

*A CELEBRATION OF A BEGINNING TEACHER'S  
INITIATION TO ACTION RESEARCH*

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## VALUES VERSUS REALITY

My introduction into the world as “teacher” happened two years ago on my first stage. I went to visit the teacher and students I would be working with the week before I was to spend three weeks in their classroom. I returned to the university horrified and in tears. I did not want to return to that classroom. The teacher terrified me. I could not image how the students in her class felt.

My first three weeks as a “teacher” were spent consoling, trying to make the students feel valued and safe while I was feeling insecure and uncomfortable. I had never been in the classroom as the authority figure and spoke to my host teacher about my insecurities. Her reply was “be a b\*\*ch like me and you’ll have no behavioural problems.” From this reply, I knew I was on my own.

My second ten-week stage was with a kindergarten class and my experience in that classroom was wonderful. Connie was the warmest, kindest, and most loving teacher. She started the day with hugs or handshakes from the students because she felt these told her what each student’s day would be like and how she should approach them. This was a teacher who was in touch with children’s emotional side and had created an environment where the children felt safe to explore and grow.

These two, very different experiences, have had a tremendous impact on me as a teacher. I am committed to never being a b\*\*ch and to creating the type of environment which allows children the freedom to explore and grow. These experiences are what led me to be sensitive to the environment I create in my classroom.

I think Brandt (1997) summed up the differences between these two teachers:

*... the best teachers know that kids learn more readily when they are emotionally involved in the lesson because emotion drives attention, which drives learning and memory. Teachers know that emotion is important; they just don't always know what to do about it.*

I really believe that the emotional part of students must be addressed before the intellectual. Therefore, I feel it is extremely important to be one of the teachers who know what to do about it.

#### VALUES TO LIVE BY

Inexperienced, nervous, unprepared, excited, I faced my class of 13 students. I was teaching 20%, part of the language arts program, in a small school. All the classrooms were occupied; therefore, my class was held in a corner of the library. This was definitely not the ideal learning environment.

In the first week eight students from the French system transferred to our school. All eight of these students were in grade two or three and were in my class. My class quickly grew to 21 students and I was given more time, 56%, to work with them and by the end of September, we were given a classroom.

By the end of the first week of school I realized that the students I was working with had a strong dislike for school. They would say things like may day may day when I asked them to do any reading or writing activity, I can't read/write, and I hate reading/writing. I needed to find a way to change their attitudes and subsequently improve their skills since 11 out of the 21 students were non-readers and all but two of the others were reading below level as shown on the Durrell, a test of reading fluency and comprehension. The students had no idea how to read.

Some were relying on the sole strategy of sounding out words while others did not even have this skill.

Consciously I set a goal to improve the students' attitude toward learning but I did not ask an action research question. However, in hindsight my action research question would be: How can I create an environment that will foster a positive attitude toward learning, particularly reading, in my students?

In order to understand why I had set this goal, I must answer this question: Why is the sense of community and a safe environment important to me? Where do these values originate? My desire to create a safe environment for children to learn is based on my two practice teaching experiences. Furthermore, I have developed a strong belief that children must feel safe in their environment and with those around them before any real learning takes place. Real learning being defined as an openness to experience new things and develop new skills.

It was at this time that I began collaborating with Brenda on a Books and Buddies Program which was designed to develop reading and social skills through peer tutoring. I thought that this program, accompanied with a great deal of encouragement, praise, fun activities in the classroom, and little homework would help to improve the students' view of school. (Why I assigned little homework is linked to one of the reasons the children had learned to disliked school.)

I had visited Brenda and Betty's classroom's the year before and I remember being fascinated at how independent the students had become and how both academic and social skills were being addressed. I also remember thinking how much effort must have gone into creating such an environment. Therefore, when Brenda approached me to begin a very similar program I

thought that this kind of program would help me to create the type of environment that would help foster a positive attitude toward learning.

A couple months into the school year I was discouraged. I was still hearing from the children that they hated virtually everything at school including physical education and art. I walk slowly down the hall with the weight of the world on my shoulders. Should I be a teacher? Can I give these children what they need and deserve? As I walk into Brenda's (my critical friend's) room, she is sitting at her desk. She stops, looks up and asks how things are going? This was all I needed to open up and share my frustration and insecurities with her. She listens without judgement and responds by telling her own story. This dialogue continues and I gradually feel the tension leaving my body. I felt reassured, capable of moving forward.

