

**RETHINKING LEARNING TO READ:
THE CHALLENGE FROM CHILDREN EDUCATED AT HOME**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research positions itself as an historical and cultural event taking place at a particular time and in a particular form for reasons which span the political, philosophical and personal. Its subject matter is the claim of some home educating parents that their children learn to read without being taught. Rather than treating such children as exceptions to an established educational norm, this thesis rethinks learning to read through parent's understandings of literacy learning based on meanings assigned to key concepts such as 'child', 'teaching' and 'reading' and on the rhizomatic structure which relates these concepts to each other and to political, ideological and epistemological understandings. This alternative perspective creates a space; physical, temporal and theoretical, in which different interpretations of learning, such as those invited by complexity theory, become open to consideration. In doing this the technological view that reading is achieved through a series of enabling inputs conducted in a particular socio-cultural environment is challenged on both philosophical and empirical grounds. However, this exploration is in turn, directed and restricted by the epistemological assumptions underpinning the PhD as the objectification of intellectual excellence. This thesis considers these restrictions and the contribution research can make given them.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father who always wanted to tell me what he knew.

George William Pattison
1921 - 1980

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CONTENTS

	Page
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	1
Purpose of Research	2
Starting Points and Layout	3
<u>CHAPTER ONE - The Circumstances, the Events and the Unrests</u>	8
Home Education; its Growth and the Idea of Autonomous Education	8
The Technological View of Education	12
The Badman Review of Home Education 2009	22
The Cultural and Political Climate and the Prevailing View of 'The Child'	24
Extending the Technology - Families and Parents in Modern Western Society	28
<u>The Literacy Episteme – its Power and Influence</u>	33
What is Literacy?	34
Institutionalising Literacy	40
Measuring literacy	41
Teaching Literacy	42
Literacy for Education or Literacy as Education?	47
Learning Literacy	47
Summary	54
<u>CHAPTER TWO - A Meeting Place</u>	55
<u>Researcher and Researched; Me, Them and Us</u>	55
Me	55
Them	60
And Us	63
<u>CHAPTER THREE – In Pursuit of Knowledge</u>	69
<u>Being, Doing and Thinking about.</u>	69
The University Idea of Knowledge	69
Internal Validity	71
External Validity and Generalisation or Lack of?	78
The Nature of Subjectivity	84
The Role of Subjectivity	86

<u>Asking Questions</u>	89
Setting Up the Questionnaire	89
Choosing the Questions and the Rationale behind them	93
What Do We Need to Know About Parents?	97
<u>Getting Answers</u>	102
Analysing the questionnaires	102
Looking at Words	103
Looking at Frameworks	105
Looking for Meaning in Metaphors	107
<u>Educational Metaphors</u>	113
Cause and Effect in Metaphors of Acquisition and Participation	115
<u>CHAPTER FOUR – Challenging Teaching as a Cause of Learning</u>	119
<u>Direct challenges to ‘teaching’</u>	119
Dissatisfaction with the Term ‘Teach’	119
Questioning the Concept of ‘Teaching’	122
Teaching as a Theory of Mind	125
How to Consider Teaching	129
<u>Experiential Challenges to ‘Teaching’</u>	132
Teaching being Rejected	132
Questioning the Value of Teaching	135
Pre-empting Teaching	140
Challenges to Teaching	143
<u>CHAPTER FIVE - What Counts as Evidence, What Accounts for Meaning?</u>	146
<u>Constructing Children</u>	147
The Natural Learner	147
Metaphors of the Organic and the Natural	150
The Individual Learner	153
The Motivated Learner	157
General Motivation	157
Specific Motivation	159
Characterising ‘the Child’	166

<u>Understanding Reading</u>	166
Is it Possible to Put an Age on When a Child Begins to Read?	167
Phonics and Reading as a Skill	171
Phonics as Main Method	172
Phonics on an Ad Hoc Basis	173
Disagreeing with Phonics	176
Only Phonics in so Far as it Fits into Other Ideas	179
<u>Other Methods</u>	181
Children Devising their own Method	181
The Limitations of Method	182
No Method	183
Memorising	186
Silent Reading	190
Literacy	192
How do Children see Reading?	198
<u>Metaphors of Reading</u>	202
Metaphors of Structure	202
Metaphors of Liquid	204
Metaphors of Osmosis	206
Metaphors of Emergence and Coalescence	207
Challenges to 'Reading'	210
<u>Reading and the Environment</u>	212
Reading in an Environment	213
Reading without an Environment	216
<u>CHAPTER SIX – Subjectivity and Knowledge – What Happens Between the Child and Reading</u>	220
<u>Beyond Cause and Effect</u>	220
Theories of Chaos and Complexity	225
Self-Organising Systems	229
Constructing Ideas about Learning	234
<u>Things Parents Did</u>	237

