

# Issue Nine (Winter 1997)

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## BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM

Judith M. Newman

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*Six year old Danny and I are playing checkers. He's just recently developed an interest in the game and while he wants to play, he finds it quite frustrating. Melissa, his four year old sister, doesn't understand what's going on and so he can't hone his skills with her; his father, Jordan, plays quickly and wins so that's no fun for him either.*

*I had barely walked into the house before Danny had started nudging me to play checkers with him. After a couple of attempted put-offs, I agree to play. We set up the board.*

*"Do you want to be black or red?" I ask.*

*"Black," Danny replies.*

*"Why do you choose black?" I wonder.*

*"Black goes first." he answers.*

*That's interesting, what rules does he know, I wonder, and where has he learned them. This is the first time we're playing so I'm willing to see how things proceed; I choose not to ask him what he knows about the game.*

*With the pieces laid out (he knows to arrange them only on the black squares) I say, "Let's go."*

*"Danny reaches to make a move, stops, looks at me and says, "Don't play your hardest."*

*I pause for a moment, not quite sure what to say. "How do you want me to play?" I finally ask him.*

*"Just play medium," he returns.*

*"Okay." I've been told clearly Danny wants a chance at winning . I'm inferring that 'medium' means he's doesn't want me to throw it; but he also doesn't want me to play at an adult level. So I comply. I make moves that allow him to take a number of my pieces; I also, however, take some of his. This first time, Danny wins.*

*We set up the board again for another game.*

*"How hard to you want me to play this time?" I ask. (See, I've learned something here.)*

*"Still not your hardest," he answers.*

*As we play, I allow him to take some of my pieces, not quite so many, but enough so that he wins again.*

*With each successive game I up my level of competition; each time Danny lets me know "how hard" he wants me to play. On that occasion we played six games; he won them all.*

*About a week later I visited the family again. Once more Danny wanted to play checkers. We started as before, Danny telling me not to play my hardest. The first three games he wins. As we're setting up for the fourth game, however, Danny says to me, "This time, play your hardest!"*

*Ah-ha, he's just let me know he's feeling confident enough to handle losing. So I play as an adult and I win. No big deal. We set up the board one more time, I win once more.*

*We play one final time, I let Danny win, but not too easily; I make it a close game.*

What remains so vivid about this episode, which occurred more than twenty-five years ago, is that it taught me an important lesson -- the learner has to feel some degree of competence in order to be willing to risk engaging in learning. At the very least the learner has to believe that he or she has the capacity to learn successfully, to trust that he or she won't be made to feel too stupid or embarrassed in the situation.

I think about how this six-year old structured the situation for himself. A relatively confident learner in the first place, Danny had no qualms about telling me, an adult, how to engage with him. He clearly set the boundaries for my participation in the situation. I realize his confidence came, in part, from my being a long-time family friend, not a teacher, and we were playing in his home, not in a school setting. Nevertheless, the incident certainly started me thinking about how, in my teaching, I make it possible for learners to take risks. How could I intentionally create what I would now call a supportive classroom?

I first came across the notion of a supportive classroom in a small monograph of that name developed by the Halifax County-Bedford District School Board (Church, 1988). In the monograph the authors describe how they have been striving to create learning environments in which children have the opportunity to learn through and about language in the context of meaningful, purposeful language use. We have also been developing and refining our own roles within the classroom, working out how best to facilitate and support children's learning (p.5).

The monograph discusses the contexts supportive of children's early language learning and goes on to explore how similar supportive environments can be created in classrooms. As the authors explain -

In school, the aim is to create classroom environments like the ones which are supportive of children like Daniel before they come to school. The challenge for teachers is to create situations sufficiently rich and flexible to meet the needs of 25 or more very different individuals who come to school with a range of prior experience.

That kind of learning situation offers children experiences that help them to extend the learning strategies they have used so effectively in real-world settings. It provides the support children need to continue to develop their knowledge about language and their ability to use language for a variety of purposes. Teachers, like parents, offer many different kinds of support depending upon the needs of the child at a particular time. They constantly make decisions about the environment and about the teaching strategies they will use (p.7).

A child's learning occurs in many different ways; in whole group activities, in small group situations, in one-to-one exchanges with the teacher and other children, as an individual. A fundamental aspect of a supportive classroom is that the teacher attempts to monitor learners in all of these learning situations and attempts to offer support which meets the diverse needs of each learner.

Precisely what constitutes support is not well understood. In 1994-95, I began working with some teachers in the St. Boniface School Division in an effort to flesh out an understanding of what a supportive classroom might entail. The teachers began by selecting a couple of children in their classroom, children they considered 'at-risk', whom they found puzzling, and about whom they wanted to learn more. We created situations in which the teachers could work with these students both individually and in small groups and we monitored those children's learning in a wide range of classroom activities. The point of the project was **not to fix** these at-risk children but to learn, through observation and activity with the child, what learning and literacy strategies the child was actually using and how to use the instructional situation (individual, small group, and large group activities) to discover what instructional tactics supported these particular learners and facilitated their literacy development.

