact and its implications to reading and literacy instruction as they are linked to education, pedagogy and teaching.

I search out eidetic memories.

Through these I seek tact.

And tact, hopefully, will inform my actions.

Monica And The Magic Key

As I said, the question I posed when I began my research was: what does Reading Recovery mean in the lives of the children with whom we work? As I reflected on my approach, however, it became evident to me that I can not separate myself out of the phenomenological question. I can't ask what Reading Recovery was like for Monica, Mandy and Danika without including myself in the interpretation. I've been too involved in all of this to exclude myself, too excited on good days, too impatient when things haven't gone as I'd planned.

My question, then, has become muddled. What attracted me to phenomenology in the first place has become my source of frustration. I like it that I'm *allowed* to be biased and involved, for that's what makes phenomenology a human approach. At the same time, my presence in all this is overpowering: just when I begin to listen to the voices of the children, I find myself trying to clarify what they've said according to my own memories and my own biases.

I find myself on the defensive.

Are we allowed to have favorites? I have heard other teachers say, "I don't have any favorites, but there's something about So-And-So..." Having a favorite student is an ethical taboo that teachers are quick to denounce.

"They're all my favorites," I have heard teachers say. Yet these same teachers tell cute stories about the same children over and over again. They celebrate their little successes. They tussle the same heads of hair.

If I'm going to be completely honest in this interpretation, I must admit to having entered the forbidden realm of favorites. I love 'em all (it's the truth), but there's one who connected with me more than any of the rest.

My favorite was Monica. The little girl who *aksd* me to show her the dolphins.

That's the way Monica speaks.

"You know my Nanny dere-dere?" (Dere-dere can be loosely translated, I suspect, to "there-there", the English form of the French "là là", although Monica doesn't speak French). "You know my Nanny dere-dere? She *aksd* me to read a book dere-dere? And I read her one all by myself dere-dere? And she said 'Monica you can read as good as a school teacher!'"

I loved working with Monica. I loved walking down the hall with her and listening to her stories about her Nanny and her Mommy and her aunts. She told me all about her spats with the other children in her neighborhood. About getting new glasses, and about how she got into trouble for sitting on the glasses on the school bus and breaking them.

Nothing was ever routine with Monica -- I never just went through the Reading Recovery motions with her as I tended to do with the others, especially when I was

tired. Our story-starter conversations were always authentic, rich, interesting -- and I was so genuinely interested in her experiences. She seemed to me to be a tiny little girl let loose in a big world, and the discovery process was gargantuan.

I wish I could tell you her real name. The pseudonym, Monica, misses the mark somehow, as did any other names I tried. She wears her name with passion and exuberance. She simply loves it. When she tells you a story about a conversation she had with somebody important to her, she frequently uses her name.

"You know my teacher, dere-dere? She aksd me, 'Monica, were you sick yesterday?' And I said "Yes, Teacher, I throwed up all day.' And she aksd me 'Monica, are you feeling better today?' And I told her 'yes' and she said "That's good, Monica.”"

Do you notice the number of times she used her own name? It's so important to her and so important to trying to explain what she's all about. To substitute *Monica* just doesn't work.

She is the most perfectly named child I have ever met. It's important that you know that. I'm not at all comfortable with pseudonyms, although I understand the need to protect my students' privacy. If I had asked her to select her own pseudonym, I suspect she'd have said, "No way, José! Use _____. That's my name. Want my number?"

There is an important point that needs to be made here. Monica's name is symbolic of her honesty. When she quotes somebody else using her name, you can be sure she's telling you something important. You can be sure it's coming from the heart.

A year has passed. Monica bounds into my imagination when I think about Reading Recovery. Not being located at her school any longer, I have rarely had the opportunity to see her. Until, now, of course.

Until this study.

I went to Monica's school one day to conduct an interview with her. I had been to the school the week previous, but Monica was out sick. At the time I was disappointed but, in true teacher fashion, masked my feelings, buried any notions of favorites, and interviewed one of the other children (with whom I had also connected, but in a different way).

A week later I returned and was delighted to see Monica's bright red jacket hanging on the hook beneath her name card. I found her class in the gymnasium.

When she saw me, Monica threw her ball clear across the gym and ran up to me. "Are you here to see me?" she asked, wide eyed, exuberant, precocious in a genuine sort of way. As always, I found her spirit to be inspiring.

The teacher laughed. "She heard you were here last week," she said, "and she's been waiting for her turn to go with you again."

Monica's hand was in mine. Solidly. Make no mistake, she seemed to be saying, this is *my* spin. It was a happy moment for all of us, I think, for who could not get the chuckles when Monica was in her prime. And today, clearly, Monica was primed.

We walked down the hall, gabbing about her Nanny and her Mommy. "Just like old times," I said. It was as if we had picked up right where we left off last year.

We went to the Reading Recovery room where our work took place last year. We talked about this and that -- about the things Monica remembered. All the nice things. All the compliments.

Then, having set the complimentary tone, I fell into a black hole.

"Well, Monica," I said, cheerfully. "Last year when I worked with you. Was it always fun? Were you always happy?"

She sat quietly, looking at her reflection in the two-way mirror ahead of her.

Her silence was disconcerting. I had expected an affirmative reply.

"It's okay, Monica. You can tell me. What was the worst part?"

She looked at me and her expression became stern. Almost accusatory.

"The worst part was when you beed angry."

My shock was colossal.

"Angry?" I asked. "I don't remember that. Tell me about it."

“When I was reading the book about the bar-b-que dere-dere I didn’t know the words and you turned around my chair and said ‘Now *Monica*, sound out the word. I’m *not* telling you again.’”

I didn’t remember it that way, but I knew there must have been some truth to it. If that was the way Monica remembered it, that was her reality.

I cleared my throat.

“*Monica*,” I said, knowing I had to ask the next question but not wanting to. “Did that happen a lot?”

“It happened three times,” she said, confidently. “You were very, very mean to me three times.”

“Three times?”

“Once when we were reading *The Magic Key* I couldn’t sound out the word and you turned around my chair again and said, ‘*Monica*, I’m not telling you again. You know that word. Sound it out.’” (Hunt, 1986c).

“Oh, I see.”

“And the next time dere-dere was when we read *Hermit Crab* and I couldn’t know a word and you turned around my chair again and you told me, ‘*Monica*, sound out this word! You know that word!’” (Randell, 1994).

You were very, very mean . . .

You turned around my chair . . .

Monica, sound out this word! I’m not telling you again!

Sound out this word . . .

You turned around my chair. . .

Monica!

I returned to my office feeling angry and defensive. Monica's words played in my head like a mantra, over and over again, such awful accusations! This couldn't have been true. This wasn't the way I recalled our interactions. After all, Monica was my favorite! She must have been confused.

I *never* asked her to sound out *anything*. Sounding out is the antithesis of what Reading Recovery stands for, the antithesis of what I believe about reading development. Reading involves the development of a system of strategies, *sounding out* being among the least effective of these.

Still, I knew there was truth in what Monica was telling me. I could picture myself, in a moment of frustration, turning her chair around, looking into her little face and saying something like "You know that word! You know what to do!" What difference did it make if the words and the notion of *sounding out* came from somewhere else? The memory came from me and my actions. The feelings were real.

She remembered that there were three times I was mad at her.

You were very, very mean . . .

I might not have recognized the truth of this memory had it not been for Monica using her name. She flung it at me like an exhibit at a criminal trial.

Monica, I'm not telling you again!

I knew right then that this was true. I heard myself saying it.

Her name gave it away.

What must it have been like for Monica to experience these three terrible moments? I know from her classroom teacher and from her family members how much she cared for me last year (as I cared for her). What an awful thing to have to suffer the disapproval of one whom you admire and look up to.

I remember turning around Monica's chair and I remember how her face changed at that moment. She never said a word, though. And now I realize that she must have experienced shock and disappointment in realizing that her teacher, "Funny Bones" she called me, could be so mean. Perhaps most bothersome to me is that she concealed her emotions for so long, that she let them fester.

Monica doesn't understand frustration and impatience. She doesn't understand that teachers get tired, that a child might be sick at home, that a credit card bill is creeping out of control. She just understands when people are mean to her. She experiences failure -- and this must have been seen as failure to live up to my expectations -- so profoundly that it becomes a dominant memory of the teacher/child relationship. It becomes, unfortunately, an interpretation of what she perceives to be a lack of effort, a lack of success, and a lack of ability.

This project is as much about me as it is about Monica and Mandy and Danika.

If my narrative becomes personal, if I pop up as a central character, it's because that's the only way I know how to approach this.

I can't be objective. I can't separate myself from this thing called Reading Recovery. A teacher's influence is so great that he or she becomes part of a child's understandings, a child's memories, a child's perceptions, a child's reality. The reverse, of course, is also true.

I remember when I was in Junior High School, I had written an essay about life during The Great Depression. The assignment emerged from our study of W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind?* (1947), a text that for some reason captivated my adolescent imagination. I *loved* that book.

I mean I *really* loved that book.

I don't know why; I don't even remember the story. There's something, though, about my mother, and her stories of growing up during the Depression years that fits into all this. I think that had something to do with it.