<u>Reading Aloud</u>	237
Parental Intentions	238
Reading Aloud as a Cause	238
Reading Aloud as Participation	241
Age	241
Whether or not Child is Reading	242
How Often Children are Read to	244
What do Children Get Out of Being Read to?	245
Emotional Context	247
Dynamical Situations	247
<u>Talking</u>	249
Talk as a cause	250
Talk as Participation	251
Answering Children's Questions	253
<u>Games/Toys/ Computers</u>	256
Television	262
<u>Deconstructing Themes</u>	263
<u>Complexity Theory, the Natural Learner and Reading without Structure</u>	264
The Open Environment	268
Child Led and Child Paced Learning	270
Certainty, Complexity and What it Means to Read	274
<u>CHAPTER SEVEN - Beginnings, Endings and the Place of Conclusions</u>	277
<u>The Thesis in and out of Parenthesis</u>	279
<u>The Epistemology of the Conclusion</u>	281
<u>The Question of the Question and the Maze of Chronology</u>	285
<u>On The Origins of Originality</u>	287
<u>Without Conclusion</u>	292
<u>Eventalising Research</u>	293
<u>The Difficulties of Talking</u>	295

<u>Contemplating the Here and the Now</u>	297
<u>What's to be Done?</u>	301
<u>The Essence of Research</u>	309
<u>REFERENCES</u>	311

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about how children learn to read. A great deal of research has been devoted to this subject but there remains one relatively barren area; that which considers what happens if children are not taught to read. In our society of course this is largely a question not open for practical consideration. The “concerted cultivation” (Prins and Toso, 2008, p 565) of literacy is a predominant concern for schools, policy makers and families. Becoming literate is of paramount importance in the modern world; a matter that may not be left to chance but which requires the thoughtful and early intervention of the agents of education. This thesis is about an educationally unusual group of people. Characterising them is not easy; but they are all home educators who have, in one way or another, confronted and questioned the prevailing practices of reading education including whether children are in fact taught to read. These parents say that their children learned to read without being taught. This thesis is about that claim; why it is made and what it means.

In our society school is more than the mental, physical, emotional, social and intellectual environment of childhood; it is a world orientation that encompasses a whole theory of mind (Bruner, 1996); a practical, cultural definition of how human beings work. Given the totality of the school experience, it is not surprising that amongst the population of children who do not go to school and amongst their families there are different ideas in circulation about how human beings work. That is not to say that all home educators agree, nor to say that families where children do go to school might not share some of these views, nor to deny that the long arm of

education extends its influence well beyond the school gate. Only to say, that there are other ways of thinking about education and some of these ways come to light in exploring how home educated children learn to read.

Purpose of Research

This study began as a follow on to previous research: Thomas and Pattison (2007) and Thomas (1998). In 1998 Alan Thomas published the first detailed study of how learning at home under the official title of home education takes place in practice. He found a wide range of approaches from the formal, following a set curriculum and seeking to cover learning material in much the same way as school, to very informal approaches. One of the most interesting and possibly surprising aspects of his study was that it unearthed a seemingly powerful draw felt by home educators towards informal learning. Thomas discovered that “virtually all the parents ... found themselves moving towards less structure and greater informality” (Thomas, 1998, p 53), some came to believe that education without formal input was a real possibility and “just a few put this belief into practice” (Thomas, 1998, p 54). Such a form of education Thomas sees as more than a flexible approach to learning; rather it constitutes a “genuine alternative to structured education of the kind experienced by children in school” (Thomas, 1998, p 53). In further research Alan Thomas and I concentrated on exploring the nature of informal learning in home education (Thomas and Pattison, 2007). Echoing Thomas’ previous work we readily found examples of children learning to read at home without any deliberate or systematic help although the ages at, and ways in which, they did so were subject to tremendous variation.