*Eight-year old Savannah transferred to our school from BC, in the fall of '94. Cumulative file records indicated she was reading at a grade 1 level. I observed her during independent reading activity early in September. Savannah was fidgety and had difficulty staying in her seat. She said she couldn't find a book to read on her own because "I can't read the words." The classroom theme was friendship and I had made many books at various reading levels available for the children to choose from. I sat down beside Savannah to read with her from the book she had chosen, **Making Friends**. It was soon evident that her strategy for reading was to "sound out" the letters in the words. She wasn't very successful at it; she miscued frequently. "I can't read words too good," she said. It was then that I encouraged her to tell the story using the pictures. With me directing her reading (What is happening? What will happen next? How do you think?) Savannah was able to predict what the story was about but could not use this to help her deal with the printed words. I also observed that in small group situations Savannah had a lot of difficulty staying focused. By the end of the month I could see that Savannah*

- *lacked confidence as a reader and did not find reading enjoyable*
- *read very little on her own*
- *had difficulty choosing an appropriate book to read*
- *did not see reading as meaningful*
- *knew some decoding strategies but could not use them successfully*
- *could use pictures to tell a story (LN, June, 1995).*

We learned a great deal about observation. Our focus on learning about the children through close and systematic observation helped us become much more aware of the children's avoidance and anxiety behaviours and to intervene more quickly in supportive ways. Our increased focus on observation raised the need for developing new record-keeping strategies which in turn raised questions about instructional strategies in general. We discovered, for example, that the behaviour of our at-risk students demonstrated a high level of anxiety and avoidance. This anxiety/avoidance took many forms: withdrawal, acting out, inattention, defensiveness, dependence. Sometimes a child demonstrated a predominant anxiety/avoidance behavior, sometimes a range. We became more adept at noticing and identifying these behaviours. Being able to observe and identify the children's anxiety/avoidance behaviour made it possible to engage in instruction that sought first to diminish and subsequently to eliminate their anxiety. We explored a range of ways of providing instructional support to discover what worked with each individual child.

*I began by providing Savannah with frequent opportunities to read with me on a one-to-one basis; my goal, at first, being to lessen her anxiety about reading. I collected several predictable books for her to choose from. I noticed she consistently chose ones that seemed familiar to her. To introduce new stories to her, I invited Savannah to do shared reading with*

*me. I carried most of the load at first, Savannah, beside me, echoing along. She was very comfortable with this support and soon became more actively involved in the reading. She made comments such as "I like this story." With repeated readings, Savannah took over more and more of the reading herself. As she became more familiar with the story, her reading became more fluent. Next I noticed she began using picture clues more independently. Savannah was still attempting to "sound out" words but her efforts became more accurate as she used context to help her predict. By the beginning of November I felt that Savannah was ready for another audience. After she had successfully read a familiar story, **One Dark Night**, (with virtually no support from me) I asked her if she would like to read it to a grade one student. She thought she could do that because "I know the story." On her return to the classroom Savannah was exuberant. "I really did good," she said. So, I made arrangements with the grade one teacher for Savannah to read on a once-a-week basis to one of the grade one students. Savannah was now beginning to view herself as a reader, she was taking more risks with unfamiliar books, she was learning to choose books that she could handle independently. I noticed she was even beginning to help other students with their reading (LN, June, 1995).*

We observed the children's anxiety/avoidance behaviours in one-to-one settings, in small groups, and in whole group instruction. We discovered that the opportunity to work with a child individually enhanced our ability to pick up on anxiety/avoidance behaviours in the classroom and, rather than attempt to deal with that behaviour directly, we became more adept at providing support which allowed the child to engage. We learned that not every child needs the same support.

*When he felt insecure, ten-year-old Andrew would become very disruptive in the classroom and often needed to be removed. It was difficult to assess his ability accurately and his refusal to cooperate caused most adults to walk away from him. Andrew was perfectly prepared to take any power struggle as far as he could and often the administration would have to intervene to make him behave.*

*Andrew's behaviour continued to frustrate me and too often he was diverted from his academic work by refusing to cooperate. It became clear to me that we were engaged in a power struggle and he was determined to be in control.*

*I believe that, ultimately, children are in control of both their learning and their behaviour. The moment a power struggle becomes part of the relationship then everyone loses and the focus becomes distorted and nonproductive. Coercion might work for a time, but at some point students figure out that adults truly have little, if any, power over them.*

*The issue of power and Andrew's behaviour became a serious problem in the classroom. He frequently refused to go out for recess. He wanted to work on the computer. He would cry if he wasn't reminded to go for his speech lesson at the usual time. He adamantly refused to go to music.*

*One particular day, his behaviour was so contrary, that he was sent home. He arrived back at school saying his mother had told him that he had two choices, he could either cooperate and work or he would have to go back home. He had chosen to return to school. We later learned, however, that he hadn't gone home; instead, he'd walked part way and then returned with his story. Although there was some concern about his elegant lying to me and the principal, it was evident Andrew saw school as a place he wanted to be.*

*How could I give Andrew the power he needed without giving in to his tyrannical behaviour? How could I get out of the power struggle that I didn't want to be in, that Andrew continually created? Andrew gave me a clue one day. He told me *AI won't go to music and, if you force me to go, I will misbehave and Mr. Benson will send me out of the room. Andrew knew exactly how he to get what he wanted; he had it figured out . . . he was in control. It occurred to me, then, I was the one who had to adapt!**

*I decided to approach the problem by assuming Andrew was behaving in a way that served him. He was attempting to get his needs met. Was I helping him or was I being a barrier? With the help of the administration, student support staff, and school psychologist, I began to deal with Andrew differently.*

*Why didn't he want to go out for recess? Was it because he didn't cope well with the noise and activity? Was he actually making a good choice for himself by resisting going outside (he knew his playground behaviour often got him into difficulty)? I arranged for him to help out in the library during recess. I made a contract with him that if his work was done, then he was free to make the choice of staying in or going outside. If his work was not done, then he stayed in like the other children to finish.*

*Our 'deal' kept Andrew engaged. He began to finish assigned work, not perhaps in the most thorough way, but he was sticking with tasks until he reached some kind of completion.*

*Andrew has taught me a great deal about both teaching and learning. I now understand, in a way I didn't before, that emotional needs have to be satisfied in order for students to be willing to engage; that I can't make anyone do anything he or she doesn't want to; that external power has limited impact on what children will learn; children's views of themselves as learners will determine whether they'll choose to engage or not. I now*

*see that my job is to create situations in which children like Andrew can be successful (AD, June, 1996).*

By changing our focus from "fixing the child" to "learning from and with the child" we discovered how to respond to an individual child's needs in ways that led to less avoidance and more engagement on his or her part. Our observations of individual children proved beneficial with all children in the classroom. We learned to be more observant of all students and consequently learned more about their individual strengths and their learning strategies. We also came to understand how important it was to record behaviours that were no longer happening as well as new ones that were emerging. The absence of anxiety/avoidance behaviours were as strong an indicator of engagement as the development of strengthened learning strategies.