The above is the perfect example of my interpretation of what a positive learning environment means: An environment where I feel safe to express myself openly and honestly . . . where I can allow myself to be vulnerable with limited fear . . . peel away the layers of myself . . . exposure, acceptance, validation . . . a place where I can grow as a person and as a professional. The above example is what Jean Clandinin, at the ITCR (1999), called laying stories side by side which does not lead to answers but affirmation and more possibilities.

In our discussion Brenda told me that she thought that there was a discrepancy between what the children were saying and what we were seeing in the classroom. They said they hated things but once they had begun the task they seemed to enjoy themselves. ( Old habits die hard.) This is when I began having the students write in a reflective buddy journal, as Brenda had suggested. In this journal they were allowed to express things they disliked, enjoyed, or thought needed to be improved on in the buddy program. It was in this journal that I began seeing that

many of the students actually enjoyed taking part in reading buddies. I gave them a place to have a voice: a place where what they had to say was really valued.

The students were having difficulty, at times, getting their buddy to listen and work. So we began sharing some of the difficulties and the successes we were having and how to solve some of the problems. The students shared a great deal and began helping each other solve problems. I also shared. Many of the problems the students were having with their grade one buddy were the same problems I had in the classroom. A real sense of community was developing in the classroom.

#### CLAIMS AND EVIDENCE

The Books and Buddies Program is a highly structure multi sensory program which integrates reading, writing, and spelling together. Each Grade 1 student was paired with a Grade 2 or 3 tutor. The dyads remained together for one third of the school year.

The students are introduced to the program through a variety of short workshops whereby they learn how to work together. These workshops include how to sit side by side, how to share a book, how to greet your buddy, and various other which focus on academic and social skills. During these workshops the students role-played and discussed possible situations which could arise, such as partner isn't listening or sitting properly.

The dyads were divided into two groups, half meeting in either Brenda or my room for 25 minutes a day. They followed a structured routine as shown on the attached sheet. The activities also changed slightly throughout the year as the students gained more reading skills. For example, at the beginning of the year all the pairs were reading the same book which we practice in class. By the end of the year the students were choosing their own books to read.

In addition to the daily meetings, the children wrote letters to each other weekly. The Grade 2/3 wrote to their Grade 1 buddy Tuesday night and shared their letters with their buddy on Wednesday. The process was reversed for Wednesday night and Thursday.

I believe this program, which allowed my students the space to take risks and learn with their buddy, helped my students see reading as a challenge which they could meet.

**Claim #1**

*The Books and Buddies Program helped to foster a positive attitude toward learning.*

**Evidence:****1. Students' Journals and Comments**

I like my new buddy. We work well together. She is my friend. I like reading with my buddy.

She always points at the words when I read. She is a good buddy.

*Although this is not a direct quote from one student's journal, it is what I was reading in many of the students' journals regularly.*

## 2. Teacher Observations

I really saw the improvement in my students' attitudes in March when a new student arrived in my classroom. She was having difficulty reading. When she came to read to me she said "I can't read, it's too hard." It was at this time that I sat back and realized that I hadn't heard those words in such a long time. The students had come so far. They were saying things like "don't tell me that word I can figure it out myself." One girl's public speech was titled 'I Love Books.' One student's mother came into school one day with her son and told me that last year he would fake sick to stay home but today he didn't feel well and wanted to come to school. These students had come to like school and had developed confidence in themselves.

As the year progressed, the students were anxious to get to work with their buddy. They took their roles as teacher seriously and were excited when they saw progress in their buddy's work. Some did not realize that they too were improving their skills by helping their little buddy. One student at the end of the year asked if we would be doing buddies again next year. I told them that half of them would be staying in my classroom and would do buddies. I heard many students say "I want to stay and do buddies again."



### 3. A photo



This picture shows the type of enjoyment that the students had during buddies and the type of relationships that developed between buddies. This picture also shows the results of our sharing in the classroom. Brittany was having difficulty getting her buddy to focus on the book while she was reading. The solution which came out of our sharing was that Brittany would put her arm around her buddy to help her buddy become more focussed. The type of sharing that was occurring between the students would not have happened if they did not feel comfortable with one another. Furthermore, this is an example that these students were themselves conducting action research into their practices with their reading buddy.

## 2. The Strategy List

The students beginning approaches to reading included I can't read, I hate reading, it's too hard, and the sole strategy of sounding words out. I think this list of strategies is quite comprehensive and speaks for itself.