There have been few studies on how children learn to read without teaching (Clark, 1976; Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999) although there appears to be widespread anecdotal evidence that this is not unusual. A different emphasis is placed on the idea by the received wisdom among certain home educators that children do not need to be taught to read. The purpose of this research is to explore this idea by looking both at the experiences of home educators and at their understandings of their experiences – both the ontology and the epistemology of learning to read at home without being taught. Analysis is based on the exploration of key concepts; the child, reading, what it means to learn and the part parents and others play in this learning.

Starting Points and Lay Out

Home education is a movement which, from small beginnings, is now gathering momentum and support across all five continents (GHEC, 2012). Its growth is an unprecedented phenomenon in the field of education not just in terms of its spread and participation but also in terms of the new practices, philosophies and understandings of education which are occurring under its auspices. I believe these things to be happening now as a result of particular historical factors: cultural, political and social and against the background of a certain amount of unrest with the assumptions of mass schooling, with prevailing concepts of 'the child' and with the role assigned to families and parents in modern Western society. Understanding events in terms of their historical uniqueness is a method championed by Foucault

and which he terms 'eventalization' (Foucault, 2000). Eventalisation provides a way of analysing events whilst avoiding the "temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological constant or an obviousness that imposes itself uniformly on all" (Foucault, 2000, p 76). Events are considered to be singular and unique and eventalisation thus "seeks to breach the self-evidence of historical phenomena" (Olssen, 1999, p 62); analysis is therefore not a search for universal constants and structures but rather a matter of examining the multiple processes that give rise to certain things happening in certain ways and at certain times. This research then, both in its form and content, aims at an awareness of its external relations; its relations to the time and place in which and from which it is formed rather than seeing its meaning to lie solely within itself and separate from its circumstances.

One difficulty of adopting this approach is that any single event is "a polyhedron of intelligibility" (Foucault, 2000, p 77). We cannot surmise its many faceted extent and any attempt at analysis must perforce be selective and remain incomplete.

Furthermore, events themselves are not self-evident but are created through the intervention of the research strategy itself. As a result, "on the level of actualisation the challenge then becomes the choice of distinction, as every eventalisation is and will always remain an experiment" ((Born, Frankel and Thygesen, 2006, p136).

Eventalisation makes of research then not some second order observation but a first order part of life itself; "an invitation to an open ended problematization" (Born, Frankel and Thygesen, 2006, p 138). At this point, I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the idea that research presents a map rather than a tracing of the subject matter under investigation; a means of exploration rather than a presentation

of what is. In this spirit I believe it preferable to view this work not as some kind of summing up nor an attempt to get closer to a piece of reality but as an event itself in an unfolding history.

In this spirit my aim in Chapter One is to lay out some external points of reference for what is to follow. I first discuss some of what I see as the circumstances, the events and the conceptual unrests that have contributed to the rise of home education at this moment in history. I consider the philosophical antecedents of 'autonomous' home education in the works of John Holt and A S Neill and contrast these ideas to the view of education invited by the work of Heidegger on technology. The political power of this view of education and the problems this causes for home educators seeking an alternative philosophy is illustrated by a discussion of the Badman Review of home education which was carried out on behalf of the Labour government in 2009. I also consider how this technological view has been extended from education into 'parenting' and the implications of this for home education. Taking up a different line of influence I then consider the literacy episteme; the place given to literacy in modern life, education and understanding. I consider some of the underlying assumptions about literacy as they are reflected in ideas and theories about how reading should be taught and learned.

Chapter Two extends the ideas of eventalisation by considering the thesis as a meeting place between myself and the others who have contributed to this project. I consider the relationships this creates and the ethical questions to which it gives rise. This discussion of subjectivity continues into further methodological implications

particularly as these pertain to parents' thoughts about reading abilities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of sampling issues and the relevance of categorical information about contributors.

Chapter Three discusses the ideas of knowledge endorsed by the university and the questions which this epistemology considers to be of note: those of validity, reliability and generality. The particular ways in which knowledge has been pursued here are considered by a discussion of data collection and analysis alongside the perpetual issue of why this question at this particular time and why this means of going about investigating it.

Chapter Four begins with a consideration of teaching and learning as a cause and effect argument embedded in the Heideggerian vision of the technological society and then begins the analysis of the research data and discussion by looking at parents' questioning of what teaching is and of the links between teaching and learning.

Chapter Five considers how we come to particular understanding of learning to read by looking at the associated concepts which support such an understanding.

Analysis concentrates on how parents understand the concept of 'the child' and how they understand what it means to read. Particular attention is paid to the use of language and metaphor.

