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'SUPPOSING': READING BETWEEN THE LINES: AN ALLEGORICAL ACCOUNT OF CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON LITERACY ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT: Telling stories is a basic human activity. It enables us to organise, evaluate and transform what we see going on around us. It allows us to make sense of what is happening, to defy what is ephemeral in our experience. In short, it helps us to read the signs and between the lines. In the story that follows, we shall watch how Little Monster struggles with the apparently random and inexplicable and strives to make order out of chaos. He is fortunate to have a mother who regards story-telling as a significant determinant of his psycho-social well-being. Indeed, there are those who would argue that engaging in the construction of narrative is a precondition for literacy development, academic success and enhanced life chances. Our second story begins here, as we exploit the potential of narrative to function as a developmental turning-point in our understanding of contemporary debates on early literacy acquisition in the context of the National Evaluation of the Early Intervention Programme in Scotland.

Key words: early learning; literacy acquisition; early intervention

1. ONCE UPON A TIME

Telling stories is one of the most basic of human activities. As well as being an intrinsically enjoyable activity, it is a way of organising, evaluating and transforming what we see going on about us. It enables us to make sense of what is happening in our immediate environment, and to defy what is ephemeral in our experience. In a very fundamental way, it enables us to read the signs and between the lines. And at the early stages of the National Evaluation of the Early Intervention Programme in Scotland, this is precisely what we must do.

In the story that follows, we shall watch how Little Monster (a close relative) gradually reorganises his experience, struggling with the apparently random and inexplicable. For him and his mother, the construction of a narrative is the basis for psycho-social health. Indeed, there are those who would argue that it is a precondition for his subsequent literacy development, academic success and enhanced life chances.

This is where our second story begins. Unlike Little Monster, we suggest rather than suppose. Yet we share his implicit purpose, as we exploit the potential of narrative to function as a developmental turning-point in our understanding of some of the implications of contemporary policy debates on early literacy acquisition.

2. SUPPOSING . . .

'Mummy,'
 said Little Monster:
 'supposing when I wake up
 tomorrow morning
 . . . supposing there was a
 big . . . black . . .
 hole . . .
 in the middle of the floor.'

Little Monster, the *enfant terrible* of our story, clearly has a febrile imagination. Like so many of us – even those with some inkling of what the grand narrative might be – he senses that his little world is inherently unstable, fragmentary and insecure. He makes very convincing use of his early language skills to explore the idea that at any moment the bottom may fall out of his world and that he might pitch, headlong, into disaster. By hypothesising in this engaging manner, he is, however, clearly rejoicing in a sustaining relationship with Mother Monster. Indeed some would argue that these language games, the games of enquiry and discovery that Little Monster is learning to play with his mother constitute – at least in part – that primary social relation. As Lyotard (1984) explains, they immediately position 'the person who asks, as well as the addressee and the referent asked about: it is already the social bond' (p. 15). We shall return to this theme later, when we confront the nature of the social bond; examine its implications for educational theory and practice; and reflect upon its impact on Little Monster's subsequent linguistic development. But let's slip into something more comfortable – linguistically at least – and return, for a moment, to our story. Little

Monster goes on to say that he didn't want to fall into that big black hole. He called his mother, but she didn't answer. She couldn't come and help him because she had gone away. Before we know it, the house is on fire

'and then there wasn't a ceiling
and the sky was all horrible
and I fell down
and down
and down.'

The reader may rest assured that Little Monster's mistrust of his mother proves to be ill-founded. And yet this vertiginous descent into the black hole of his imagination has its analogue in the tenor of the current debate on standards of literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Despite the existence of some limited evidence to the contrary (Dombey, 1998), the mood is crisis, the talk of an inexorable decline in standards. And, as a glimpse over the event horizon will tell us, in the current wave of policy initiatives, the primary locus of remediation is considered to be the school, and the classroom in particular.

3. THE EVENT HORIZON

'... And I couldn't see the bottom
of the hole
And I just went on falling
forever and ever.'