*Brent entered the room; he checked me over from the doorway. Mrs. Anthony was talking to him. I greeted him; attempted some conversation, too. He was having none of it.*

*Brent sauntered over to the table and sat down making a point of having his back to me. Mrs. Anthony told me a bit about Brent before she'd gone to his classroom to accompany him back to the resource room. A first-grader, Brent was not adapting to school very well. He was all over the place, unwilling to stay in his seat for long. He wasn't interested in books; he wouldn't engage in any sustained way with school tasks. Mrs. Anthony had asked me to do some assessment to see what Brent knew about reading/writing.*

*Since Brent was refusing to acknowledge me, Mrs. Anthony took out a couple of very simple picture books she'd been using with him. She asked Brent to choose one to read to her. He chose **Balloons**. He looked at the cover and, at her prompting, read it aloud, pointing to the word. He opened the book and read the title page - *Balloons*. Turned the next page and read - *three red balloons*. He read through the book, commenting on the pictures as he went. He didn't need much help.*

*From the sidelines, I, too, commented on the pictures. Slowly, Brent began including me in the reading. Just before we reached the last page I tossed in a challenge. The page read - *I like blue balloons*.*

*"Brent," I said, "I think that page says - 'I like yellow balloons'."*

*"No, it doesn't," was his immediate reply.*

*"I think it does," I persisted.*

*"It begins with 'b'," he insisted. "And these balloons are blue," he said, pointing to the picture.*

*"Can you write the word blue?" I asked, reaching for some paper and a pencil for him.*

*He took the pencil and copied the word.*

*"Can you tell me what letters are in that word?"*

*"B - l - u - e," he said turning to face me for the first time.*

*"Can you write something about 'blue'?" I asked.*

*"I can write 'I like blue balloons'."*

*"Try it," I suggested.*

*Brent copied the sentence from the book.*

*"Can you write something else?"*

*"I can write 'I like to play'."*

*"Go ahead."*

*Brent copied 'I like,' sounded out 'to', then turned to me and said "I don't know how to write 'play'."*

*"How do you think it starts?"*

*"With a 'p'."*

*"Do you know how to make a 'p'?"*

*"Yes." He proceeded to form the letter. We talked about the rest of the word, I wrote it on some scrap paper, he copied it.*

*"Can you read this whole page now?"*

*Brent proceeded to read what he'd written.*

*We continued for another fifteen minutes.*

*After Brent had returned to his classroom Mrs. Anthony and I talked about what we'd observed. It was clear Brent could be quite engaged if he felt he wasn't being threatened. He recognized quite a few letters, he could write them. He understood how to use picture cues to help him predict what the print was saying. He knew how simple sentences were constructed. He*

*certainly knew that print represented meaning, that it flowed from left to right, that there were spaces between words.*

*Mrs. Anthony expressed her surprise at how long I'd been able to keep Brent engaged. We talked about what Brent could do on his own, about how I kept extending what he could do so that he continued to feel in control of the situation.*

*"I was interested in finding out how long I could keep him going," I said. "We know he can be engaged for nearly a half an hour. I suspect that's a lot longer than he'd normally allow himself to be engaged in the classroom."*

*Mrs. Anthony confirmed my suspicion.*

*"We've now got to watch him in the class to see if we can understand what he's avoiding," I suggest.*

*With some idea of what Brent could do with assistance, we needed to find out what he could do on his own.*

As soon as we had some data on the children we began exploring ways of putting the learner in control of the learning. We started with the children's vulnerabilities, finding out what they were and ways of compensating for them. We wanted to discover exactly what the children were capable of doing independently. Being able to identify their independence level was crucial because it provided an indication of what engagement looked like for that particular child. It offered a baseline against which to assess their anxiety/avoidance behaviour.

Once we located what a child could do independently, we explored increasing the complexity of the task with an eye to providing just enough support to help the child sustain his/her engagement. We discovered various ways of keeping the child going in one-to-one instructional situations and then attempted similar strategies in small group and whole class situations. We learned that judicious attention to what the children were attempting to do and offering support as quickly as possible allowed the children to function more independently for longer in the classroom.

We extended our exploration to situations which were beyond the students' current level of functioning in order to discover ways of helping them participate and learn from complex literacy activities although they were yet incapable of engaging in them on their own. Lev Vygotsky (1978) refers to this as the *zone of proximal development*. We explored ways of creating a balance, both for the individual children, as well as for the class as a whole, between activities which the children could engage in independently and those which required some, or a great deal of, support.

We began to identify and describe various kinds of support:

- working at a task together - shared reading, shared writing, working collaboratively, then offering the child an opportunity to attempt the task independently (being ready to 'share' again if it should be needed)
- providing practice within a group context and for a real audience (not just teacher as examiner); i.e., readers theatre creates a situation requiring repeated readings of a difficult text in a group context as well as for subsequent performance for a real audience
- asking the learner if help is needed, then asking him or her to identify what help would be useful
- asking questions
- to help the learner analyze the task
- to help the learner verbalize the strategies they're using
- to help the learner verbalize other potential strategies
- to find out "How did you do this?"
- providing the learner with some choices for the outcome of what they're doing
- making it legitimate for and encouraging the children to work with partners
- demonstrating and verbalizing our own strategies, talking about how we engage with reading and writing
- providing the children with exemplars and a range of printed resources
- pointing out when the children are successful

Being able to identify these various kinds of support proved very valuable. Naming what we were doing allowed us to be more deliberate when making instructional decisions for particular children. In turn, this developing list of supporting strategies make us more open to learning from the children. We learned to slow down, to give a child time, to take our lead from the children at the same time not losing sight of the complex tasks we wanted them to be able to handle independently. Most important, we began to learn from this individual instruction how to sustain the child in the classroom and help him or her remain engaged in small group and whole group situations.