Chapter Six begins with a consideration of the meaning of cause and effect arguments when applied to learning to read and introduces the ideas of complexity theory which are able to substantially change ways of thinking about technological understandings and instrumentality. Complexity theory is discussed as a means of breaking out of the empirical rut of seeking universalities across data and the proceeding analysis aims at a deconstruction of universals rather than a construction of common themes.

The final chapter draws together the twin concerns of this project, reading and researching, and seeks the common ground in both as examples of the objects of 'education'. In doing this I return to the ideas of eventalisation and consider, in both the light of this and of complexity theory the meaning of research itself, particularly as it pertains to the political and ethical elements of its own circumstance.

CHAPTER ONE

The Circumstances, the Events and the Unrests

Home Education; its Growth and the Idea of Autonomous Education

Lloyd-Smith and Tarr reiterate the views of Foucault that “each society has its regimes of truth” that control ways of thinking and give as their illustration that “our culture has evolved in such a way that nurseries and schools are an essential element of childhood” (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, p63). The terms of their example illustrate the frequent way in which home education is ignored, hidden, dismissed or simply not known about in main stream empirical research and similarly fails to feature in theoretical thinking about education; being neither substantially included in the literature on learning nor in that which considers the relationships between families, education and the state. Instead, as Suissa (2006) points out, schooling has become synonymous with education. The extent of this assumption should not be underestimated; for example the University of Birmingham course information for its Education BA (Hons) degree makes erroneous reference to “compulsory schooling” (University of Birmingham, 2013).

In fact the “regime of truth” is not as total as it might appear. Home education is a legal option in most western countries (the exceptions being Germany and Sweden) although legal requirements, including the registration of children who do not attend school, vary from country to country (Wikipedia, 2012). In the UK the extent to which the option of home education is exercised is a matter of speculation as no official statistics are kept. There is no legal compulsion to register a home educated child

with the local authority if that child has never attended school, nor is there a legal compulsion to inform the new local authority if a child not attending school moves residence from one local authority area to another (Nicholson, 2012). Figures are therefore very difficult to collect. From a handful of families in the 1970s (Meighan, 1997) to estimates of between 50,000 and 70,000 children today (Fortune-Wood, 2009), it will now never be possible to chart the rise of home education in the UK. What does seem certain though is that numbers are growing rapidly – perhaps by as much as 15 per cent per annum (Fortune-Wood, 2009).

Not only are numbers unknown but so is the detail of how parents go about educating their children at home. Home educating families are not obliged to follow the national curriculum, take GCSEs or standard tests, make advance plans or keep school hours, terms or timetables. Nor are they restrained by any of the physical or policy restrictions that govern the possibilities for teachers and classes in most mainstream schools. The result is that home educators are free to follow their own ideologies, design their own practices and come to their own conclusions about the possibilities and purposes of the educational enterprise (see for example Dowty, 2000).

Very little is known about how home educators go about their task. From research, personal testimonies, anecdotal evidence, newsletters and submitted evidence in court cases it is clear that home educators span a range of ideas and positions. Despite being lumped together by legislation, the media and even occasionally themselves, there is no such thing as a typical home educator. One strand of thinking within home education however emerges under the broad heading of

autonomous education. For home educators this line of thought is most strongly associated with the work of the American educationalist, John Holt whose philosophical antecedents seem to lie with Dewey and Rousseau. Holt was a disillusioned school teacher whose passion to improve schools finally gave way to the view that schooling had never been, and could never be, a good means of education (Meighan, 2007). Holt became an advocate of home education, resting his views on two central tenets. First that children are natural learners; “children do not need to be made to learn about the world, or shown how. They want to, and they know how” (Holt 1976/2004 p 7 – 8). Second that the link on which so much of the educational enterprise rests, that between teaching and learning, does not exist; “organised education operates on the assumption that children learn only when and only what and only because we teach them. This is not true. It is very close to one hundred percent false” (Holt, 1989, p 160). The sum of these two ideas is that children will learn what they need to know about their world without the need for adult intervention.