I loved to listen to my mother's narratives about her childhood. I loved her story about finding a lost lamb on the root cellar hatch on April Fool's Day and nobody believing her. I loved the one about Uncle Jimmy, the technological whiz kid of Tracadie, N.B., setting up his own radio station in his "workshop", and my mother, taking the glamorous name of Connie Boswell, singing live from Studio "A" while

somebody else prepared the news in Studio B. (My mother laughs when she recalls the day the RCMP arrived to shut down Uncle Jimmy's operation.)

My memories of my mother's narratives are peppered with images. An apple orchard. Blueberry fields. A little cabin at the end of the lane called *The Wah-Hoo*, with guitars and dancing and singing going on inside. My grandmother bringing food out to the tramps who came to her back door, but carrying a kettle of water, just in case. A little Boston Bulldog named Popeye, and a horse with a most politically-incorrect name. A secret recipe called Mystery Cake that was reserved for special occasions. My grandfather, a rather stern and impatient man, I understand, dazed and broken at the death of his baby daughter, my Aunt Josephine.

Long before *The Waltons* there were my mother's stories. And then there was *Who Has Seen The Wind?*

My enthusiasm for this book spilled over into my essay. I remember exactly how it began:

The Scene: Western Canada

The Date: 1933

How clever I was, I thought. I worked on this piece for an entire weekend, and on Monday morning, proudly placed it on my teacher's desk.

It was uncharacteristic of me to work hard back then. My teachers called me lazy, and I was. I found it hard to concentrate on classroom activities, and I avoided homework; I had so much on my mind, very little of which involved school. It's not

surprising, then, that my Language Arts teacher would question the authorship of my work.

On the day he was returning the assignment, he called me to his desk.

“Who wrote this?” he asked, sternly.

I was utterly deflated. I could barely speak.

“I did,” I whispered.

“You wrote this?” His tone was accusatory.

I nodded my head, my lip beginning to quiver.

What could he do? He handed me the paper with a big red mark scratched on the cover: thirty out of thirty.

It was meaningless.

This incident, of course, stayed with me. In a way I embraced it because it taught me that for practical purposes, at least, we are who others think we are, and that others form impressions based on their interactions with us. At first I blamed him, and then I blamed myself.

Years later I became a teacher. One of my first positions was as a Language Arts teacher in a junior high school and my former teacher was now a colleague.

It was September and I hosted the first staff party of the year. He and I got talking. I didn’t sense that he had something he needed to say. Then, from out of nowhere, came this --

“Do you remember what happened . . . ?”

“Yes.” I knew what he meant. He didn’t have to finish the sentence.

“I’ll never forget it,” he said, sadly. “I think about it often.”

“It’s okay. It was for the best.”

“But you don’t understand,” he said, gravely. “You really don’t understand. As soon as I said that to you back then, I realized I’d screwed up. I knew that as a teacher I had screwed right up.”

“It’s okay.”

“I can picture you standing at my desk and I think to myself, ‘That was the day I screwed up with John McLaughlin.’”

I laughed. I told him to forget it. I said he was a good teacher: one of the best. And I meant it, too, especially then.

How could I have known what this incident had meant to him? I didn’t know that teachers carried this stuff around with them, that for years they beat themselves up for the split second decisions that caused them to say or do the wrong thing.

I know now, though. I know how intricately involved we are in each other’s lives: students and teachers, teachers and students. My Language Arts teacher influenced me and I influenced him. This must be true, too, of my own professional realities. It must be true of the way tact (or lack of tact) influences the pedagogical moments of the relationships between students and teachers in Reading Recovery. That relationship is a close one, or at least the opportunities for it to be close exist in the nature of the daily one-to-one instruction.

I have learned that we take things for granted: trust, understanding, experience, knowledge. We think children know where we're coming from when we show frustration and when we criticize. We expect them to understand that we don't *mean* to be *mean*, that it's all part of the teaching game. *Sometimes teachers get snippy and you just have to ignore it:* that's the hidden curriculum that children must learn. Only they don't learn that. When teachers act tactlessly they betray the relationship; they kindle eidetic fires that never extinguish.

van Manen (1986) writes that

Realizing how I did the wrong thing for a child constantly gives me a measure of the true meaning of pedagogy... So what should we do with the guilt of being an imperfect mother, father, teacher? We should . . . look closely at our children. Children are natural forgivers, and that makes our responsibility to be true parents and teachers even more urgent. We must not abuse their forgiveness.

(P. 54)

So I accept my position.

I celebrate it.

I take responsibility for it.

It's part of the phenomenon.

The Fuss Over Withdrawal

I recently attended a seminar on reading development presented by the renowned reading theorist and researcher, Marilyn Jager Adams (1997). At one point she addressed the issue of withdrawing children from the classroom for extra help in reading and writing. When this happens to students, she argued, they feel different and inadequate.

I raised my hand.

"Given your views on withdrawal," I asked, "what is your opinion of Reading Recovery?"

Jager Adams sat on the stool and thought for a moment. I could tell we were on the verge of a paradox.

On one hand, she replied, Clay and Reading Recovery were important to North America because they provided a rationale and vehicle for early intervention. On the other hand, she continued, Reading Recovery is a "second tier program". She suggested that we'd be better off directing our resources to "fixing the classroom first". Despite our best intentions, she implied, Reading Recovery educators were actually doing damage to our students' self esteem and feelings of self-worth by withdrawing them from the classroom. We would do more for these children, she said, if we worked at changing the classroom learning environment.

Church (1996) agrees. She writes that Reading Recovery, and programs like it, “vest the problems in the children, rather than in our failure to create classroom curriculum to support children’s diverse needs” (p. 39). Reading Recovery training, she continues, “does nothing to change the classroom program children are experiencing” (p. 39). She quotes research that suggests the best place to help children who struggle is “in the classroom” (p. 41).

I do not wish to challenge these views, as I am sure they have merit. What I do wish to suggest, however, is that there are also compelling arguments for the other side. It seems to me that we, as educators, tend to polarize on pedagogical issues. Everything seems to be *this* versus *that*.

Whole language versus phonics.

Basal readers versus *real* literature.

Math facts versus problem solving.

Cooperative learning versus competition.

Authentic assessment versus standardized tests.

Jager Adams (1997) made an excellent point in her Fredericton presentation. “We can’t seem to get beyond this stupid whole language versus phonics debate,” she said. And she’s dead on. We continue to engage in these kinds of either/or discussions, and the more we argue, the further we get from the real educational value of the innovations.

I wish Monica, Mandy and Danika weren't withdrawn from their classrooms last year. I wish there had been no need for it. That's what I wish for all children, and maybe some day we'll be able to provide for every diverse need within the classroom.

But we aren't there yet. We aren't even close.

Right now, without intervention, these children struggle to cope with the activities and expectations of the classroom. Church (1996) expresses "serious philosophical difficulties with identifying children at age six as needing 'recovery'" (p. 39). She calls for a redirection of resources towards the kinds of professional development that will make a difference in the classroom.

Well, that's one solution. In the absence, however, of a model that will really make that kind of difference, I think Reading Recovery is an impressive alternative. As Routman (1996) writes, "Reading Recovery is not perfect. It is, however, the best early intervention program I have ever seen. Students learn to read, and they learn quickly" (p. 52). For Monica, Mandy and Danika, it was the *very* best we were able to offer. Or, perhaps, the teaching I provided, which was informed by Reading Recovery principles, theories and practices, was the best that I knew how to give at the time.

Reading Recovery has been criticized because it isn't available to all children and because it doesn't even succeed with all those with whom teachers work. Nobody ever said Reading Recovery would solve all of our literacy problems, indeed the search for a panacea has placed unfair pressure and expectations on the Reading

Recovery community. All too often we undermine people's attempts to make positive changes when we should instead champion the spirit behind the efforts. We should say -- as we do in Northern New Brunswick - "Drive 'er, Charlie! Go for it!"

If we wait for classroom structures to be completely dismantled and for new ones to emerge, we allow more children like Monica, Mandy and Danika to slip through the cracks. Reading Recovery may be an expensive safety net, but it is a safety net nonetheless. And who, I ask, has the right to put a price tag on our children's literacies?

So what about withdrawal? Does Reading Recovery cause children to feel inadequate, as Jager Adams contends? Not according to the children with whom I spoke. The one clear theme that emerged through my interviews with these children was that they remember Reading Recovery as a happy experience.

"Do you remember coming to read with me last year?" I asked Mandy.

"Yes," she replied, enthusiastically. "It was fun!" Our interview would be riddled with this word, "fun", and of its various other forms, like "funny", "funniest", "funner", and "the very, very funnest!".

"What was the best part, Mandy?"

"The funnest part?"

"Yes," I smiled. "The funnest part. What was it?"

Mandy's giggle is catching. She has no front teeth. If Monica was my favorite, Mandy was my funnest. I remember laughing right out loud with her, the lesson's momentum shot. This happened over and over again.

One afternoon, in the middle of a labored running record, Mandy belched.

"Ooooch," she muttered. "Tastes like hot dogs."

We went into fits.

Another time, when reading a book about a pig, Mandy came to the word "oink". She stopped, looked at the picture, pointed to the word, covered all but the first letter with her finger, and finally let out a clear and distinct pig snort.

"I don't know the word," she said, "but that's what it means!"

Laughter again. Loss of control. Two friends with terminal giggles.

Back to our interview. She was thinking about the funnest part.

"I liked everything. It was all fun."

"Everything was fun?"