Within a certain distance of the centre of a black hole, so they tell us, the gravitational pull is so strong that nothing – not even light – can escape. As we shall see, the current debate on standards of literacy exerts a measure of the same force. Let us begin by examining some of the gravitational forces at work in educational research. We shall then turn our attention to how these same forces may affect educational policy.

As Richardson (1998) points out, 'measurements of "literacy standards" and "basic literacy skills" have become the barometer of the success and well-being of schools, teachers, students, citizenship, democracy and the political system' (p. 116). The links between early underachievement in literacy and later academic failure have been widely documented (Reynolds *et al.*, 1996a; Sammons *et al.*, 1997). However, the impact of such underachievement is widely perceived to extend far beyond the level of the individual pupil or

the school. Several researchers have suggested that there are links between low levels of literacy and poor economic performance (cf, for example, Reynolds and Farrell, 1996; Dombey, 1998; Beard, 1999). In addition, media commentators have been quick to associate poor levels of literacy and numeracy with a range of highly undesirable phenomena such as 'underachievement and disruption inside school, unemployment, perhaps even crime and drug addiction figures outside school.' (*The Scotsman*, 28 October, 1998, p. 3). According to Dombey (1998), there are even those who attribute 'our confused sense of national identity' to 'low standards of literacy'. The fact that many of these links – if tenable at all – are merely associations rather than cause-and-effect relationships somehow gets lost in these breathless accounts of the rapid descent into the black hole of falling standards. It is interesting to note that in the same edition of *The Scotsman* newspaper, educational research is excoriated for being 'quite simply insufficiently evidence-based' (p. 10).

Despite the fact that what happens (or does not happen) in school is widely perceived to have an impact that extends far beyond it, the focus of much educational research (and, it would appear, of current educational policy) has been with what happens there, and in the classroom in particular. There is a considerable body of research into school effectiveness and improvement (cf Mortimore *et al.*, 1988; Sammons *et al.*, 1995; Reynolds *et al.*, 1996a; 1996b; see also Beard, 1999, for a comprehensive review of the literature). This, and the concerns with the 'basics' enshrined in the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) are but two examples. Although as Reynolds (1998) rightly points out, 'this discourse can be seen as reflecting a number of concerns, political, social and economic' (p. 147), the prime locus of concern – for both policy makers and educational researchers – is the school and what happens within it, particularly at the classroom level. There is also a substantial research literature on learning at the classroom level (cf Brophy and Good, 1986; Creemers, 1994; Borich, 1996; Creemers and Reynolds, 1996). The interface between the school and classroom levels has also been explored (cf Teddlie, 1994; McCallum, 1997).

It is interesting to note, however, that the well-established link between poverty and educational disadvantage, first highlighted in the Plowden Report (Advisory Council for Education, 1967), receives far less prominence in current educational debate. Indeed poverty is not a word which is much used in current policy debates. In political discourse, it has been largely superseded by a term which is derived from a paradox: what it says is in fact what it does not say.

For the very term 'social exclusion' posits that from which one is excluded, rather than engage directly with the preconditions of such exclusion, viz the deprivation that is poverty.

In her cogent exposition of the main concepts associated with educational policies for young children from deprived backgrounds, Watt (1996) argues that

In the 1990s the political climate in which issues of achievement and disadvantage are debated has changed dramatically but levels of relative poverty are increasing and issues of inequality are as relevant as ever (p. 139).