We learned to shift our gaze from teaching to learning. Our emphasis on learning to observe, on making inferences and interpretations from our observation, served as a basis for instructional decisions and shifted our attention to the learners. We discovered that the children had a range of productive learning strategies at their disposal but that

our instructional activities didn't always permit the children to use them. We learned to make openings for the children to use and extend their strategies.

We found that growth can be very uneven. Gains can be made in one aspect of literacy and not with others at a particular time. Growth in reading may not be mirrored by growth in writing; and the converse/growth in writing can outstrip growth in reading. We found that there is no single path to literacy proficiency. Some of the children engaged with reading more easily; others took off with writing. We explored ways of more closely integrating reading and writing activities. We found the children become more independent readers/writers when the reading was supported with writing and the writing supported by books.

We learned the importance of not lowering the goals for the at-risk children. We learned not to be afraid of keeping them in challenging situations but to find ways of supporting them so they could be successful.

The following episode with Kevin, a second grader, illustrates some of the above aspects of a supportive classroom at work. I don't know for certain, but I'm guessing his teacher considers him lazy, uninterested, generally slow. But he's none of that; what she's seeing, in my view, is his resistance to school tasks which result from his not being able to do what's expected of him. He doesn't read well, he can't copy from the blackboard because he can't read so he can't keep track of where he is, he takes forever to get anything done and mostly he gives up and goofs around.

I've been hanging around Kevin, trying to help him out. It's a constant evaluation situation - trying to find out what he knows, what he can do independently, what he can do with my help, what strategies he employs, and what he can articulate about them. It just happens that the class has been engaged in spelling or writing of some sort when I've visited the room. Kevin's been in his seat, not being disruptive, but not engaged in the lesson either. Kevin talks to me and picks up his pencil if I help out; he doesn't shut me out completely. Unlike Andrew, he accepts help when I offer it.

Yesterday, our interaction went something like this.

*"What are you trying to do here?"*

*"Copy that writing on the chart." (It's a fill-in-the-blanks item with Halloween connections. The teacher has had the class brainstorm some possible words to fit the blanks. Now the children are supposed to copy the text filling in the blanks using words provided below in the lists.)*

*"Can you read it to me?"*

*Shakes his head 'no'.*

*"Let's read it together."*

*We read through the text together a couple of times; I wait for Kevin to insert the elements he wishes. He does it without too much prompting.*

*Today's chart consists of the following:*

*They \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I felt \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I didn't know what to do.*

*Words like howled, screeched, laughed, roared are on the first list. The second list has nervous, terrified, sad, excited on it.*

*Kevin reads, "They howled and roared. I felt terrified. I didn't know what to do"*

*"Can you find the word 'terrified?'"*

*He shakes his head.*

*"Where can you look?"*

*"On the red list."*

*"That's right. What does 'terrified' begin with?"*

*"t'?"*

*"Got it. Spell the whole word out."*

*"T - e - r - r - i - f - i - e - d."*

*"Can you find 'howled?'"*

*He does. Then we read the chart again filling in the blanks once more. Now it's time to copy it into his notebook. Kevin looks at the chart and copies 'T,' looks again and copies 'h.'*

*"What's that word you're writing down?"*

*"They."*

*"You're right. Look at the whole thing, all four letters. Say them out loud for me."*

*"T- h - e - y."*

*"Take a good look at it. I'm going to stand in front of it so you can't see it and I want you to write the whole thing at once."*

*He does it slowly but correctly. We go on to the next word. He has trouble tracking 'howled' from the list on the chart so I write it on scrap paper and put it beside him. We take a look at the word, I encourage him to see morphemic chunks - howl, ed. I don't name them that for him but I'm encouraging him to use meaningful chunks.*

*"Take a good look because I'm going to cover it over."*

*I put my hand over the word. Kevin is able to remember h - o before I can see he needs to look again.*

*"Do you need to look again?"*

*He nods 'yes'.*

*I lift my hand for a few seconds.*

*"Are you ready again?"*

*He writes 'w' - l before he needs to look again. He finishes the word.*

*"What am I showing you how to do here?"*

*"How to spell."*

*"Yup. What am I showing you about spelling?"*

*"How to look at the word and remember the letters."*

*"Keep trying that. It'll make writing easier for you."*

*As I write this account it feels as if this exchange is going slowly but in fact Kevin is working at a good clip. I help him with the first sentence before moving on to another child. Before I leave him I set the expectation for him to do the second sentence by himself. I make a point of not being far away. I keep an eye on him, prompting him at a distance. He manages to get the second sentence down with reasonable speed. Again I prompt him on the third sentence, having him look at entire words.*

*Kevin is almost finished when it's time to leave for music. He has two words to go/to do. He insists he wants to finish so I encourage him to.*

*"Read for me what you've written."*

*"Uh-uh. You read it."*

*I read the first sentence but leave room for him to join me on the second; I drop out on the third leaving him to read on his own.*

*As Kevin leaves the classroom he stops in the doorway and counts the children remaining in the room. About half of the children are still finishing up. He turns and energetically skips down the hall. Why do I have the feeling that this may be the first time he's not the last to complete an assignment?*

In truth, I'm not sure what I've helped Kevin learn. This is not an ideal literacy activity for him. He should be doing quite a lot of shared reading in both small and whole class groupings. He needs predictable books. He should be writing his own text, being encouraged to spell functionally most of the time, having his attention drawn to words he might know or remember easily. The interaction should be paced quickly in order to keep him (and the others) engaged. He should feel in control and confident the entire time; he should feel comfortable asking for help after he's tried something himself, first. This copying activity highlights his inadequacies. Not only can he not read the words on the chart, there are no clues to help him remember what they might be; if he can't remember what was talked about (and he wasn't paying close attention) he has no way of figuring out how to help himself. Even with some supported reading and rereading he still has difficulty transporting words at that distance to his paper; he needs the words beside him so he can keep track of what he's copying.