"Uh huh. Remember that time when I wrote a story about my little niece? (She used the French word, *nee-ess*, although, like Monica, she doesn't speak French. I chalk it up to the language of her neighborhood.)

"I don't remember that, Mandy. Tell me about it."

"Remember? My little niece her-dere she sweared at me and she got in trouble."

Suddenly, I did remember.

"Yes, Mandy. I remember that. You were very cross at her."

"Her-dere, she swears at me all the time. She says the 'f' word and the 's' word -- all those words. When I take something of hers just to look at it, she swears at me."

"Oh, dear. That's not very nice."

"She's only five. I used to be her friend, but not no more. She gets grounded for swearing or hitting or bad things."

"Oh. What does grounded mean?"

"I don't really know what grounded means. It never happened to me."

"You're lucky," I replied. "I bet it's no fun."

"My little niece said it's *terrible!*" She flipped absently through a book I had set out for her before the interview. Her mind, clearly, was on her little *nee-ess*. She grinned at me, all gums, and said, "That's why I don't swear no more!"

That smile, those gums, that admission. I know Mandy trusts me. This couldn't have happened without a trusting relationship last year.

It's hard to get Mandy talking about last year. She wants to cut to the present: that's the important stuff. The past is past, she seems to be telling me. She's more interested in catching up on what's happened in our lives this past year. I bring her

back to the Reading Recovery phenomenon and she squirms her way back to the present.

“What else do you remember?” I ask, having dealt with the swearing issue.

“Let’s see. Hmmmm. I remember reading.”

“What do you remember reading, Mandy?”

“Lots of books. They were mostly easy but some were hard.”

“Did you like them?”

Toothless grin again. “Oh yeah. They were fun to read. Remember that cat who stealed everything?”

“Ahh,” I respond. “*Greedy Cat*” (Cowley, 1983).

“Yeah, him. He stealed everything him-dere when the mother went shopping. That was the funniest one. Whenever he stealed the sausages, that was so funny. I thought they were wieners but you had to tell me what they were.”

“They’re sort of like wieners, though.”

“Sort of. I know what they are now. Me-dere, I get to eat some sausages with pancake syrup on them.”

I needed a quick shift back to the past. This was dangerous territory, I realized, letting Mandy loose in the present.

“What else do you remember about that book?”

“That book? *Greedy Cat* book?”

“Yes. Why did you find that one fun?”

“The funniest, funniest part was at the last when she put the pot in the shopping bag and the cat ate the pepper and he said ‘Too hot! Too hot! Too hot!’ and he said ‘Yow!'” Mandy was laughing out loud now, and making faces. I was writing madly to get these words on paper.

“He never stealed again, I don’t think. That was funny. But my little niece, she steals stuff from me but I don’t swear at her no more.”

I dropped my pen, smirked in defeat, and decided to enjoy the present.

“What do you do?”

“Huh?”

“When your little niece steals. You said you don’t swear, so what do you do?”

Toothless grin. Dazzling eyes.

“I TELL!”

I laughed out loud again. “Does she get in trouble?” I asked.

“Huh,” Mandy replied, grabbing another book. “That fixes her. She gets grounded!”

Back to withdrawal. I tried another tactic once we stopped laughing.

“Mandy,” I began, “what was it like to have to leave the classroom every day?”

“It was good. It was fun.”

“You didn’t mind?”

“I liked it!”

“But how did you feel?”

“I felt good. I liked going with you. I like reading. You teached me how to read.”

“I see. But what about the other kids. What did they think?”

“They wanted to come too. They used to say, ‘Hey, when’s it my turn?’”

“So you felt good about coming with me?”

“Sometimes when you forgot to get me it didn’t feel too good.”

“Did that happen a lot?”

“Not a lot. Some times.”

“Oh, well Mandy, I didn’t know that bothered you.”

“It’s okay, you always said you were sorry the next day.”

The fuss over withdrawal, I think, has been carried too far. I know Mandy was missing important things in the classroom when I removed her for Reading Recovery. I know, too, that the other children must have seen her as somehow different than themselves by virtue of the way she was spirited away every day. Even if she can’t verbalize it, there must be a recognition within her consciousness that she needed, and received, extra help.

But did she, as Jager Adams would have us believe, feel less intelligent than her peers? I doubt it. I think, on the contrary, that Mandy felt smart. I remember her

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excitement at working through difficult tasks. I remember the day I took her to read to the kindergarten children, and how delighted she was to be *really* entertaining and informing others with her power over words.

And I remember the giggles.

Withdrawal? You can't just adopt a polarized position. You have to look at the context. I don't believe withdrawal was negative in the context of this teacher and these children. I remember them swinging their zip-lock bags of books as we walked down the hall towards our room, gabbing about the things that had happened in their lives in the twenty-four hours or so since we had last been together. Their body language -- smiles, bouncy steps, swinging arms, bobbing pony tails -- indicate to me that they liked being taken out of the classroom. I always got little stories from them, and even if they weren't happy ones -- (even if it was about being punished for some sort of mischief, or about a Mom being out of town -- these conversations were marked by a level of intimacy and trust that makes me know *withdrawal* in itself is not a bad thing.

The important thing, I believe, is the nature of the phenomenon that is being experienced. Rather than asking, "Is withdrawal good or bad?", we ought to ask, "What is the child being withdrawn to? How is this experience being lived? What is the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the child?"

Certainly not all children will experience Reading Recovery as a pleasant phenomenon. I am sure there are children who dread having to leave the classroom for

their thirty-minute lessons. Perhaps, though, we need to explore the notion of tact in determining whether a particular child's withdrawal program is good or bad. A tactful teacher will be aware of the child's dualities: insecurities, anxieties and dislikes on the one hand, strengths, passions and tastes on the other. A tactful teacher will encourage risks rather than enforce them, and will try to know the child personally, not just academically.

In this case, in the relationship between this teacher and these children, I think tact existed; it was not always there (sometimes the teacher acted with a complete disregard for tact), but overall the relationship was positive. Generally speaking, I believe these children were happy to enter into that relationship.

The giggles gave it away.

Chapter 8

Sounding It Out: Who Teaches Them That, Anyway?

A few weeks have passed and Kathleen is approaching independence. I notice some of her awe returning. I see her taking risks again. Just now, as I planned how to begin this chapter, I heard her in the family room making up a story to go with a book that was too difficult for her to “read”.

“And the mother said to the son, ‘You’re getting me very frustrated young man!’” she said. “And then she said, ‘You’ll be spending time in your room!’”

It strikes me as odd that I never allowed Monica, Mandy and Danika to do that, despite the fact that there is a place in the lesson for it to happen. The very last thing that is done in a Reading Recovery lesson is to introduce a new book that the teacher will use for a running record the following day. This would have been the time for the child to fabricate a tale, a time for imagination to creep into the daily rigor of the Reading Recovery lesson.

Instead, I recall our book introductions as being a series of questions and answers. Something like this:

TEACHER: In this story the Father Bear goes to the river to catch some fish.

Did you ever go fishing?

CHILD: Yeah.

TEACHER: Look at this picture. What's Father Bear doing?

CHILD: He's going fishing.

TEACHER: Does he see any fish?

CHILD: No.

TEACHER: Oh, look at this page! What happens?

CHILD: He sees the fish. He catches the fish.

TEACHER: Good for you!

And so on, and so on.

The purpose of the book introduction is to familiarize the child with the story, to kick-start the semantic and syntactic cueing systems, so that when he or she attempts to read it, the attempt will be driven by meaning and structure. The problem with it, though, is that it is situated at the end of the lesson when the teacher is often pressed for time, and the frustration level is beginning to climb. Often the child is getting tired after the tremendous effort that's been exerted in the preceding twenty or so minutes.

From experience, I know that the teacher is tired at this point as well. It's easier to follow a very efficient, question-and-answer format than to allow the child to engage in an authentic telling of the story. I have no idea what book Kathleen was just reading, but I suspect that if I pointed out a few words that might give her difficulty, her strong sense of story may well carry her to a solid reading of the text. I suspect,

also, that this grounding in semantics and syntax would make her less likely to rely on the graphophonemic system when she finds herself in trouble.

This afternoon Kathleen brought a book to me that she had selected at school. It was at this point that I noticed the change in her, a renewed sense of purpose in reading. I noticed how she told me the story, rather than just reading the words, as had been her approach in recent weeks. The book was called *Ben's Teddy Bear* (Randell, 1993a), a predictable book with a limited vocabulary but a story she could easily relate to. Ben, the main character, can't go to sleep because he can't find his Teddy Bear. Kathleen goes through this virtually every evening as she scours the house looking for her blankie (a worn yellow crib sheet with fitted corners).

I could sense the coming together of the semantics, syntax and graphophonics as she read this book to me. Her reading was expressive and fluent. She would stop periodically to point out connections she was making to the illustrations.

"Look, Daddy," she said. "Ben's Mommy is tucking Ben in just like Mommy tucks me in. And his clothes are just thrown on the chair next to the bed, just like you do with yours!"

Books used by Reading Recovery teachers are placed along a gradient of difficulty from Level 1 to Level 21. *Ben's Teddy Bear* is a Level 5 book. It struck me that I had never heard a Reading Recovery student read a Level 5 book with this flair and confidence. Is it that I have always kept the task too difficult for my students?

Was it too easy for Kathleen? Perhaps my problem is in finding that elusive zone of proximal development.