She characterises the climate in the post-Plowden era as one in which the agenda was framed by 'professional educators in the language of child-centred education, educational processes and equality of opportunity' and education 'conceptualised as a transaction between teacher and learner' (p. 139). She contrasts this with the situation in the post-Thatcher era, when 'the "education speak" is generated by policy-makers and its language emanates from the world of business: it is of outcomes, quality assurance, performance indicators and standards' (p. 139). Although the present government may be committed to removing the worst excesses of the market place, the latter continues to exert considerable power as a metaphor. As Watt points out, the rationale for education is still frequently 'expressed in terms of its being a national investment' (p. 139). We would concur with Watt's assessment that 'education-speak' is still largely generated by policy-makers. What appears to us to have changed, however, is that they are now adding to their linguistic repertoire language previously used almost exclusively by professional educators (and educational researchers) and appealing (rhetorically at least) to notions of 'child-centred education, educational processes and equality of opportunity' (Watt, 1996, p. 139). In an era of genetically-modified crops and other forms of intensive farming, perhaps Watt's distinction between a straightforward 'horticultural' metaphor, based on a notion of 'growth' through 'appropriate nourishment' and that of the market place begins to look less secure. But then as Little Monster has so clearly pointed out, the gravitational force at the centre of a black hole does appear to be irresistible . . .

4. SINGULARITY

'Mummy, supposing all that happened when I woke up tomorrow, what would it be like?'

'Mmm,' said Mother Monster,
'that would be very scary.'

Mother Monster has a point. There is indeed something very scary about a place where mass has no volume and time does not pass, but that is exactly what it is like at the singularity, the centre of a black hole. And the black hole which is the current literacy crisis appears to be no exception. Although time has not exactly stood still, research into literacy acquisition is still characterised by a persistent polarisation of the debate on the respective advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to the teaching of reading and writing. These 'paradigm wars' (Kamil, 1995) have been comprehensively documented by a number of researchers (Fang, 1995; Kamil, 1995; Saks 1995; Fraser, 1998; Harrison, 1999). They appear to have assumed even greater prominence in the context of the current concern at policy level with falling standards in literacy and numeracy (Wray, 1997).

In many respects, the current debate originated in the 1950s, when for some it was simply a matter of phonics versus what is still widely referred to as 'look-and-say' (Flesch, 1955). Until the late 1960s, reading instruction was dominated by the 'bottom-up' model – beginning readers were encouraged to start with the smallest building blocks (graphemes) and proceed to the construction of sentences. As is the way with polarised debates, 'bottom up' almost inevitably ceded to 'top down' (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1978). Advocates of the 'top-down' approach acknowledged that fledgling readers brought their pre-existing linguistic knowledge and life experiences to bear on the task in hand. In the 1990s, the consensus appears to be that the very process of learning to read – as distinct from becoming literate in the broadest sense – is highly complex and fairly unpredictable. In order to master it, the neophyte reader relies on a combination of low-level and high-level schemata (Stanovich, 1980; Oakhill and Garnham, 1988; Funnell and Stuart, 1995). The research evidence suggests that this process is best supported by a range of activities and approaches, which may vary across time and between schools.

It is clear, however, that no single approach provides a panacea for early literacy for all. This range of approaches may include engaging in story-telling; exposing children to a culture of literacy; introducing concepts of print and letter names; developing phonemic awareness and phonological skills through rime and onset; developing children's early writing skills; and increasing the amount of verbal interaction in the classroom (cf, for example, McMillan and Leslie, 1998; Johnston and Watson, 1997).

The advantages of such eclecticism are clear, as is the rationale for the adoption of a range of approaches. After all, if there is evidence that everything works, then why not do a bit of everything? This is the operating principle adopted by teachers in at least one study (Cato, 1992). Reynolds (1998) notes that teachers appear to be guided by intuition when it comes to selecting the precise blend of approaches they use in their classroom. It may also be the case that this blend varies considerably over time.

Yet one striking feature of this debate (in educational research at least) is that the concept of literacy itself, and the locus in which it evolves, remain relatively unexplored. Literacy is construed as an entirely self-evident concept, associated firmly in the public imagination with print-based rather than computational media. The latter includes not only computers but the wide range of receptive, expressive and presentational devices that can be used with them: interactive video, optical and print-based media such as CD-ROM and CD-I, networks, hypermedia systems, image processing and animation, speech recognition and synthesis. Indeed the rapid development of these technologies, and their potential to transform the way we communicate and acquire knowledge may lead us substantially to revise our notions of what it means to be 'literate' or 'educated'. We have already seen how the event horizon can shrink to the level of the school. So too it is with the very meaning of the word 'literacy'. For as Street and Street (1991) point out, 'the defining type' of (print-based) literacy is 'the variety associated with schooling' (p. 143) (cf also Tett and Crowther, 1998). As Richardson (1998) points out, literacy can be construed as 'a set of asocial individual cognitive skills dislodged from their socio-cultural moorings in human relationships and communities of practice' (p. 116).