Nevertheless, Kevin is quite willing to work with me. Each time he successfully remembers some letters or a whole word, a lovely smile crosses his face and his pace picks up. He's easy to draw in and to keep engaged but not in this lock-step classroom if his teacher doesn't have time to spend with him; and Mrs. McEnroe doesn't, because Kevin isn't the neediest child in the group. There are at least a half-a-dozen others who are having more difficulty than he is!

What I've attempted to illustrate here are my efforts to create some support for Kevin, to help him develop some strategies for dealing with what is a less than ideal learning situation for him. Since I can't change the reality of his classroom, I try offering him strategies which will allow him to be a bit more successful at what he has to do.

So what have I learned about building a supportive classroom? I've discovered anew that I have to take my lead from the students. Every encounter with a student offers an opportunity to learn more about him or her as a learner. This isn't exactly news. Dewey (1963) said it; so did Vygotsky (1978) and a host of other researchers and educators. Gordon Wells (1986) refers to instruction which takes its direction from the learners as 'leading from behind.'

The most important thing about building a supportive classroom is realizing our gaze should be on learning and not teaching. What I've attempted to illustrate here with these critical incidents is that the heart of creating a supportive learning environment is the constant assessing of what the learner is trying to do, of the strategies he or she is bringing to a particular task. This continual analysis of students' learning is very different from our more customary focus on 'teaching' where our attention is placed on what we're doing ourselves as teachers. Most teachers are aware of their students' learning but that awareness is largely tacit - when our attention is directed primarily at what we're going to do next we may notice individual students' responses but our carefully prepared lesson plans often preclude on-the-spot revision of intentions based on students' responses. In a supportive classroom it's the sense students are making of what's going on that drives instruction.

Danny, Savannah, Andrew, Brent, and Kevin have all helped me think in new ways about teaching that starts with the student. I've learned through my engagement with these students something I only partially understood before -- I have been able to uncover some of the factors I'm looking for when following a student's lead. They've taught me to ask them whether they need help or not and, if so, what help they would like me to provide. By putting the children in charge of their learning I am able to learn what works for them and what interferes. These children have allowed me to help them change their 'not learning' behaviour', as Herb Kohl (1994) would call it, into engagement. By observing their learning, and learning from them, I've been able to discover which actions on my part prove supportive and which actually interfere.

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## WHAT IS READING AND WHAT IS WRITING?

-an exploration of early literacy  
Claire Sutton

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"McCain", he shouts, shoving a tiny piece of paper in my face.

"Yes, David, it's McCain all right," I answer, squinting to see the stub of paper in his little hands. David has accepted my invitation to "find everything you can read" in the tub of junk mail and cereal boxes and flyers I have placed on one of the tables in my grade one classroom. He and Matt are the only two investigators today, combing through the box, and then cutting and pasting their findings on the large sheet of paper marked "I CAN READ..." on the bulletin board. David works at this job for at least a half hour, confidently reading out 'Safeway' and 'Superstore' to no one in particular. When he comes upon a toy store flyer, however, his interest peaks. He carefully cuts out two square pictures of Nintendo games he owns, and proudly presents them to his friends. "I have this one - Warrior 2" he announces, and then he reads another title, too obscure for most of us to see. He glues them in place.

I am impressed with his determination and his literacy skills.

Just yesterday he tackled the job of recording his activities at project time with real "David" forcefulness. "I want to write 'I cut fruit', but I don't know how to spell," he said. We had made fruit salad together, and he had brought the "prize" fruit - a huge honeydew melon. He had spent most of project time cutting and chopping.

"Well, just say those words slowly to yourself and write down what you hear," I say cautiously. I have only had David in my class for three days and I want to see what he does with that kind of help. He looks surprised when I tell him that I won't spell for him.

"O.K.!" he bellows, "I . . . Hmm, " and he writes an I, "cut .. Ohh, that's a K.", and then "fruit" and he writes an F. I K F is written above his picture of a huge green melon than has a knife with a very serrated edge sitting over it. The point is made. David knows how to write.

This comes as a bit of a surprise to me, because I have been told that David doesn't like to write. However I have been very eager to meet him, because I taught his sister Ashley two years ago, and she was a wonderful thinker who taught me a major lesson

about teaching word out of context. I have a feeling that David has some lessons for me this year.

Two days later our class goes out for a walk in our community. We don't go all that far before I realize anew that this area is packed with literacy moments for my grade ones. They all know the street sign says "STOP" and the words on top of the school say "Robertson School." But when we turn the corner of the block and stand in front of the local grocery store, we have a literacy bonanza. I look at my student teacher and comment that we should have brought a tape recorder. I ask the children to read what they can and the words pour out. Pepsi, Chips, Open and there are lots more. Trevor says he knows what's on the back of the door - it says "Pull". David points to a picture of a Dove bar (it's a new one I don't know) and he says "That says chocolate bar." And then he points to a sign and says "That one says no smoking" - it's the red X over an "under 18" sign - the store won't sell cigarettes to anyone under 18, but David certainly has the understanding of this kind of sign.

We continue our walk and my young charges have picked up on the game now - every time they see something that looks like a sign, they point and shout. "FOR SALE" "DON'T GO ON THE GRASS" "BEWARE OF DOG" It goes on and on. David knows what the striped pole means, "That's a barber shop." I wonder to myself when I last saw one of these old poles, but David knows about it because it is right down the street from where he lives. It is indeed a literate walk through our school's neighborhood. Later that same day I am reading a letter from David's mother. I have invited the parents to write me about their children, so that I might understand them better. She has written a lovely letter, but she mentions the fact that "David doesn't seem interested in learning his "ABC's". And then I am shocked to read "His final report from Kindergarten stated that he could only identify eleven letters of the alphabet. I was stunned and have been trying to help him over the summer months but he was always more interested in catching frogs..."