Or maybe it has to do with this business about sounding things out.

Two years ago, while I was studying at the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery, a colleague and I interviewed several Grade 3 students who had experienced Reading Recovery in Grade 1. Our hypothesis was that these students would be able to articulate how they deal with difficulties when they read. After all, we asserted, as Reading Recovery teachers we spend so much time having children answer questions like, "How did you know it was *store*? ", or "What did you do to figure out that word?"

We brought our video camera. My colleague, with her experience in the dramatic arts, was the interviewer while I was the cameraperson. I'll never forget our chagrin.

Over and over again we got the same response to the question: "What do you do when you get stuck?"

Each and every child's response was, "I sound it out".

HOLD IT! CUT!

“But Steven,” my friend would say, “when you’re reading along in your book, and things are going really well, and then you get to a word that you can’t figure out -- there must be something that you do.”

“I just sound it out.”

“Okay.” (Grimace. Sigh). “But Steven, what else do you do?”

“Nothing. I just sound it out.”

“That’s it? You just sound it out?”

“Uh huh.”

CUT!

“So Steven, you said you sound it out. Maybe that’s what you do now. But do you remember what you did when you used to go to Reading Recovery?”

“Reading what?”

“When you used to go with Mrs. Branch in Grade 1.”

“Oh yes. I remember her.”

“Do you remember what she taught you to do when you got stuck?”

“Yes. She’s the one who taught me to sound it out.”

“Oh.”

CUT!

When the tape rolls again the cameraperson and the interviewer have changed places.

"This is Steven and he went to Reading Recovery when he was in Grade 1. Do you remember that, Steven?"

"Yeah. It was fun. Mrs. Branch was really nice."

"And do you remember the things you learned to do?"

"I learned to read. And when I got stuck I would go back to the beginning and try it again. Or sometimes I would think about the story or look at the picture. And sometimes I would just skip the word and it would make sense after a while. But I *never ever* sounded it out."

We ditched the project and chose a different topic. The child was so obviously prepped it was embarrassing.

Tonight I asked Kathleen what she does when she gets stuck. She thought about it for a second; I fully expected her to say, "I sound it out".

But she didn't."

"I go over it," she said, at last.

"You what?"

"I go over it. I go over the word and then it makes sense."

"Wow!"

"Am I not supposed to do that?"

"Yes, Kathleen," I said laughing. "That's exactly what you're supposed to do.

But who taught you that?"

"Nobody taught me," she said. "That's just the way I do it."

Every one of the three children in this study is proud to announce that she can read because she can sound out the words. Where did this come from? Who taught them that reading is about sounding out? Am I being defensive when I say -- emphatically, at that -- that I *never* prompt a child to "sound it out"?

Clay (1991) writes that "sounding out is not enough" (p. 290). She believes, as I do, that in order for children to become fluent, confident readers, they need to access phonological awareness in the context of a system of processing strategies. While word solving is an important reading skill, it is much different than simply sounding-it-out. How children learn to read, she states, "can no longer be reduced to learning letter-sound relationships" (p. 291).

The kind of prompting I have tried to do in my work with children has been to bring together meaning, structure and visual information. Although I know I have been tempted to say, "Sound it out" when a child is stuck on a word, I've bitten my tongue. I've tried to prompt to higher level processing: I've tried to help the child monitor, search, discover, cross-check, repeat, confirm, self-correct and solve, all within the context of a meaningful reading situation.

The “sounding out” issue repeated itself with every interview I conducted, and I don’t understand where it’s coming from. Too many children are talking about “sounding out” for us to ignore it. Too many children are not talking about the other strategies that they learn in Reading Recovery. Perhaps it’s because much of the prompting we do in Reading Recovery is towards a more effective use of the graphophonemic system, and to them, reading becomes a matter of sounding out.

What puzzles me is the way these children are reading. I listened to each of them read as I conducted the research for this project, and each one of them employed a variety of effective strategies to deal with difficulties. They reread lines and pages of text. They looked at the pictures. They thought out loud. They substituted words that made sense but didn’t look right. The problem, though, is that they tend to do these things after their attempts at sounding-out have failed.

Who teaches them that reading is about connecting letters and sounds? That question is crucial to this study because it forces me to examine the role I have played in all this. To get at that question, I must explore the nature of *sounding-out*: what it is like to experience this, and then, what does *sounding-out* actually mean?

“So, Danika,” I asked on a subsequent interview as I tried to get at the nature of the *sounding-out* experience, “what it is like to sound something out?”

“It’s hard.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to think about the sounds and then make them with your mouth.”

“Why is that hard?”

“Sometimes it doesn’t work.”

I don’t get a sense that reading is *hard* for Danika. She employs many strategies to get herself out of tangles: reading ahead, rereading passages, looking at the picture. Clearly, though, her sounding-out experiences are difficult, and they are her first line of attack on difficult text. When she does sound something out, she often gets stuck on the first letter, or she looks at a part of the word that her experiences tell her should make a particular sound.

Here’s an example. The book is *Pony Crazy* (Bryant, 1995), and the sentence reads, “She stared straight ahead at the finish line” (p. 2).

Danika was reading fluently to this point. Then she said, “She stared straig -- straig -- str -- straig-g-g-g”

“Hold it!” I exclaimed. “You’re sounding out! What does that feel like?”

“Crappy.”

“Why crappy? What do you mean?”

“I can’t figure it out. Wait just a minute.”

“She stared str . . . she stared straight ahead at the finish line!”

The sounding-out part was difficult for Danika. She used her finger to help her focus on the word and the letters within the word. She squinted her eyes. Her oral response was slow, deliberate, mechanical. Someone has taught her that this is what *real* reading involves. Am I implicated in this? Surely I must be, as I was central to her reading development intervention. Professionally, this is discouraging, for somehow, despite my beliefs about the importance of meaning and structure, I have caused Danika to believe that the graphophonic system is the most important in problem-solving on an unknown word.

It is only after *sounding-out* fails that Danika searches for help from meaning and structure, and when she does this -- when it makes sense to her -- she experiences success. What are the implications in this for tactful teaching? I don't know why it happens, but for some reason, the children in this study have adopted a *graphophonics first* approach to reading. Knowing this, and understanding that our school system places a heavy emphasis on letter recognition and letter/sound relationships, I think Reading Recovery teachers would be well advised to spend less time on things that support the child's perception of *reading as sounding-out* and attempting, instead, to make reading a meaningful process.

Chapter 9

Adventures

I asked each child this question: What did you like about coming to read with me last year? Danika's first response almost went unnoticed.

"I liked Biff and Chip."

"What about them?" I probed.

"I liked the adventures they went on."

Biff and Chip are two recurring characters in the *Oxford Reading Tree* series (Hunt, 1985) which is widely used in Reading Recovery. Here's how the story line goes: we meet the family and their friends, the family moves to a new house, the children find a magic key in a box under a tree, and the key takes them on adventures (Hunt 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1986d, 1986e).

They go on an underground adventure.

They go on a winter adventure.

They step into story books.

And so on.

It's been my experience that the books in this series are among the most popular for Reading Recovery and classroom use. Children like the consistency of the characters, and they find the stories and illustrations humorous. Teachers I have

spoken with enjoy the stories at a different level, picking up subtle jokes that the children might miss.

I almost missed the significance of Danika's comments because they were so consistent with what the other children had been telling me.

"I liked Biff and Chip" said Monica.

"I liked Floppy. I liked Kipper. I liked all those Kipper books" said Mandy.

So when Danika echoed these sentiments, I felt it was simply a mutual response to a popular series. But the word "adventure" lingered with me. And finally, as if I had been daydreaming in the path of a runaway train, it hit me.

The stories in the *Oxford Reading Tree* series (Hunt, 1985) are different from the other books we use because of the sense of adventure. The children, the parents, the teacher, even the dog are constantly getting themselves into trouble. They are prone to bouts of silliness. There is always one character or another thrown into a moment of irony.

That, I think, is what attracts us to these books. The other stories, including those in the *New PM* series (Nelson Price Milburn, 1993), the *Sunshine* series (Wendy Pye Team, 1988), and the *Ready To Read* series (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1983), lack that spirit of adventure. They're better described as books with which to teach reading.

The Oxford series has found the tricky balance between simplicity and predictability on the one hand, and richness of story on the other. I remember, when

working with these children, that when given a choice of books, more often than not they would select an Oxford. Perhaps it has something to do with the adventures that the children go on - the reckless, daring adventures that take them away from the safety of their suburban home, their suburban parents.

Historically, children have connected to this kind of literature. Saltman (1985) writes of a “single recurring element that characterizes almost all children’s books: the child protagonist at the center of the work” (p. 671). Further, Saltman argues that

children are able to live inside the books they read, and this ability, coupled with their growing concern with the testing of their own strengths and abilities, accounts for a common plot device in children’s literature: ridding the story of adults.

(p. 671).

The children in the Oxford series escape from adults over and over again. It is not that the parents play an insignificant role in the series; indeed, they provide a context of safety and understanding, and reinforce the notion that it is okay to make mistakes. In the foibles of the adults -- in their playfulness and in their love of fun -- lie the seeds of adventure. The children simply take it a step further.