- sound it out
- look at the picture
- skip it and go back
- look for a little word in a big word
- cut the word in half
- break it into syllables
- look in the dictionary
- give them the beginning sound
- wait five seconds and tell the word
- look for a spelling pattern
- think of a rhyming word

## 3. Students' Journals

*Reading can teach you to write. I love library books because they are funny. Some are sad. The more you read the better you get. Reading helps you in life. Books are special to people in some way. It makes people smarter. They have special things inside them. When you practice it helps you so you can read better. I think Kevin likes to read books because they are interesting to him. The more you read the better you like it. When you read a book, you learn about feelings. You have to practice your sounds and look for rhyming words.*

I believe that students must be active participants in their own learning in order to make more connections to prior knowledge and therefore more meaning. This belief is in accordance with the constructivist view of learning: Children learn as a result of their personal generation of meaning from experience (Abruscato, 1996).

This is why I challenged my students to generate as many ways as they could think of to help their little buddy figure out a word when they got stuck. This also challenged them to think about what they do or could do to decode unfamiliar words. I was astonished at how comprehensive their list was.

**Claim #2**      *Providing opportunities for students to generate reading strategies improved their attitude toward reading.*

**Evidence:**

**1. Teacher Observations**

I asked the class periodically what strategies they used to help them figure out words they did not know and which they could use to help their buddy learn to read. I recorded these. I had told the students that last year Mrs. Braun's grade three class had found ten ways that helped them. This made the students eager to find more ways to decode words. Some days a student would come in and ask: Is this strategy on the list? Our list grew and gradually, with some reinforcement, the students began using strategies suggested by others and showing their buddies some of the strategies too.

I think this shows an understanding of the importance of reading while integrating some ideas of how to learn to read.

Learning to read is a complex task. In order to be able to construct meaning from text children must be able to recognize many words automatically. Therefore, when children are able to decode words attention can be focussed on creating meaning. For children who develop these skills reading is rewarding and fun which leads them to read more. However, for children that struggle with these skills reading can be frustrating. These children would do anything to avoid reading a book (Allen, 1998). This is the student whom I had in my class. Very few had developed decoding skills and for most reading was a frustrating task to be avoided.

The difference between skilled and poor readers is called the Matthew Effects. The implications of the "Matthew Effect" can be seen in the study by Juel (1988, as cited in Allen, 1998) who found "the probability that a child would remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade if the child was a poor reader at the end of first grade was .88." This is not what I wanted for my students. I was determined to do everything to help them develop their decoding skills and overcome the frustration they had with reading.

**Claim #3** *The change in students' attitude improved their reading scores.*

**Evidence:**

**1. Test Scores**

Each student was tested using the Durrell, a test of reading fluency and comprehension, at the beginning of the year and again in June. All of the kids were readers. All but three of the students improved by a grade level and many improved by much more. See the attached for a more detailed description of the results.

## **2. One Student's Development**

In May, the one student who had believed strongly all year that he hated all aspects of school, came up to me and said "I'm a good writer." I knew then that his attitude was changing and he was opening himself up to learning. I had finally reached the last student in the classroom.

Although it was late in the year and he had developed limited skills, he really began to improve in those last few weeks.

## **3. A Parent's Comment**

Last year I had to fight with my child every day to do her homework. She would kick and scream and refuse to do it. This year she will sit with her little brother and read to him (her little brother is also a little buddy) and then he reads to her. It is nice not to have to fight with her and her reading has come a long way this year. She has really gotten a boost. Thank-you.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS OF MY RESEARCH**

I think the Books and Buddies Program which was developed by Brenda Braun and Betty Kreuger is valuable for many classroom teachers. Betty and Brenda have researched its effectiveness with second language learners and found it to be a great success. Vicky has looked into the social aspects of the program and found that it fosters positive relationships and behaviours. Finally, I have investigated the program's usefulness in fostering a positive attitude toward learning in a class of non readers and found it to be valuable. The program has been used at various age levels. It began as a grade three class teaching a grade two class and now has incorporated grade two teaching a grade one and the grade one teaching kindergarten.

I believe, that in combination, the research that has been done shows the usefulness of this program in virtually any classroom. It is important for teachers who would like to develop a program such as this to adapt it to fit the needs of their students.

Next year, at Sherbrooke Elementary, Vicky and Betty will each be working with new partners to include four classes of students working on this program. I will also be working with a new partner. Brenda is moving to Edmonton and I am sure will use an adapted version of the program with the students she teaches there. As we bring in new people, I am sure there will be new findings about the usefulness of the program and more adaptations made.

For teachers who have students with limited skills, my research might lead them to question why. By answering that question they can tackle the cause rather than the symptoms of poor skills.