I ask myself how this can be. And yet I know how it has happened. The children at the end of kindergarten are tested for the sake of their report card. The test involves looking at letters printed all alone, with no context. I shake my head. The report card requirement surely promotes a very different understanding of literacy than what I understand. David has shown, every day that I have been with him, that he understands and reads the print in his world. He also proves the point that he needs the context of the print, in order to make sense.

He cannot, or perhaps will not identify single letters, stripped of meaning. But within a context of meaning, and his own life, he is a reader, and a writer, and a sense maker. My job for the next few weeks will be to convince him of his abilities.

The next day - I ask "What is reading? What is writing?"

Sandra is holding a rather large cut out picture of a bucket of chicken, and looking at me with nervous eyes. "It says" and then she stops. "I forget what it says"; her voice fading. "Kentucky Fried Chicken?" I offer, somewhat hesitantly. "Yes," she replies, and runs off to stick on her contribution to the "I CAN READ" poster in our classroom. I immediately wonder about the wisdom of my actions. The poster is supposed to be a collection of words that the children recognize. Today many of the children are accepting my invitation to find 2 words that they know to cut out of the junk mail pile that sits on one table. Sandra certainly recognized the chicken bucket, but as I look at it later, I realize that there are no words on the bucket; rather it just sports a picture of Colonel Saunders on the side. Sandra certainly is reading according to my definitions, but I wonder for a few moments what her parents will think when they visit next week. If she shows them the bucket and says "That says Kentucky Fried Chicken," will they understand? Will they encourage her tiny literacy step?

David asks if he can read his math folder today. Yesterday we made covers for the plain white envelope we are going to store our math records in and David decorated his with several pictures that he told me about. "Hey, that sounds like a story to me," I had said. So today, out of the blue, he offers to "read" his story. He settles in front of his peers and quickly interprets the picture into words. And later, when he is playing with the geoboards, he looks at the elastics pulled and shaped before him and says, "Hey, I made the Pepsi sign." Sure enough, it is the Pepsi sign, we all agree. And then we have our first writing workshop. They are all wriggly on the carpet, so I don't spend all that much time talking about what they are supposed to do. We share a few ideas and then I just turn them loose, with their brand new portfolios and whatever paper they want. Sandra asks, rather surprisingly, "How many pages do we have to write?" and I am stuck for an answer. She decides to write everyone's name on a list. Francine makes a string of letters. "I don't know what it says," she offers, not seeming the least bit upset. David and Taylor are making a Nintendo poster with all sorts of action. Many of them have drawn pictures and are asking me what to do next. It seems fitting to say to them, "Well, just say the words you want, and then in grade one spelling, write down what you hear. Remember, it's grade one spelling, not big people spelling." I give that encouragement over and over. Karla writes a little story about being in a tent. She writes freely and is amazed at her own ability. Andy, our nature enthusiast, writes EG EC MOC - "eagles eats mouse" under his picture of an eagle. Matt has drawn a picture of a school bus and written a collection of letters that somewhat resemble the words he reads to me. "Me and Devon are going on the school bus. We are going to school." Devon has drawn a very expressive picture of a shark chasing a boy who is on a blood soaked raft. When I ask him what he wants to say, he rambles on a long story, but when he realizes I expect him to put that into print, he says simply, "The shark bit the boy." I give him the standard "go and do your best" routine, and then listen as he tells his buddies that he's taking his picture home, so his mom can write the words for him and then he'll copy them. "Come sit here, Devon," I call out. With me saying the words slowly, Devon writes CRC BT V BOY. "Devon, you are a writer!" I tell him. His eyes widen in amazement, and he runs off to show the others.

Brock has been labouring over a collection of pictures all day. His older brother Sean was in my class last year and I can tell that he has been greatly influenced by that wonderful boy. Brock is drawing streetfighters and sharks. I try to encourage him to put some words to his pictures. He is adamant that "they don't need the words 'cause they know what's happening."

Other children are crowding around, and I am not paying much attention to Brock. "Well, perhaps you could just try," I reply absently. Brock looks at me with determination and declares, "Remember you told the children that the words don't tell the whole story?" I hug him in disbelief. He is quoting my words from the reading of several books earlier in the week - *Bunnycakes* and *Rosie's Walk*. Sure enough, I had emphasized to them that the words did not tell the whole story and that they would have to look closely at the pictures to understand.

After the children leave I reflect on this very busy, noisy day. I have to ask myself - What is reading, anyway? And what is writing?

If reading is, in its essence, sense making, then these children are surely readers. I know that most of them could not read isolated words on a Dolch list and they no doubt could not say the words as they are written in the books they are looking at. But they are attaching themselves to certain books in the classroom already, returning again and again to their favourites. There is a sense in which Trevor owns *Bunnycakes*, he has looked at it so often. Our day wouldn't be complete without a rendition of the songbook *Down by the Bay*. Surely this reading of pictures is a type of literacy. I am so reminded of Margaret Spencer's declaration that children in today's world have a different literacy, as they have to learn to read TV and computers and (although she doesn't say it) surely Nintendo games.

And the writing. I do not want to have children simply copying sentences, sentences copied from the teacher's hand and mind. I want my students to experience the thrill of putting their own thoughts down, as rudimentary as their signing may be. I am so proud of their efforts today, although to the outside observer they may look like tiny scraps of odd letters. And what of the writing of pictures? As David and Brock have let me know, there are many doors to knowing, and for these grade ones, their drawings have much to say.