Sutherland & Arbuthnot (1991) write that foremost among the virtues of good adventure tales for children “is the atmosphere of excitement and suspense which serves as the most tempting of all baits for nonreaders” (p. 385). While I hesitate to label Monica, Mandy and Danika “nonreaders”, I certainly agree that this sense of excitement inherent in the Oxford series has seized their imaginations and attention,

and has caused them to speak positively about the reading experience. I knew all along that these were popular books; it's only now, though, that I feel I understand the attraction.

Mandy told me that she liked how the children in the Oxford series are always "in danger". The word *adventure* is defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Guralnik, 1975) as "the encountering of, or a liking for, danger; an exciting and dangerous undertaking" (p. 11). In this definition I found the connection I'd been searching for in trying to interpret Mandy's experiences with these books.

"Do you like to be in danger too, Mandy?"

"Sometimes. But not like Biff."

Biff is a female character who Mandy refers to over and over again. She rarely speaks about the boys.

"What kind of danger do you get into?"

"I hang upside down on the monkey bars. That's dangerous."

"Aren't you scared you'll fall off?"

"No. My legs are strong. I never think I'm going to fall. But sometimes the teachers get all scared. They say, 'Mandy! Don't swing around like that! You'll fall off!'" She giggles.

"What's different about Biff?"

"She gets in *real* danger like when she goed with the kids down that mine tunnel. It was dark and scary but she wasn't scared."

"That *was* scary. You're right."

"She didn't know what was down the tunnel but she goed there anyway."

The magic key takes the children to new and exciting places fraught with danger. Mandy longs for the kinds of new beginnings that Biff experiences as she charges ahead into the unknown. Mandy lives in a small, closed world that rarely extends beyond a few experiential venues: home and neighborhood, school, the grocery store. There's little danger in these environs, Mandy having developed a kind of savvy to wear with each one. Even the school playground, where she is free to explore on her own terms, is limited and limiting.

Biff has the key. The magic key. And the key is danger. She plunges down mine shafts with reckless abandon. She stands up to bullies in foreign lands where she doesn't have her parents and teachers to protect her. And even at home, Biff takes charge: as Mandy pointed out, "She even gets to pick out her own wallpaper!" Mandy would like to have that freedom; she yearns to explore new places, to experience the danger of the unknown, to seize new beginnings that take her beyond the monkey bars at school.

Who has the power in Mandy's life? Her mother. Her teachers. And others whom she doesn't even know but who set rules and regulations about what a little girl

living in her part of town, going to her school, can and can't do.

Who has the power in Biff's life? Biff does. Biff has the magic key.

"So you liked the adventures the children went on with magic key," I said to Danika. "What was your favorite one?"

"When they went to the winter village. I liked that one. They saved the little boy." Danika was sitting up straight, her legs swinging, her hands jammed in beneath her thighs. She does this a lot, as if she's trying to keep her body in check.

"Would you like to have a magic key?" I asked.

She just smiled, and I knew she meant, "yes".

"What kind of adventure would you go on?" I asked. She was silent for a moment. Her legs stopped swinging as she thought about that one. Then she brought her hands up and, making them into fists, began shadow boxing.

"I'd find a mean old giant," she said, laughing. "And I'd punch his lights out!"

Who is Danika's giant? Who is it that keeps her from exploring the world on her own terms? What are the things that mean old giants deny this little girl? She loves adventure stories because the characters in them are empowered to take action based on their own intuitions and their own understandings of personal strengths. Danika seeks new beginnings, a way out of the closed world in which she lives.

I wish I had a magic key. I'd give it to Danika and watch her go!

Chapter 10

“Does That Sound Right?”

There is an issue I need to deal with but that I've been avoiding. It involves language patterns -- home and neighborhood patterns -- and how they stand in the way of reading acquisition. It's a problem I've encountered time and time again, in different schools, in different districts, even in different provinces. It's a problem that Reading Recovery teachers raise over and over again when they get together to discuss pedagogical issues.

Monica was struggling with a little book called *Tom Is Brave* (Randell, 1993b). A little boy, Tom, falls on his way to the store and skins his knee. Bravely, he returns home and allows his mother to clean and dress the wound. The text on this particular page reads: “‘Here you are,’ said Mum. ‘You are brave’” (p. 12).

Monica looked at the picture, as she had been taught to do, and began to read the words.

- “*Here za . . .*

She stopped, frustrated.

I gave her the words and she began again.

- “*Here you are,*” said Mum. “*Youze is . . . youze is . . .*”

She stopped again, even more frustrated with herself. I gave her the rest of the words and she reread the page.

Schools demand that children adopt a standard format for English communication. It is virtually impossible to succeed in school without learning that proper English is written and read a certain way. Other forms of expression, including dialects and colloquialisms, for example, are deemed of a lower status and must be repressed if a child is to succeed. That is not to say that some people don't resist and challenge this notion, but to be taken seriously by the community of educated speakers, one must phrase one's argument with the same standards that one attempts to challenge. Standard English is a modern invention that disadvantages some children who speak and think in different communicative patterns.

A child's strong non-standard language pattern is, to me, the most difficult obstacle to overcome in teaching for mastery over standard English print. On the other hand, it has been my experience (generally speaking, of course) that children who come to school with insight into and facility with English structures, seem to accelerate faster and discontinue earlier.

Monica and Mandy are from the same neighborhood and, at least to my untrained ear, they share some kind of non-standard English patterns. One example is their use of "dere-dere", a phrase I introduced in an earlier chapter. It is a phrase that has worked its way into their oral language patterns so resolutely that it has become

natural, meaningful and crucial to their communication processes. I can't imagine Monica and Mandy speaking without saying "dere-dere" every sentence or two; it's a part of who they are. Monica and Mandy without "dere-dere" would be like me without "Honest to God!" or "It was *too* funny!"

I know people, in part, by the things they say. Our Courtney's latest is "That's so wicked!" This phrase identifies her as a twelve-year old growing up in Bathurst, New Brunswick, associating with other kids in her school.

Life is wicked.

Adidas track pants are wicked (as long as they're black with white stripes down the side).

Wicked, I gather, is something good.

The problem, in terms of teaching Monica and Mandy to read, is that none of the books in our collection value their own very important language patterns. Kipper and Biff and Chip speak beautiful English. So do Baby Bear, Dan The Flying Man, Mrs. Wishy Washy and Sally, the bean girl. Nobody says "dere-dere". Nobody says "Me-dere" or "You-dere". Nobody says "Youze guys'r gonna get it!"

Monica and Mandy say these things. They look for these patterns in the books they're given, and like many other children, they enter Reading Recovery with strong language patterns that don't match that which has become the dominant standard in English instruction.

Does it sound right? We ask them, over and over again.

Of course it does, it's the way they speak.

Clay (1995) writes about three cueing systems that need to be accessed and controlled if one is to become an effective reader. These systems -- meaning, structure and visual information -- are accessed or neglected, depending on the strength and dynamics of a child's processing system. Reading difficulties often occur, it is asserted, when a child overemphasizes or ignores one or more of the cueing systems.

If a child is neglecting meaning, the Reading Recovery teacher prompts him or her to search for information that would help the reading make sense. If the child is ignoring visual information, or graphophonics, the teacher will prompt him or her to look more closely at the word or words, and to search for information that will help in solving the problem at the print level. If the child is neglecting structure, the teacher will prompt him or her to think about what sounds right. This last circumstance is the most difficult one to overcome when dealing with children whose neighborhood and family language patterns are so strong that they interfere with the reading of the print as it is written.

The book was *New Trainers* (Hunt, 1986a). Mandy was enjoying the book, having already read two or three about Chip and his family, and having come to enjoy the humorous illustrations that characterize the *Oxford Reading Tree* series (Hunt, 1985).

Things went well until page four.

““Chip weared the new trainers” she said, and before she had a chance to turn the page I stopped her.

“Hold it,” I said. “You said ‘Chip weared the new trainers’. Does that sound right?”

“No,” she said, quickly. “It don’t sound right. It should say ‘new sneakers’ ‘cause that’s what they’re called.”

Mandy wasn’t *getting it* but I was determined to make a point on this one.

“You’re right,” I said, “they are sneakers. But in this book they’re called trainers. There’s something else. Read it again.”

““Chip weared the new trainers.””

“Does that sound right?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Mandy, you said that Chip weared the new trainers. Can we say it that way?”

“What way?”

“Weared. You said ‘weared’. Do we say it that way?”

“Yah.”

I had walked right into it. I got the same feeling you get when you watch yourself lock your keys in the car.

The question, of course, was redundant. Can we say it that way? Of course we can. Mandy says it that way all the time, as does her mother and her little *nee-ess*, her friends and her neighbors.

I made one last ridiculous attempt to win the point.

“How about this?” I began. “Chip wore the new trainers. Doesn’t that sound better?”

“Whatever,” she relented. “That sounds good too. Chip wored the new trainers.”

While I am not a linguistic expert, the aspiring phenomenologist in me has been sensing patterns. Having lived in this area my entire life, I have come to understand this non-standard English and to accept it as a very natural manner of local communication. It would seem obvious to me that every area has its own colloquial, garden variety of neighborhood English, and clearly in Monica’s and Mandy’s language is a consistency that allows them to be understood and embraced by a community of people.

Goodman and Buck (1997) draw a distinction between language *difference* and language *deficiency*, and urge teachers not to confuse the two. To do so, they maintain, is to undermine the linguistic self-confidence of young learners. To Goodman and Buck, “the only special disadvantage which speakers of low-status dialects suffer in learning to read is one imposed by teachers and schools” (p. 445).