Finally, my research has many implications for myself as a beginning teacher. These are discussed in the next section.

### MY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

I presented at the ICTR in April, not really knowing until after listening to the keynote speaker, Jean Clandinin, that what I had done was similar to action research. It was at this time that I realized that I belonged at this conference. Prior to the conference I was feeling a little unsure of whether or not, I, a first year teacher, had anything of value to contribute. I realized that attending the conference had a great deal of value for me and as things progressed and I talked with other teachers I felt more comfortable, I felt safe.

It was during Jean Clandinin's speech that I realized that what I had been researching all year was how to change my students' negative attitude toward learning. It was also at this

conference that I realized the strength and value of the relationship that I had developed with Brenda. Karen and Janice spoke of the openness to vulnerability and shared stories and emotions. This is exactly the type of relationship Brenda and I had developed. We were more than colleagues. She was my critical friend and mentor.

I returned to school to continue my investigation into action research and what I had done in my classroom. At that time, I thought I had conducted action research; however, after doing some reading on action research (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 1996; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998) I realize that I have not conducted a real action research project. I did not go through the full process of action research. I did not systematically investigate my own actions called informed action. I also had no preset plans called intentional action (McNiff et al., 1996). I did not consciously go through the four step cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998).

On the other hand, I discussed this with Judy who told me that she had taken an action research course whereby she was required to reflect back and deconstruct her practice. This process, at McGill University was considered action research.

Either way, I believe that I have grown tremendously from looking back on what transpired in my classroom last year. It was not until I sat down to write this that I could fully appreciate the value of a reflective journal. A journal would have helped me tremendously in telling my story. I feel now that there are many gaps in what transpired, in the emotions, the difficulties, and the triumphs. Furthermore, it is this process that has led me to want to conduct action research whereby I systematically and intentionally investigate my own practice and religiously write in my journal so there are no gaps in my story.

Why is it important for me to do research? What are the implications for my practice? I listened to all the members of this class share and say how they feel they are just beginning to be effective teachers because of this method of research. I want to begin my career feeling that I am an effective teacher because I am a reflective practitioner and an action researcher. I want to develop these skills now so that I am driven to constantly and systematically improve what I am doing. I think this will have a profound effect on my practice and my view of myself as a teacher. I want to be able to look back on my practice and feel satisfied that I did my best.

I think the key to be able to look back and say I did my best is reflection. As Douillard and Hamilton (1999) stated "Reflection is affected by the individual, who sometimes looks closely and at other times takes a broader view. Through reflection we can look deep or stay on the surface." This is also similar to what Clandinin (1999) referred to as telling "real or cover stories." I believe this year I opened myself up to being vulnerable with Brenda. I was able to look closely at my practice and share real stories with her. However, Brenda is moving and this leaves me with a fear of not finding someone to be able to critically and honestly look at my practices with.

This process of critically looking at my values and my practice has led me to understand how deeply what I believe influences my teaching and consequently my students. Therefore, to be an effective teacher I must know myself well. As Palmer (1998) states:

*...teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subjects. (P.2)*



I know that I have only just begun to look closely at what I believe and what I have lived in my in-classroom place. However, I do see the vital importance of taking the time to reflect and to do so honestly. I hope to continue this process of reflection on what has occurred in the classroom with the children. I think that hearing their voices are just as important as finding my own.

One thing that I have realized by reading some of Connelly and Clandinin (1999) is that although I am quite comfortable with how I have lived my story in my in-classroom place, I am unhappy with my reluctance to speak up in the out-of-classroom place. At the school where I teach the emphasis is placed on technology. I believe technology is important but when many of the students in the school have limited language skills I think the emphasis should be on helping students become literate prior to becoming computer literate.

Why did I say nothing? It was my first teaching position and I was too busy trying to please in order to get hired back next year. I was living a contradiction. I believe that the students should be the central focus of any decisions made at school yet I sacrificed what I believe to be best for them in order to try to secure myself a job. Well, I have my position for next year and I have made a promise to myself that my voice will be heard at staff meetings next year.

The act of going through this process with such a small group of supportive and blooming teacher researchers has been inspiring, to say the least. I have gained more confidence in myself as shown in my promise to speak up and be heard next year. My confidence is also shown from my realization that my greatest fear next year was not having Brenda there to guide me, not having a critical friend, someone who I can be honest and vulnerable with. I now feel that I am

capable of showing someone new how the Books and Buddies Program works. I am also determined to search out someone, maybe JoAnne, to share my real stories with.