Holt’s ideas were taken up in the UK by academics interested in alternative learning models such as Roland Meighan (2012, 2007). Holt himself found common ground with the British founder of Summerhill School, A.S. Neill, whom Holt first met in 1965 (Meighan 2007). According to Meighan both men founded their educational thinking on “the proposition that children can be trusted to learn about their world with far less adult interference than is commonly believed” (Meighan, 2007, p 5). Holt’s continuing influence is apparent in references to his work in research on home educating families and the shaping of their decisions about education (Webb, 1990;

Thomas 1998). Holt's publications continue to be recommended to home educators on web sites such as that of Education Otherwise (www.education-otherwise.net) and to be cited as useful references for home educators in publications such as Griffith(1998), Webb (1999), Dowty(2000).

A S Neill is a further, although perhaps somewhat lesser influence, on home educators (see Thomas, 1998). In 1921 Neill founded Summerhill school in Suffolk, England. His aim was to create a non-authoritarian, free school in which all decisions would be made collectively by both staff and pupils through a democratic vote. Neill's principles lay in promoting social and moral growth; learning he believed would take care of itself if the child had enough freedom to become self-regulating and was able to follow his or her own interests. "The whole idea of Summerhill is release: allowing a child to live out his natural interests" (Neill, 1962, p111); in such circumstances "creators learn what they want to learn in order to have the tools that their originality and genius demand" (Neill 1962 p39). Underpinning Neill's educational philosophy lay his acceptance of human fallibility; no one he believed is good enough to tell another how to live (Perkinson 1984).

With or without direct reference to the thoughts of Neill and Holt it seems that such views often underlie parents' decisions not to teach their children to read or to do so only by invitation. Their decision lays open a precious opportunity. As Holt observes "every time we try to manage the lives of young people, we give up the chance to see how they might have managed their own lives and to learn what we might have

learned from their doing it” (Holt, 1972, p 35). This research is an attempt to take the opportunity to learn from these families and these children.

The Technological View of Education

Philosophers of education have in recent years taken an increasing interest in the work of Heidegger on technology (1977) and its implications for education (Waddington, 2005). Heidegger proposes that prevailing forms of modern thought approach the world from a technological view point looking for instrumentality and understanding through a means – ends causality, “wherever ends are pursued and means are employed, wherever instrumentality reigns, there reigns causality” (Heidegger, 1977, p 6). The widespread nature of this view is exemplified in statements such as “it is largely by technology that contemporary society hangs together” (Franssen, Lokhorst and van de Poel, 2010). The idea that education is a kind of social technology; the application of particular resources towards the achievement of pre-set ends, is one that has been described and discussed by, amongst others, Flint and Peim (2011). Such a system is typified by “an intensified managerial control of curricula, standardised labour processes and the rigorous imposition of overarching accountability mechanisms” (Selwyn, 2011, p 484) further held in place by an audit culture that requires “the constant production of ‘evidence’ that people within schools are doing this ‘efficiently’ and in the ‘correct’ manner” (ibid p 484). Such a view of education is made logical through the association between education and the economy such that the former will drive forward the latter; “if spending on education delivers returns of some sort, in much the same way as

spending on fixed capital then it is sensible to talk of investing in human capital, as the counterpart to investing in fixed capital” (Stevens and Weale, 2003). The best technology of education will realise the greatest economic returns and the way of achieving the best education is through the most efficient technology. The spirit is one of maximising and improving and it is a commonplace to find modern schooling both explicitly and implicitly expressed as a technology in such terms.

Understanding the nature of technology however must go further than this; what technology does, rather than what it is, reveals what its essence might be said to be. So Heidegger argues, “we must ask: What is the instrumental itself? Within what do such things as means and ends belong?” (Heidegger, 1977, p6). Using the example of the technology of the craftsman, Heidegger considers the answer to these questions to be found by viewing technology as a way of ‘bringing forth’. Bringing “out of concealment forth into unconcealment” (ibid, p11) is illustrated by the way that a craftsman brings forth or reveals the object of his making from the material with which he began. In this relationship lies Heidegger’s concept of Dasein; that object and subject are not separate distinctions but are formed by one another.

The skill and sympathy of the craftsman however is not echoed in Heidegger’s stance toward modern technology where “the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging” which “sets upon” its resources (ibid, p14). Revealing now takes place in the recognition of a standing reserve; the resources that can be mobilised to support a given technology. Whatever is perceived as standing reserve “assumes the rank of an inclusive rubric ... whatever stands by in the sense of

standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object” (ibid, p17). The objects of the standing reserve have lost their own character and become mere adjuncts to the technology they serve.