Anastasiow (1979) studied the language patterns of inner-city African American children and found that their language was “of a consistent form and [reflected] the child’s thinking” (p. 17). Poverty children, as he called them, were not deficient in language development (as had earlier been believed), but rather the active users of highly developed, rule governed linguistic systems. Instead of accepting their language and using it to extend out towards an understanding and control of standard English, Anastasiow suggested that we tend to point to these language patterns as evidence that the child is “intellectually inferior” (p. 17).

Anastasiow’s views remain important in the current discourse of dialects as they relate to literacy acquisition. He argued that teachers should begin with the child and his or her realities, and that they should provide activities that embrace these realities. Children, he wrote,

must be able to experience those elements they are to learn, for that is the way learning takes place. Children’s speech is a sample of what they know, no more no less, and their oral language is the base on which teachers can build a curriculum.

(p. 20).

I don’t know the answer to the problem, but I recognize that it is a universal one. Recently, the Oakland School Board in California approved a resolution to

devise and implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as ‘Ebonics’, ‘African

Language Systems', 'Pan African Communication Behaviors' or other description.

(Oakland, p. 2)

The significance of this resolution is not so much that action has been taken to improve the English skills of non-standard English speakers, but rather that the Oakland Board of Education officially recognized these speech patterns as distinct languages. Significant, too, has been the controversy that this resolution has caused. The term, "Ebonics" has entered our cultural discourse in an important way. Some view it as the symbol of the break-down of our linguistic ideals and structures. Others see it as a victory in the struggle for cultural freedom and integrity.

Temple Adger (1997) made an interesting point that "Status differences among dialects are a matter of social evaluation and language prejudice rather than linguistic adequacy" (p. 1). Similarly, Fillmore (1997) wrote:

Schools have traditionally treated the speech of these children as simply sloppy and wrong, not as evidencing skills and knowledge the children can build on. The proposed new instructional plan would assist children in learning standard English by encouraging them to compare the way they speak with what they need to learn in school, and this cannot be accomplished in a calm and reasoned way unless their teachers treat what they already have, linguistically, as a worthy possession rather than as evidence of carelessness and ignorance.

(p. 1)

How, I wonder, can we help children like Monica and Mandy compare their own oral language patterns to the things they need to learn in school? Does Reading Recovery need to change in order to recognize the sociolinguistic and cultural integrity of non-standard English language patterns? It's become quite clear to me that saying, "Does that sound right?" is not good enough.

According to Dudley-Marling and Murphy (1997), Reading Recovery does not acknowledge the sociocultural aspects of reading. Schools and school literacy, they assert, perpetuate existing social structures, and these, they believe, are "racist, classist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist structures" (p. 467). They believe that, true to its promise, Reading Recovery has provided the kinds of support that will allow students to master the technical act of reading. The challenge now, they suggest, is for Reading Recovery teachers to ask

whether the students with whom they work *have* really learned to read, whether the worlds of school reading deny their own worlds, whether the technical aspects of reading work so well that these readers become implicated in their own subjugation.

(p. 467).

To Monica and Mandy, it doesn't matter whether Chip *weared* the new trainers or Chip *wored* the new sneakers. They read it the way they talk it, and they talk it the way they live. Reading instruction can't be about forcing a new and difficult language onto a child without accepting and celebrating the home and neighborhood language that is so much a part of the child's identity and sense of self.

What is it like to live in somebody else's language and to be forced to leave your own behind? This is what we have asked children like Monica and Mandy to do. Reading Recovery operates firmly within a milieu of standard English structures, and children are often told, "No. I'm sorry, but that's not right. That might be the way you speak, but that's not the way books are written." We have required them to learn new structures and patterns without acknowledging the equal value of their own.

I went back for a final interview, attempting to understand what it is like to live in somebody else's language. To act with tact, I felt, it was necessary to know the experience from inside these children. Monica helped me to understand.

All I had to do was correct her.

"You know my Nanny dere-dere..."

"Wait, Monica. Say that again but don't say dere-dere."

"How come?"

"Just try."

"My Nanny dere-dere..."

"No. Just say 'My Nanny'."

"My Nanny der. Oh sorry. My Nanny she told me..."

"Wait. Just say, 'My Nanny told me.'"

"My Nanny told me dere-dere..."

"No, Monica. Just say, 'My Nanny told me' and keep going."

Monica looked at me with her bottom lip sticking out and her chin thrust up in my direction.

“Why you doing that?” she asked.

“Doing what?”

“You’re changing what I say? I don’t like it.”

“Why not?”

I started to laugh. “I was just trying something, Monica. Go ahead and tell me the story however you want.”

Monica told me about her Nanny promising to buy her a new pair of sneakers when she got her cheque.

I was conscious of Monica’s body language during this exchange, for I felt that in it I would find clues to her inner feelings. She grimaced. She crossed her arms. She cocked her head ever so slightly as if to say, “What’s with you?” And then she gave me *that* look, the one with the bottom lip stuck out like a lance.

Monica was able and willing to tell me her story only in her own language. In another language, it was clearly not worth telling; it simply wasn’t the same. The kind of English structure I was forcing on her changed the very fabric of the narrative, for the story included and emerged from the natural tendencies of the story teller.

“You’re changing what I say. I don’t like it.” Can a child speak any more clearly? Monica prefers the language patterns in which she’s fluent, confident and comfortable. To force somebody else’s language on her changes her, and thereby

changes her story. Reading Recovery, and from a broader perspective, school in general, has done just that. Day after day we remind children like Monica: "No. That's not the way we say it."

"Exactly *who*," they must wonder, "is *we*?"

“I Remember Them Colored Letters”

Phenomenological research seeks eidetic variation in the memories of the people who live the phenomenon under investigation. This involves examining the different experiences people have had with the same phenomenon. Learning to ride a bicycle, for example, is a phenomenon many people have experienced. To study the experience of a number of people would provide different memories and different contexts for the same adventure. Yet within that variation would be themes that each of the other participants might readily recognize. Perhaps when one participant would speak of fear, for example, others might say, “Aha! I recognize that! That happened to me the first time I got on a two-wheeler too!”

This sense of understanding is sometimes referred to as the *phenomenological wink* or the *phenomenological nod*. There’s a kind of knowing energy that passes between people who have shared experiences. A close friend who died of cancer a few years ago used to talk about how people who have had this disease understand one another the way others can not.

One theme that emerged through this study has been a counter-balance between work and play. Each of the children spoke about how they enjoyed our sessions, how I made them laugh, how the books were fun to read, especially when the

tasks were kept easy. On the other hand, the children also spoke about how tired they were at the end of the lessons, and how they knew they had to work hard.

It struck me as odd that, while I worked almost exclusively on continuous text with these children, they were all quick to articulate memories of the very few things that were done in isolation. One of these was the use of magnetic letters. Monica said she liked using them when she was allowed to *play* with them. Mandy said she liked to make words that started like her name. Danika told me that the letters were the “bestest” part.

Our little working room was a walled-off section of the school library, and it was far from sound proof. When teachers had the younger children in the library, it was difficult to concentrate on our work. Monica reminded me of the day I lost my temper with the “Grade Oners”.

“You were working with me and we were doing the letter stuff dere-dere and I was doing a word like *the* or *blue* I don’t remember,” she said. “The Grade Oners came in but they didn’t have their teacher dere-dere ‘cause she was sick and they had someone else and the kids dere-dere they were big time bad!”

“Oh, I remember!” I said, smiling. “I kind of lost my temper.”

“You were on your nerves! You went out and said ‘Can you be QUIET ‘cause there’s a little girl trying to learn how to read.’ And I looked through the window

dere-dere and I saw that they all just looked right up at you and they all just shutted up 'cause you were on your nerves."

The story goes that I then returned to our room and we started working with the magnetic letters again. Monica said I was on my nerves so bad that day that I "letted" her make whatever words she wanted with the letters, and that was the most fun she ever had with them.

The magnetic letters are used primarily to show how one can go from a known word to an unknown word. This short section of the lesson, known as word making-and-breaking, is intended

to help the child to understand the process of word construction, how words work, and how he [or she] can get help from words he [or she] knows to use on new words he [or she] needs to know.

(Clay, 1995, p. 45).

Is it because this short part of the lesson (no more than two or three minutes at the most) is so different than the other parts that the children remembered it? Is it because at this point in the lesson the children were asked to stand up and do some work in front of a vertical surface, manipulating letters in large, sweeping motions? Is it because this part of the lesson appealed to their tactile sense? Who knows. It is interesting, though, that all three children spoke about it without prompting, and that all three qualified their happy memories with the statement that sometimes it was hard work.

Danika was the first child I interviewed for this project. I expected her to leap into her memories of favorite books and significant moments that passed between us. Not so.

"I remember them colored letters" she said.

At first I wasn't sure what she was referring to. Was it the alphabet books we used in early lessons? Was it the markers we used to write her stories?

"Which letters do you mean, Danika?"

"Them ones right there! Them colored letters like 'A' and 'T' and 'D'." She pointed to the magnetic white board with a few letters scattered here and there.

"Oh."

I tried to move her on to her memories of books.

"After can I play with them colored letters?" she pleaded. "That was the bestest part."