I think I have become aware of the necessity to live what I believe in my practice and in the greater school community in order to be at my best for myself and my students. Thank-you for such a wonderful opportunity for a beginning teacher and a pre-beginning teacher researcher to share my experiences and to learn from all of yours. Thank-you Jack, for your guidance and your questions which pushed me forward in my inquiry.

Finally, this process of critically looking at my practice has led me to many new questions. Prior to taking this course I had decided to examine how I could implement the new curriculum effectively into a split grade 2/3 class. Although this may still be something I will struggle with, I realized that it does not come from inside me. Therefore, I have changed my focus to something that I value, which is community.

#### THE NEXT STEP

Next year, I want to continue with the action research process. It was through talking with JoAnne that I have decided to continue my focus on the community but in a broader context and in a systematic way. Our question is: How can we develop caring individuals whose goals include ways to contribute something positive to the community (class, school, town) they live in? This time I will, in collaboration with JoAnne, follow and adapt an action research model in order to conduct an action research project. I also hope to be able to bring other teachers from my school into this or a similar project by sharing with them the process and the benefits.

I have chosen this research question because I had and will have again this year many children who tended to get into a great deal of trouble on the playground. These students are also

the ones who were the most difficult to handle in the classroom. I do not believe that children want to misbehave. I think that if they could develop an understanding of the effects of their actions on others then there would be fewer difficulties in and out of the classroom. I also think it is by giving them an active role in making the classroom, school and community a better place that they will appreciate their place in that community and their ability to change it.

I think I have come full circle. I began my paper by examining the beliefs that I held which led me to investigate how to change students' attitude toward learning. Now I begin to examine why I have chosen to investigate how to develop caring individuals.

*. . . the best teachers know that children learn more readily when they are emotionally involved in the lesson because emotion drives attention, which drives learning and memory. Teachers know that emotion is important: they just don't always know what to do about it (Brandt, 1997).*

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## Books and Buddies Agenda Term 3

## Monday

1. Greet your buddy
2. List all the words that contain the spelling pattern
3. Grade 1 reads while Grade 2/3 points
4. Grade 2/3 reads while Grade 1 points
5. Clean-up and say good-bye

## Tuesday

1. Greet your buddy
2. Grade 2/3 asks Grade 1 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
3. Grade 1 asks Grade 2/3 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
4. Grade 1 reads while Grade 2/3 points
5. Grade 2/3 reads while Grade 1 points
6. Processing form
7. Clean-up and say good-bye

## Wednesday

1. Greet your buddy
2. Grade 2/3 asks Grade 1 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
3. Grade 1 asks Grade 2/3 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
4. Grade 2/3 reads buddy letter to Grade 1
5. Grade 1 reads while Grade 2/3 points
6. Grade 2/3 reads while Grade 1 points
7. Look for words with spelling pattern in newspaper
8. Clean-up and say good-bye

## Thursday

1. Greet your buddy
2. Grade 2/3 asks Grade 1 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
3. Grade 1 asks Grade 2/3 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
4. Grade 1 reads buddy letter to Grade 2/3
5. Grade 1 reads while Grade 2/3 points
6. Grade 2/3 reads while Grade 1 points
7. Clean-up and say good-bye

## Friday

1. Greet your buddy
2. Grade 2/3 asks Grade 1 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
3. Grade 1 asks Grade 2/3 to spell a word from the spelling pattern list
4. Grade 1 reads while Grade 2/3 points
5. Grade 2/3 reads while Grade 1 points
6. Processing form
7. Clean-up and say good-bye and have a good week-end

## Result of the Durrell

Grade 2	September	June
SB	NON-READER	2 L
JC	NON-READER	1 L-
KC	1 M	2 L
CF	NON-READER	1 H
JF	NON-READER	1 H
KJ	2 L	3 L
BL	1 L	2 L
RP	NON-READER	3 L
AS	NON-READER	1 L+
JS	NON-READER	2 L-
WS	NON-READER	2 L
NT	3 H	4 H++
MV	NON-READER	2 L
Grade 3		
MC	1 H	2 M
SJ	1 H	2 M
MM	1 M	2 M
KS	NOT TESTED	3 M
SS	1 L	3 L
BV	NON-READER	2 L

How I want to be evaluated.

- ① Is there evidence of growth as I proceed through the Action - Reflection cycle?
- ② Is there evidence that I have become aware of my values and beliefs?
- ③ Is there evidence that I have lived my educational values in my practice?
- ④ Is there evidence that my learning has influenced the learning of my students?