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## PARADIGM WARS

### Taking a closer look at Michael Huberman's critique of "Teacher Research"

Matthias Meiers

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#### I. Introduction

Professor Michael Huberman's article *Moving Mainstream: Taking a Closer Look at Teacher Research* is an instructive object lesson in the problematic nature of extraparadigm critique. The author, a recognized authority and exponent of postpositivist qualitative research methodology, looks in on the activity of "teacher researchers" as a "critical friend" and without clearly saying so, imports the conceptual framework of his own discipline into his critique of action research. To confuse matters further, he insists on speaking about teacher action research as "teacher research" and this obfuscates the demarcation line between two distinct paradigms. In fact his language conceals the distinctiveness of the action research paradigm and thus allows him to apply the standards of his own discipline inappropriately. This problematic decision already makes for some mischief in his opening remarks about "teacher researchers",

*I'm not sure they could flow together if they examined more closely one another's premises and methods. In the academic world, for example, these people would not coalesce. They evoke in my mind the bar scene in Star Wars, in which there is an unlikely assemblage of inhabitants from different planets who, as it happens, all like to drink (124).*

In the following discussion I hope to show that Professor Huberman and I think and speak about "teacher research" from two very different vantage points. Michael Huberman speaks as a qualitative researcher and situates his commentary within a postpositivist paradigm. My response to Huberman reflects a pre-commitment to a constructivist paradigm in teacher action research. Before I attempt to delineate these two vantage points, that of the postpositivist qualitative researcher and that of the constructivist action researcher, in order to offer a cogent reply to Huberman's critique, a few remarks about the function of paradigms or disciplines of inquiry are in order. Perhaps, these remarks will also begin to shed some light on why teacher action researchers evoke the image of extraterrestrial aliens in Huberman's mind.

## II. Paradigms, Paradigm-dependent Statements, Witches and Monsters

A paradigm is a conceptual framework which allows us to construct or generate statements that are truthful within its field of discourse. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* Michel Foucault wrote,

*Within its own limits, every discipline recognizes true and false propositions, but it repulses a whole teratology of learning. ...perhaps there are no errors in the strict sense of the term, for error can only emerge and be identified within a well-defined process; **there are monsters on the prowl, however, whose forms alter with the history of knowledge.** In short, a proposition must fulfill some onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline; before it can be pronounced true or false it must be ... "within the true" (223-4).*

The truthfulness or the validity of a statement is therefore to be determined in terms of its relationship to the paradigm which a speaker employed to construct his statement. Since findings, conclusions and statements are paradigm dependent one cannot safely isolate them from the context of their paradigm and then place them into another for the purpose of verification. By doing this, we are in fact putting the paradigm (from which we extracted the statements) on trial and assuming the risk of finding the statements in question meaningless because we have transported them into a foreign context. There is, of course, nothing wrong with transporting statements from one paradigm into another, if both paradigms are very clearly articulated and if we are engaged in a hermeneutical exercise of exploring their function and usefulness.

Perhaps, the following rather outlandish example will help make my meaning clear. Suppose, a stranger in a stunning red robe and a bishop's hat approaches you, as you are taking an evening walk down a quiet, lonely country lane, and quite abruptly exclaims, "Aren't you glad we found out that witch, Joan of Arc, and lit her on fire before she could destroy us all!" This statement appears monstrous to you. You begin to wonder about the speaker's sanity and your own safety.

As a student of the history of Western Civilization you know that her execution on May 30, 1431 was a politically motivated act intended to destroy a nineteen-year-old charismatic peasant woman who had entered the public realm and become an exemplar of political action for women and the subjugated peasant class. To the political authorities - the English as well as the French - Joan clearly was an uncanny monster. You explain this at great length to the stranger accompanying you. As you are speaking, an unfamiliar village appears on the horizon and with increasing frequency you encounter people in medieval garb. Suddenly, the stranger erupts in anger and spits these words into your face, "You monster! I am Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais, who presided at her trial!" and then knocks you out. You regain consciousness, water dripping down your face and your twentieth-century clothing, lying on a rack. You

recognize Pierre Cauchon in the company of several of his friends glaring at you disapprovingly. Pierre hisses menacingly, "What do you mean by saying Joan was not a witch? We have incontrovertible proof..."

Now you realize that you have somehow walked back to fifteenth-century Beauvais and that you are truly in dire straits because these people are not willing to examine the paradigm, the constructs and the line of inquiry on which their statements rely. For your own safety, I will not continue on this tangent except to say that statements and the confidence we have in their veracity are paradigm dependent. Furthermore, intellectual honesty compels us to articulate very clearly the paradigms on which our statements depend because implicit, unstated and unexamined paradigms are impervious to critique and thus potentially dangerous. We must remember this caution particularly in the social sciences and education where the emergence of competing research paradigms is necessitating rigorous inquiry and dialogue about their usefulness and applicability.

Since paradigms are human constructions based on fundamental beliefs about our relationship to "knowable reality", Guba and Lincoln emphasize that "...advocates of any particular construction must rely on persuasiveness and utility rather than proof in arguing their position" (*Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 108). For this reason any attempt to prove paradigms right or wrong would be a futile exercise. We can only shed light on their practical, utilitarian merits.

### **III. The Paradigm and Fundamental Orientation of Postpositivist Qualitative Research**

Michael Huberman outlines the ontological and epistemological foundation of his paradigm as follows,

*... I believe that social realities exist not only in the mind but also in the objective world, even if we are unaware of them. Caught up in our limited milieus, paradoxically filled with daily complexities pulling us in different directions, we can seldom make out, much less reflect on, the rational and nonrational forces acting on those milieus. Conversely, in those social settings we have developed meanings and intentions - language, decisions, conflicts hierarchies - that we take as realities because people construe them in common ways. Things that are so believed become real and can be inquired into... If we want to describe, interpret, and, above all, explain these processes, we must have evidence for them. For example, an adequate explanation has to show that each entity is an instance of that explanation... (Moving Mainstream: Taking a Closer Look at Teacher Research, 137). (Moving Mainstream: Taking a Closer Look at Teacher Research, 137).*