"Really?" I couldn't believe it. Neither did I pursue it, although now I wish I had. Instead I got her talking about Baby Bear and Father Mouse; in my hurry to study what I considered to be the guts of literacy, I missed a crucial phenomenological moment.

In any case, the discussions I have had with these children about magnetic letters are symbolic of something bigger. To me, they represent the tension between

work and play that seems to characterize a Reading Recovery intervention.

Clay(1995) has written about the need for a balance between two kinds of learning:

on the one hand there is performing with success
on familiar material which strengthens the decision-
making processes of the reader as he [or she] works
across text, and on the other there is independent
problem-solving on new and interesting texts with
supportive teaching.

(p. 9).

The way the children explained their memories to me, it seems that I might well have set up and maintained this balance. Either that, or some days I made it too easy, and some days I made it too hard. I find myself asking, “What was it that made Reading Recovery fun on some days, and not-so-fun on others?” Is it the nature of Reading Recovery itself that causes this tension to exist? Is there something inherent in the program’s design that forces a tenuous balance between work and play? Or is this governed by the relationship between teacher and child as they engage in the Reading Recovery structures. I suggest it is the latter.

Interpreting a phenomenon involves attempting to get *inside* the subject. In this case, it involves describing the feelings of Monica, Mandy and Danika, “remembering all the while that plausibility not accuracy is important” (Cummings, 1995, p. 114). There is no way to actually know the truth in factual terms; it is possible, however, to know it in terms of how it might have been -- how it must have been -- based on the eidetic memories of the participants.

Take Monica, for example.

When she spoke to me about the magnetic letters, I probed a little deeper.

"We used to make words with these," I said. "Remember how we would make a word you knew, like *stop* and then make another one that was a little different, like *stopped*?"

"I hated that part."

"Why?"

"It was too hard. I liked it better when you let me make the words I wanted to make."

"What did it feel like, Monica?"

"It felt like I couldn't think what you wanted me to do."

Too hard. I understand what Monica was telling me. When she said she "couldn't think" what I wanted her to do, it seems to me she means she was confused. Going from a known word to an unknown word was a difficult task for her. I remember how she would say, "Not this again!" when it was time to stand up and go to the white board for the making-and-breaking section of the lesson.

"Yup! Come on! We have to do this!"

"Aw, man!"

Spit spot. Off to the white board.

The making-and-breaking section of the lesson is short and speedy. The teacher presents a word that the child has supposedly learned how to make, and then shows how he or she can use that knowledge to get to something unknown. Monica's experiences with this were typical of virtually every other child with whom I have worked in Reading Recovery.

Sometimes she would just look at me with a quizzical expression on her face. I knew she was having difficulty with this stuff, but I dogged ahead ruthlessly. Beneath that expression was an anxiety that I tried to deny, a steadily deflating level of confidence that I had convinced myself I was actually pumping up.

Clearly, making-and-breaking wasn't the fun part. Clearly this was the part that Monica, like the others, called hard work. In hindsight, this has nothing to do with Reading Recovery as such; it has to do with tact. At the moments when Reading Recovery was experienced as fun, I believe I acted tactfully, and when it was seen as hard, or when the children "hated" Reading Recovery, I believe I acted tactlessly, or at least with insufficient tact.

What parts of Reading Recovery were experienced as *hard*? Making-and-breaking is the one that stands out, but there were others. In the writing section of the lesson, when I attempted to teach words so they were known fluently, I remember the children struggling. So, too, with certain books that the children didn't enjoy reading, books that caused them to fight for control of difficult words, phrases and ideas. At those moments, I believe, my teaching wasn't tactful.

It was those tactful moments that the children enjoyed. Those were the times when they laughed out loud, or smiled, or said things like, "What a good book!" Tact is critical to a positive teacher-child relationship: the degree to which it is used or neglected will shape the dynamics of the relationships and, in turn, the way that learning has taken place.

What was it like for these children when things were hard? I imagine that inside Monica's head was a strain and a stress that she invoked to try to deal with the tasks I had set out for her. Mandy's body language -- her muscles tense and her teeth biting down on the inside of her cheek -- speak to me now of an anxiety level that surely hampered her learning and her confidence. One day, Danika used both hands to wildly disperse the letters all over the board: "You are making this too hard!" she wanted to tell me. "I don't understand!"

The truth of the matter is that I never understood making-and-breaking myself. I never knew how to keep it simple. The procedures outlined in Clay (1995) always confused me, made me anxious, made me want to rip the page out of the book and tear it into pieces (in the same way Danika had flung the magnetic letters to the extremities of the white board).

I've decided that it's terribly difficult to be tactful when teachers are unsure of themselves. When I didn't feel comfortable with what I was doing, I allowed my impatience and frustration to emerge and invade the teacher/child relationship. Tact involves control, insight and confidence; how ridiculous of me to engage in activities

that don't allow me to be tactful simply because they are "in the Guidebook" or "part of the procedures". If I had to do it over again, I'd head off those tactless moments by choosing *not* to do those things that don't seem right for me, for to engage in them is to choose to do what's not right for the child.

Chapter 12

Check Marks

Mandy was being playful. It was a Thursday afternoon, my second interview for this project, and only a few days before Easter. Her enthusiasm for life was delicious.

“You be the kid and I’ll be the teacher,” she said.

Cha-ching! Phenomenological jackpot!

“Great!” I replied, smiling, delighted actually.

Mandy jumped up off of her chair and said to me, “You sit here on the pillow and I get to sit on your big chair.”

“Terrific!” I said, feeling playful myself. I sat on the cushion and squeezed my thighs into the little space beneath the table.

Mandy picked up a pencil and shoved it behind her ear, the way I do four or five times in the run of a lesson. I had to laugh.

“Now pick a book” she said. “And you-dere, make sure you sound out all them words. Even them big words.”

“Any book?”

“No little boy, not any book. Just one of them books there.” She pointed to a basket of low level little books. I selected *Miss Popple’s Pets* (Webb, 1993) and began to read.

Mandy took a running record.

"What a good job you did!" said Mandy when I finished the book. "You read all them words right. See my check marks? Me-dere I made only check marks and that means you-dere you got them all right."

Check marks. Each of the children spoke to me about them, and it's no wonder. Every day, ten minutes into the lesson, it became check mark time: child reads, teacher makes check marks.

The running record is a crucial part of the Reading Recovery lesson because it provides valuable clues as to what might be going on inside the child's head as he or she reads. It never occurred to me, though, to try to explain the "check mark thing" (as Danika calls it) to them. It was Mandy who helped me to understand it from a child's point of view.

As the role playing was winding down, I asked her, "Why do you suppose I made those check marks?"

"To see if I got the words right," she replied.

"Is that all?"

"Uh huh. Sometimes me-dere I didn't get them right and you wrote down other stuff."

"What other stuff?"

"I don't know. Words and stuff. The wrong stuff I said maybe."

Something bothered me, and it is only now that I think I understand what it was. Mandy had experienced running records so many times that she knew the routine perfectly. She even knew what the check marks meant, and she knew that if I didn't make check marks, I wrote "the wrong stuff".

What Mandy doesn't understand is the way I used the records to inform my teaching with her in subsequent days. To her, running records are a way of checking up on whether or not she got it "right", and it follows, I guess, that this leads her to believe that reading is about knowing all the words. How ironic that running records (the tools I use to foster a holistic process) have actually undermined the meaning base of the reading experience.

These kids remember the check marks. What did it feel like for them to see me ticking off, word by word, what they read? I thought I'd ask.

"Monica," I began. "What do the check marks mean?"

"They mean you know how to read."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you got the words right. Like if I read *the* dere-dere and it was right dere-dere then you put a check mark."

"How did that feel?"

"I liked check marks better than other stuff."

“Why?”

“Check marks maked you happy too. Remember?”

So this has as much to do with the child’s perceptions of how the teacher feels as it does the other way around. When I took a running record, Monica tried very hard to get a lot of check marks. But it wasn’t because these marks made her feel she had succeeded; she liked to get them because she knew it made me happy. And of course it did. The purpose of a running record is to see how a child is performing on relatively new text: the more check marks the better.

“How did you know that made me happy, Monica?”

“You telled me. Remember dere-dere you’d say ‘Oh look, Monica! You read all that book without no mistakes! What a smart girl!’ Remember? That made you happy and you maked a funny face.”

“I see. And what happened when I didn’t make check marks. What happened when I made the other stuff on the paper?”

“It meant I got it wrong and I tried to do better.”

So running records, which are meant to be taken unobtrusively as the child reads, actually became the focus of her attention as she worked through the little books I had given her. And I, the teacher, became the object of her efforts: she simply wanted to please me. That’s a disconcerting realization, since reading should, indeed

must, be a personal act, engaged in for personal reasons, to enlighten oneself, to entertain oneself, to inform and challenge oneself. Where in the world did Monica get the idea that this had anything to do with me?

The answer, of course, is in the way I handled the running record scenario. Although it wasn't deliberate, I must have praised her -- and praised her very effectively! -- for correct responses on these books. I must have shown my glee at her high running record scores more than I showed it at other moments. I must have said things like, "That makes me so happy!" (In fact, I can hear myself saying that.)

Here's an opportunity for thoughtful action: turn it back to the child. Help him or her realize that success is personal success, that the pay off for their efforts is a personal one. van Manen (1986) writes that teachers should "mobilize their influence to help children gain insight into their own interests" (p. 19).