The relationship of humans to technology Heidegger calls Ge-stell or enframing. Swept along as part of the standing reserve into the endless links of technology that dominate our lives, enframing restricts our view of the essence of technology. “As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but does so, rather exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve” (ibid, p26/27) However, it is possible to re-focus our gaze from the instruments of technology to the essence of the technology and in doing so the power of enframing loses its grip over us. Choice rather than inevitability opens up to us and we become free to choose our fate (at least technologically) for we are then “already sojourning within the open space of destining” (ibid, p25).

As far as education is concerned, the technological view enframes our thinking about, and our practice of, education and this eframing become the definition of education. Standing reserve exists in the ‘educational resources’ that fill the designated educational spaces of the modern world: schools, universities, libraries, museums, particular texts, particular artefacts. Similarly the human resources of education: teachers, policy makers, researchers, parents are part of the standing reserve. Even the pupils and students themselves who occupy a blurred place

between raw material and resource are objects within the enframing of education as a technology. Without the standing reserve there is no education and any attempt to operate outside this enframing becomes open to the charge that no education is actually taking place at all; a charge, as will be discussed later, with which many home educators are all too familiar.

According to Heidegger, technology is a human activity that harnesses a means as a way of obtaining an end. In education this end might be expressed as a fixed achievement which indicates success; five GCSEs perhaps or a university degree. However such an endpoint is at odds with Neill's dismissal of the learning of traditional school subjects as a desirable educational outcome. Instead he argues that the thing which really matters is "life's natural fulfilment ... man's inner happiness." (Neill, 1962, p37). "My own criterion of success", he argues is "*the ability to work joyfully and to live positively*" (ibid, p41, italics in original). Neill's unconventional view of the ends of education poses a fundamental difficulty in treating his philosophy as a technology. The ends of state schooling are not necessarily the same as the ends of education; in treating them as if they are an important question is being foreclosed. Heidegger's understanding of technology can only be applied where pre-decided ends are in place. Where the ends of education can be considered in dispute, so must the technology which realises these ends similarly be in dispute. To talk of 'the' technology of education becomes an oversimplification.

As an educational end Neill's criterion of success presents some difficulties in measurability. A technology must have an end and that end must be certain and definable. The five GCSE criterion is a single defined achievement measured at the end of schooling; the same cannot be said of Neill's criterion of joy and positivity that may be more or less apparent through the years of education until the end of life. When and how would it be appropriate to make an assessment of Neill's criterion of an on-going, lifelong attitude?

Whilst some bizarre index for joy might conceivably be drawn up, Neill uses the word "ability" rather than the actual realisation of joyful work and a positive life. Thus even if these things eluded an individual he or she might yet possess the ability to achieve them if other detrimental circumstances were not in their way. How can we determine this ability apart from through successful demonstration? Neill goes on to document the lives of some ex-Summerhill pupils but no achievement or lack of it could actually show that his end has in fact been met; not least because the subjectivity of any such judgement would have to involve the individual to whom it was being applied.

Holt is even more circumspect in his consideration of whether education should have designated outcomes and if so what they might be. At the beginning of "Instead of Education", Holt dismisses the conventional definition of education as "something that some people do to others for their own good, moulding and shaping them, and trying to make them learn what they ought to know" (Holt 1976/2004 p77). Holt himself eschews any specific educational outcomes. Instead he turns from education

to learning, for which he sets his own definition; “Learning, to me, means making more sense of the world around us, and being able to do more things in it.” (letter from John Holt, June 1984 quoted in Meighan, 2007, p 122). Indeed if, as Holt argues, learning is a natural human activity which goes on throughout life then it cannot have ‘outcomes’, just as life itself cannot have ‘outcomes’. In denying that education is an enterprise that can be characterised by its ends Holt is not just questioning the technological enframement of education but is acting to dismantle the idea of education as a technology completely. If education has no recognisable ‘ends’ then it has failed to conform to the Heideggerian definition of technology. The question has turned from what education is for, to what education is.

Heidegger argues that technology is a way of revealing, of bringing forth into consciousness that which was previously hidden. In education what is to be brought forth is the complete educated person who somehow existed potentially in the uneducated child; a thought expressed by Biesta who, paralleling Holt’s definition of conventional education, argues that education is “always an intervention into someone’s life – an intervention motivated by the idea that it will make this life somehow better; more complete, more rounded, more perfect – and maybe even more human” (Biesta, 2006 p2). Given that education is something that is most forcefully applied to children the implication is that the young, uneducated child is somehow less complete, less human than the educated adult. In Heidegger’s terms the potential of the child will be revealed through the technology of education.