Huberman's ontological position is that social realities and patterns of human behaviour exist in an objective sense. From this follows the epistemological assertion that the researcher can distance him/herself objectively from these social realities in order to discern patterns and causal relationships among them. To this end the researcher gathers masses of qualitative data which encapsulate the essences of people, objects and situations. Usually this raw data is constructed in words, narrative descriptions and transcriptions of taped interviews. The methodology of this paradigm seeks to approach the highest degree of robust, rigorous empiricism while still remaining close to qualitative description of social phenomena. Huberman states,

*. . . theory is generated from a continuous interaction between fieldwork and emerging explanations for what is happening there. Those explanations, flexible and evolving, then need to be taken elsewhere to see how different contexts affect them. I would add this: the more contexts explanations fit, the more "lawlike" we can consider them... ..if these explanations jibe with robust findings in the domain under study and with constructs that are consonant with these explanations, the more confidence we can have in them (Moving Mainstream: Taking a Closer Look at Teacher Research, 137). (Moving Mainstream: Taking a Closer Look at Teacher Research, 137).*

In their description of *Data Management and Analysis Methods* Huberman and Miles emphasize that qualitative studies are .

*. . especially suited to finding causal relationships; they can look directly and longitudinally at the local processes underlying a temporal series of events and states, showing how these led to specific outcomes and ruling out rival hypotheses. ... we can understand not just that a particular thing happened, but how and why it happened (Handbook of Qualitative Research, 434). (Handbook of Qualitative Research, 434).*

To justify this claim, the authors explicitly describe their understanding of causality, a paradigmatic element of their view of theory construction. They argue first that causality is local and "the immediate causal nexus is always in front of us" (434). The argument continues as follows, cross-site analytic work attempts to reconcile "the particular and the universal" in order to identify "generic processes at work across cases" (435).

To ensure the empirical validity of data collection, management and analysis the researcher can rely on an elaborate set of verification strategies commonly referred to as *triangulation* (438). The researcher seeks confirmation of his/her observation of the same phenomenon from other sources. To Miles and Huberman, this can mean, for example, test scores supporting work samples and observations. Testing "the viability of patterns" may involve attempts "to replicate key findings, to check out rival explanations, and to look for negative evidence" (438).

Detailed reporting of the methodological dynamics of a given study is essential to its value in the larger academic conversation. Miles and Huberman note the following lacuna,

*We have the unappealing double bind whereby qualitative studies can't be verified because researchers don't report on their methodology, and they don't report on their methodology because there are no established canons or conventions for doing so. (439)*

In their work the authors seek to propose a set of methodological conventions which would facilitate third-party critique and verification of studies and thus further the project of describing social phenomena in empirical terms.

#### **IV. The Paradigm and Fundamental Orientation of Constructivist Action Research**

Constructivist (teacher) action researchers reject the empirical project of the postpositivists. The ontological and epistemological position of a constructivist is that realities are socially constructed. Thomas Schwand writes constructivists

*. . . assume that what we take to be self-evident kinds (e.g. man, woman, truth, self) are actually the product of complicated discursive practices... In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it (Handbook of Qualitative Research, 125).*

This echoes Martin Heidegger's statement, "**It is in words and language that things first come into being and are**" (An Introduction to Metaphysics, 13). In this way language is the matrix of human constructs and understanding. The essential epistemological difference between the two paradigms lies in the constructivist assertion that the objectification of human behaviour - which lies at the heart of the search for empirical "law-like" patterns - fails to come to terms with human intentionality. Martin Heidegger states this view explicitly in *Being and Time*,

*The person is not a thing-like substantial being. Furthermore, the being of a person cannot consist in being a subject of rational acts that have a certain lawfulness. . . . Essentially the person exists only in carrying out intentional acts, and is thus essentially not an object. Every psychical objectification, and thus every comprehension of acts as something psychical, is identical with depersonalization (44-5). (44-5).*

Teacher action research is a sustained and intentional inquiry by the researcher into problematic aspects of his/her professional praxis. The inquiry becomes an integral dynamic of praxis, an intentional process that accompanies, informs and betters the

unfolding and developing teaching act. Action research is not driven by a need to construct an elaborate methodological arsenal of empirical techniques because it does not seek to formulate robust "law-like" theories about teaching. If this were its project, the researcher would quite absurdly construct him or herself as a dehumanized thing-like object. For this reason empirical methodology is anathema to constructivist teacher action researchers. They would agree with Martin Heidegger that in the social sciences **"...the best technical ability can never replace the actual power of seeing and inquiring and speaking."** (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 20). In this way action research is grounded in the experience and the intentionality of the inquiring and speaking subject.

In my experience the methodology of constructivist teacher action research relies on the interpretation of extensive field notes and documents which originate in the classroom and reflect the teaching-learning dynamic within it. The researcher constructs extensive narratives of critical events focussing on problematic aspects of his/her professional praxis. Thick narrative description allows the researcher to construct a tentative understanding of the dynamics of these critical incidents, particularly of his/her role within them. This research process serves to clarify the relationship of teacher intentions to actions and, if there is a problematic mismatch between them, to explore and try out different courses of action which more aptly reflect the teacher's pedagogical intentions, values and beliefs.

## **V. One Last Kick at the Monster of Transcendental Narcissism**

When researchers in education claim to employ empirical methodology, effectively emulating the natural sciences, and seriously believe that their paradigm explicates the only valid method of arriving at an understanding of the phenomena in question, we are confronted with an example of transcendental narcissism. I believe that Huberman's critique of teacher research may be a case in point because he blithely insists that the methodology of his paradigm is applicable to teacher action research. This position rests on a fundamental misunderstanding. Constructivist teacher action researchers are concerned with bettering the quality of the human dynamics and educational experiences available to children *in their care*. For this reason, Huberman's essentially reductionist empirical project - which seeks to determine rules of causality operating in all schools and classrooms - has nothing to offer to their paradigm. This is not his fault because I recognize that he is operating within the confines of a fundamentally different understanding of human behaviour. He did, however, evoke in my mind the image of Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais.

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