Somehow, I have helped children gain insight into mine.

Chapter 13

Still, They Resist

Americans and Canadians have an enduring faith in the potential of education to overcome any obstacles arising from an individual's background or experience. This conviction is the heart of a cultural myth that, with hard work and a good education, every citizen can reasonably hope to achieve some measure of social and economic success. The reality is that, for many people, education and hard work are insufficient to surmount the crippling effects of poverty or racial, gender, or religious discrimination. Stories of rare individuals who have overcome disadvantage or discrimination to achieve high levels of economic or social success do not demonstrate the possibility of success as much as they reveal the effectiveness of institutional barriers in restricting access to social goods to members of dominant groups.

(Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 1997, p. 460).

In the months that it has taken to write this thesis, Kathleen has officially learned to "read". According to our reading development continuum, she has left the take-off stage and is now an early independent reader. She's still tentative on books that she thinks are too difficult for her. The other night, for example, she pleaded with me to read the *whole* bed-time story instead of doing the me-read-a-page/you-read-a-page routine.

"This one is too hard, Daddy," she said. "Puh-leeeese! I'll read you one I know."

Still, there is a fluency to her reading that is evidence of that self-extending system Clay describes throughout her research. There's a growing confidence in her interactions with books. There's a desire to show off her new skills.

"Look!" she says as we drive past a sign. "It says 'Hamburgers and Hot Dogs'!"

This drives her sister crazy.

"We know, Kathleen," says Mauryah, her elder by one year. "We can read, you know."

The structures of the modern world suit Kathleen. She has adapted to them. Embraced them. She is willing and ready to organize her life within them.

Not so for Monica, Mandy and Danika. They've learned the technical aspect of reading, there's no question about that. They get lots of check marks when you take a running record, and they are able to retell after they have read something. The difference is that I don't see the same vigor in their interaction with print. I don't see that they *want* to use print for their own purposes.

Do they feel part of a wider community of readers? My sense is that they do not.

Do they know that they can use their abilities with print for their own enjoyment? For their own learning? To impress others the way Kathleen tries to impress the rest of her family? I don't think so. My guess is that to them, reading is still work.

What went wrong, then? Perhaps the answer is found in Clay's definition of reading. "I define reading," she writes, "as a message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced" (1991, p. 6). It is only now that I recognize the narrowness of this definition, and only now that I realize how we as Reading Recovery teachers have tried to categorize reading as a cognitive process.

Reading is so much more than a meaning making process. It is a relationship between reader and texts. It is attitude. It is desire. It is motivation. It is voice. It is wanting and needing to engage with print because we recognize there's something in it for us. Monica, Mandy, and Danika, I suggest, have not found that recognition. Sure, they are able to interact with print. Sure they have developed powerful systems of strategies to help them unlock print and bring meaning to it. In that way, I feel I've been successful.

From a sociopolitical perspective, however, very little has changed. Foucault (as cited in Skrtic, 1991) has asserted that "the most insightful way to understand society is to consider it from the perspective of the professions that have emerged to contain its failures" (p. 24). Is it the case that despite its best intentions, Reading

Recovery actually perpetuates the school structures that serve some students better than others? Rather than changing education so that it embraces all and serves all needs, we cite our “success” with children like Monica, Mandy and Danika as evidence that given appropriate remedial programs, the current structures are actually good for all.

In this, I think, we are making a mistake. While not all children in Reading Recovery are from disadvantaged, marginalized groups, my observations and experiences would lead me to believe that many of them are. Reading Recovery can help these children gain mastery over the technical aspect of reading, but as it now exists, it does nothing to address the equally important problems of cultural inequity. Reading Recovery operates as a utilitarian approach to literacy, a methodology that “emphasizes the mechanical learning of reading skills while sacrificing the critical analysis of the social and political order which generates the need for reading in the first place” (Macedo, 1991, p. 151).

When I began writing this thesis I discussed how Kathleen was complying with the modern world while Monica, Mandy and Danika were resisting it. I have not changed my thinking on this, if anything it has been strengthened by the interpretations I have put on the lived experiences of these children. I continue to see the pre-print-literate state as a kind of premodern period. Now, more than ever, I see how Kathleen has complied with the demands of her family, her school and her community by making this transition to modernism. What surprises me is that I no

longer regard Monica's, Mandy's and Danika's resistance as a positive counter-hegemonic political statement.

On the contrary, I find it rather sad.

These children have all of the cognitive processes in place to become active, engaged, driven, purposeful readers and users and manipulators of print text. Still, they resist, and their resistance, I am afraid, may evolve into a dangerous passivity. Mitchell (1991) writes that "Educating for difference, democracy, and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. It is about providing students with the knowledge, capacities and opportunities to be noisy, irreverent, and vibrant" (p. xiv). I guess therein lies the difference: Kathleen's literacy is a noisy, vibrant one, while Monica's, Mandy's and Danika's are complacent.

Cummings (1995) remarks that "Phenomenology, through deepened understanding, offers the possibility of informed 'radical' action" (p. 108). As I conclude this project I ask myself whether phenomenology has prepared me for that kind of action. Is there sufficient depth to my understanding of Reading Recovery to cause me to change my actions, and to challenge the structures that cause us to neglect the sociocultural aspects of literacy?

Certainly the children with whom I worked have helped me to understand Reading Recovery from a new perspective. It has been professionally invigorating to leap out of the positivist context in which Reading Recovery is so firmly planted, and to examine the phenomenon through the experiences of the children. How amazing it

has been to listen to the voices of the children as they told me, as only they could, what Reading Recovery is really about.

The implications of this study are clear, at least in the mind of this writer who sits at his computer at two in the morning, tick-tacking the final words of what has become a personal and professional reawakening. If it is successful, phenomenology must lead to action. What follows, then, are the actions I feel are needed if Reading Recovery is to really make a difference for the children with whom we work.

Action #1 - To question and to challenge the Reading Recovery establishment so that the sociocultural and political aspects of reading are considered and dealt with. Quantitative research does not deal with the important human questions that emerge every day in the relationships between teachers and children.

Action #2 - To embrace and celebrate the linguistic differences of our children, and to challenge those who mistake *difference* for *deficiency*.

Action #3 - To encourage other Reading Recovery teachers to engage in phenomenological research, and to join them in exploring our own lived experiences and the lived experiences of others in our very closed community. We take too much for granted. We listen to the edicts from the upper echelons of the Reading Recovery hierarchy, and tend to blindly follow their rules and guidelines. Phenomenological research will help teachers to understand Reading Recovery at the human level of lived experience, and to develop pedagogical tact.

Action #4 - To be conscious of my position in the teacher/child relationship, regardless of the context, be it Reading Recovery or otherwise. van Manen (1986) writes that “Whether we like it or not, adults cannot help being examples to children” (p. 43). Before this study I didn’t realize the weight of that example on a child’s perceptions of the world. As teachers we need to make a conscious effort to develop tact, so that the example we set, indeed the relationship we establish, promotes happy experiences and happy learnings.

Action #5 - To try to think, to understand the world, to respond the way a child might respond to the personal and pedagogical decisions I make. Sometimes, the things we think we teach are not at all what the children learn; how clearly this appears to me now. van Manen (1986), writes that as teachers, we should

do our utmost to understand what it is like to be in the world as a child. More concretely, I do my very best to understand the situation of *this* child. How does *this* child experience life in its multifaceted dimensions?”

(p. 13).

One final lesson from Monica. Listen to her voice. I hope you can hear it by now.

You know them kids dere-dere with the magic key? If I was them dere-dere I know where I'd go. I'd go inside a spaceship and fly far away like to Jupiter or

somewheres like that. And I'd take my Nanny with me and say "Look out the window Nanny! Look at all them stars and all them planets! And look down there, Nanny! Look at Mr. McLaughlin all small and waving at us."

And what would your Nanny say, Monica?

My Nanny? My Nanny dere-dere? She'd say "Thank you Monica for bringin' me to the stars."

And would you take me to the stars some day, too?

If you want.

She didn't mean it. She didn't say it with the same expression she used when she talked about taking her Nanny to Jupiter. And that's okay. Some experiences are more sacred than others, reserved for family. Others we open up to friends. This one was clearly an experience for Monica and Nanny, and although I was excluded, I was still there, waving to Monica, wishing her well, encouraging her and wanting her to take control.

In the end, Reading Recovery was experienced as something foreign to these children. School is foreign. The rules and the language of school are foreign. The Reading Recovery teacher, despite his amazing fondness for them and his desire to know and help them, even he is foreign. He never visited them on *their* turf, never spoke *their* language, never tried to explore their own literacies.

This guy, they must all feel, at least implicitly, he's not like me. He's a school guy. He teached me how to read.

And would you take me to the stars some day, too?

If you want.

It was a polite promise.

Three words uttered perfectly.

Timed appropriately.

Three check marks for saying the right thing.

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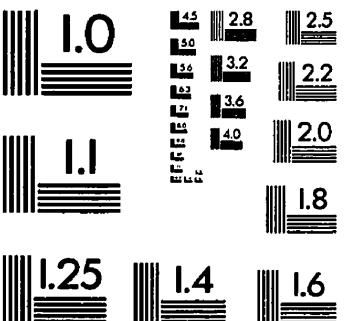
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