As this brief resumé of the 'paradigm wars' illustrates, the unifying theme in the current debate about raising standards in literacy and numeracy appears to be an emphasis on approaches rather than practice, and on curricular advice for deployment in the early years classroom. The question remains, however, as to what effect the current focus on the classroom environment, and upon teachers' practice, will have in the medium to long-term. If, for example, teachers were to misconstrue the current focus on their classroom practice as an assault on their professional competence, this might have the unfortunate effect of undermining the very professionalism that is the necessary precondition for developing evidence-based professional practice. Intuition may be an important element of professional practice, but it is hardly sufficient grounds for professional decision-making. After all, we would be dismayed if an expe-

rienced general practitioner made clinical judgements purely on the basis of his or her intuition.

But surely it is time we heard what Mother Monster has to say for herself? After all, she appears to be a resourceful woman operating in straitened circumstances. So perhaps she can find a way out of this (black) hole.

5. A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

'But then supposing tomorrow
when you woke up, you
called me and I was
making pancakes.
And supposing
you ate up all
your pancakes,
And then we
went for a walk.'

For all her faults, Mother Monster clearly knows all about the benefits of a good breakfast, and appreciates the importance of providing a stimulating language environment for her offspring. Intuitively at least, she understands the situated character of human understanding, communication and literacy development. While not disputing the fact that black holes are truly black, she gently reminds Little Monster that there are still many happy things they can do together. After breakfast, she suggests they take a walk. They walk and walk until they find a green hill. At the bottom of a hill, they come across an old man with a long red scarf, selling balloons. He shall cross our horizon again. (We should point out that the colour of his scarf, although perhaps indicative, is purely coincidental.)

For the moment, however, we in the educational research community would do well to heed Mother Monster's salutary injunction to take a walk. Even if we do manage to climb all the way to the top of the hill, we should take care not just to stand there in the sun. We need, perhaps, to recognise that there are limits to our exploratory and explanatory powers; and we need to extend our horizons beyond the level of the classroom, and thereby acknowledge the limits of our possibilities. We are quick to assert that 'there are important links between the processes of literacy acquisition and socio-cultural background' (Richardson, 1998, p. 118). However, we also need to remind ourselves that learning is located as much in co-participation in what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as 'communities of practice'

(p. 29) as in the heads of individuals sitting in classrooms. And maybe we need to ask ourselves about what types of *social* engagement provide the proper context for learning to take place, rather than focusing on what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are likely to be involved, or on the curricular flair of the teaching profession. There does now appear to be a consensus that the learning process is a highly interactive and productive one. But are we perhaps sacrificing wonderment and enchantment in our restless pursuit of core skills? (This is no doubt a question that we shall address in the course of our evaluation.) And are we possibly putting more emphasis on pace and progress than on the legitimacy – and indeed perhaps the desirability – of peripheral participation? After all, is not the latter perhaps an entirely appropriate way of learning-in-being and being-in-learning for those who cannot yet manipulate a tool? As Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, ‘children are, after all, quintessentially legitimate peripheral participants in adult social worlds’ (p. 32).

It is also important that we acknowledge the role of improvisation, and of emergent processes which are essentially unpredictable and cannot be reduced to generalised structures. We also need to recognise that literacy does not invariably follow any step-by-step pattern; and that children may learn about uses, strategies and values simultaneously and haphazardly (cf Ivanic and Hamilton, 1989). These observations may, of course, bring into question the validity of describing early literacy development largely in terms of cognitive behaviour, on the beginning reader’s ability to decode, encode and enact prefabricated codes and structures. However, this is not to say that all that is solid melts into air. It is merely to say that we need to remind ourselves of what we know already – namely, that literacy development is in many respects indistinguishable from language development. And that neither is the exclusive domain of linguistics or cognitive or developmental psychology. And that there may just possibly be a distinction between being able to read and being a reader. The challenge for us as evaluators is to recognise that in literacy development ‘structure and process, mental representation and skilful execution, interpenetrate one another profoundly’ (Hanks, in Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 16); that these are distributed between the participation frameworks of home and school in ways which are essentially unpredictable and incommensurable; that such participation frameworks are not immutable givens; and that interaction with an experienced and understanding adult may be the key to learning.

But whatever became of the man in the red scarf selling balloons

who crossed our event horizon earlier? For just as there is gravity, so is there levity. And if nothing else, Little Monster and Mother Monster are great believers in the incredible lightness of being. . . .

6. JOINED-UP POLICY: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

' . . . And supposing I bought
a red balloon like a red jewel
And you bought a
green balloon like the green sea
And a blue balloon like the blue sky . . .'
'And a purple balloon,'
said little Monster, 'like . . .
like a lovely purple balloon.'

It would appear that educational policy is at once susceptible to the gravitational force exerted by black holes, and yet retains the buoyancy of the chain of colourful balloons floated by the Monster dyad. In educational circles, joined-up policy appears to inform classroom practice as much, if not more, than notions of developing joined-up writing. We need not look very far for examples. The high-profile Early Intervention Programme was first launched in Scotland in June 1997. The three-year programme was initially funded for £24 million, and was 'aimed directly at raising the standards of literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy skills in primary years 1 and 2' (SOEID, 1998a, p. 2). The initiative was posited on the belief that 'all children must have the right start in primary school . . . if they are to access all later stages of the curriculum' (p. 2). In 1998, the government provided an additional £36 million over three years 1999–2000 in order that education authorities might involve more schools. Total funding to the Early Intervention Programme now stands at £60 million over five years, 1997/98–2001–2002. The education authorities may exercise their discretion as regards the deployment of the central funding.

The Early Intervention Programme clearly represents a significant investment in improving all pupils' level of attainment. As such, it is closely associated with a series of related education policy initiatives designed to raise attainment. In Scotland, perhaps the most significant of these are *Improving Achievements in Scottish Schools* (SOEID), (1996); *Setting Targets. Raising Standards in Schools* (SOEID, 1998b); and the development of a national baseline assessment strategy for Scotland (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1998).

In practice, however, the term 'early intervention' appears to

conjure up notions of educational deficit, which although perhaps implicit in the SOEID's pronouncement that '*all* children must have the right start in primary school' (SOEID, 1998a, p. 2) [my emphasis], are never made explicit. In much of the research literature, the focus is very often on the 'slow reader' (cf, for example, Brooks *et al.*, 1998), and on the forms of educational intervention most likely to maximise the performance of individual children identified as having reading difficulties (Sylva and Hurry, 1995). The extent to which the distinction between prevention and intervention is frequently blurred in the literature is clearly illustrated in the following extract from Sylva and Hurry (1995):

The research evidence points to the fact that, for reading difficulties, early intervention appears to be more effective than remediation at a later stage. . . . There has been greater success with younger children in their first year or two of school. It may be that it is easier to prevent reading problems in the first place than to attempt to remediate them further up the school (p. 5).

It is also generally believed to be the case that 'the largest vulnerable group' (in terms of children most likely to make poor progress in reading) is those 'who come from a disadvantaged family, live in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, or attend a school with many disadvantaged children' (McMillan and Leslie, 1998). On the basis of these observations, several education authorities in Scotland have targeted resources from the Early Intervention Programme at schools in areas of multiple deprivation. Within the classroom, however, the aim is to enhance the performance of *all* children in respect of their ability to read, write, spell and count. As such, the programme differs from previous initiatives designed to raise levels of attainment amongst pupils requiring learning support (cf the RAISE Project) (Robertson *et al.*, 1994). Although the RAISE researchers noted that 'special attempts have been made by government to support and increase attainment in areas severely affected by economic decline', and were prompt to acknowledge that 'low attainment is no longer seen as solely rooted in individual intellectual characteristics' (p. 1), their research endeavour focused almost exclusively on teaching strategies and the curriculum. Similarly, there are some indications that in the Early Intervention Programme the focus is on the early years curriculum, and on promoting a range of complementary approaches to the teaching of reading and writing. In most cases, these are supported by staff development initiatives. In some, the curricular re-focusing is enhanced by well-managed interprofessional working, as funding

has become available to deploy a range of other 'understanding adults' in the primary classroom – for example, nursery nurses and classroom assistants. Part of the impetus for this renewed emphasis on creating a stimulating learning environment at the early stages stems, of course, from the publication of the *A Curriculum Framework for Children in Their Pre-School Year* (SOEID, 1997). It is our expectation that the national evaluation of the Early Intervention Programme in Scotland will help to determine the extent to which there is a coherent 'joined-up' policy environment in respect of early years education. Mother Monster may teach us something about the relation between appearances and reality. But at least the hysteria that beset Little Monster at the beginning of our story seems to have disappeared. He is able to stake his claim with new confidence, and rejoice in the incredible lightness of being.

7. THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

'... And then I let my red balloon float away and away into the sky.

And then you let your blue balloon float away and away and your green balloon.'

'Only not my purple balloon,' said Little Monster.

'I would take my purple balloon back home with me.'

'Oh yes,' said Mother Monster. 'We'd take your purple balloon home.'

We noted above that educational policy has two rather remarkable and apparently mutually exclusive properties. On the one hand, it appears to be exceptionally susceptible to the centrifugal forces of gravity. And yet it retains the buoyancy so characteristic of balloons. The danger with 'policy balloons' (as opposed to kites, which are politically more invidious), such as the present series which is designed to raise attainment, is that they are rarely airtight and are thus susceptible to drift. (Perhaps policy hysteria is inevitably followed by policy drift.) Is there a way out of this impasse? Let Little Monster and Mother Monster lead the way.

After releasing their balloons, Mother Monster and her offspring set off home. On the way, they 'meet an old man in a long yellow scarf, selling ice-creams. And supposing you had strawberry and I had chocolate ...' said Mother Monster. 'Or the other way round?' says Little Monster. (And why not indeed.) They get in just before it gets dark, and proceed to make a fire and toast some buns. 'And you'd tell me a story,' said Little Monster. 'And I'd tell you a story',

replies his mother. 'What would that be like?' 'Mmm,' said Little Monster, 'that would be very nice.'

This is an exchange which will delight many educationalists. It is one thing to acknowledge that a 'high level of parental involvement' is a potent 'school effectiveness factor' (Reynolds, 1998, p. 154), and that such involvement is heavily implicated in successful attainment at the level of the individual (West *et al.*, 1998). Nevertheless, it is quite another to make 'parental involvement' (however that is construed) an explicit plank of a policy designed to raise attainment in reading. But that is another story. And it's nearly time for bed. . . .

By now Little Monster is adept at accentuating the positive. (It appears we have much to learn from Little Monster.) 'Supposing I took my purple balloon up to bed with me?', he says, 'and it floated up to the ceiling and stayed there ALL NIGHT and didn't fall down?', he speculates with new-found optimism. Perhaps we are seeing the very beginnings of an integrated approach to policy development and implementation in early years education: one which has clear and mutually inclusive aims and objectives; and, above all, one which recognises that learning is as much a social as a cognitive activity, rooted in very different communities of practice which are closely related and may be mutually complementary. But in our story, as in that other, it is Mother Monster who will have the last word.

'Mmm,' said Mother.

'That would be very, very nice.'

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