But this acceptance of what will be revealed does not yet probe the essence of education; the thing that Heidegger wants us most to examine. In what ways are the terms of the technology of education constructed, “Within what do such things as means and ends belong?” (Heidegger, 1977, p6). Heidegger’s own examples concentrate on material objects and physical forces; on dams and rivers and silver and vessels. Education, however, deals with people who must first be recast as some kind of raw material; the technology of education is concerned with the transformation of ‘the child’. This conception of the child is a critical element in the enframing of the technology of education. Yet as Holt argues,

“We constantly ask ourselves, in anxiety and pain, “What is best for the children, what is right for the children, what should we do for the children?” The question is an effect as well as a cause of modern childhood. Until the institution was invented, it would hardly have occurred to anybody to ask the question or, if they had, to suppose that what was good for children was any different from what was good for everyone else.”
(Holt, 1974, p32)

It seems that we are quickly moving into a world of slippery concepts that hinge on each other and can only be understood in terms of each other. If childhood is merely a concept that can be conjured up and dismissed at convenience then where is the reality of the less complete, less rounded, less human person waiting to be drawn out through the technology of education? What can education actually reveal if this person, ‘the child’, does not exist in any substantive way? Instead ‘the child’ is without an ontological existence but is rather a concept that exists critically to, in turn, hold the concept of education in place. By questioning the concept of ‘childhood’ Holt is simultaneously questioning the technology that purports to be acting to reveal the “more human” (Biesta, 2006, p2) being lurking within the uneducated child. In

Heidegger's terms, this very technology is actually itself a way of concealing the many assumptions that underpin its own conception. Holt's confrontation of 'childhood' as a meaningful category, confronts in turn the whole idea of education as a technology.

The other critical element in Heidegger's philosophy which Holt's arguments bring into relief is that of the standing reserve. Heidegger talks about how the human standing reserve becomes depersonalised; only to be understood in terms of the technology that it serves. This is a conception which finds resonance in Holt's description of life in the classroom. Although the students are individuals and therefore all different from one another, these differences do not count;

“they all have the same things to do, and they are all expected to do them in the same way. Like factory workers on the assembly line, or soldiers in the army, they are interchangeable – and quite often expendable”
(Holt, 1972, p11).

Simply seeing the individuality in the standing reserve is a way of challenging the enframement of technology. As Holt champions home education he is attacking this objectification of the standing reserve; parents and children (the standing reserve of home education) are defined by their human relationship to one another; not their functional one. In the technology of education a child is a repository for exam results, “that seek to determine the Being of the student in their own terms” (Peim and Flint, 2009, p353). At home a child is a person, with all the complexity which that entails. In an education that highlights individuality rather than conformity to the mass programme, it is much harder to objectify either children or parents in the ways that

characterise Heidegger's standing reserve as objects that stand over us. If home education is based on human relationships which promote ideas of individuality, then to view it as a technology involving the objectification of the standing reserve becomes contrary to this overall perception.

Heidegger argues that where people act as standing reserve they become subsumed into the technologies which in fact hold sway over them, rather than the other way around. The only way to avoid this is to question the enframing of the given technology as a whole. However he does not discuss what the relationship might be between the different groups of the standing reserve nor their relationship to the ends of the technology in which they are involved. In fact he does not discuss how the internal dynamics of a technology might affect the nature of that technology in its entirety. Heidegger expresses his distaste for the use of the Rhine as the power source for a hydroelectric plant. In such a use the dignity of the Rhine has been undermined, it has been objectified into what it can produce. However, he does not consider the use to which the electricity generated through the power of the Rhine might be put. Perhaps it supplies a hospital that saves the lives of the sick. Perhaps the uses to which the Rhine's resources are put increase rather than diminish the dignity of the river; so that it is not only beautiful but also a healing source. Heidegger seems to offer two alternatives: to be blindly in the thrall of technology or to be resisting its enframing power. He sees being part of the standing reserve as only and always a reduction that involves loss of standing and intrinsic dignity.

“Therefore, in a sense, whatever is reduced to standing-reserve is no longer an *object* because it has been completely subsumed under the material and

conceptual reign of the *subject*. A kind of *objectlessness* results – the only significance these objects have is that they are the property of the subject.” (Waddington, 2005, p 574 italics original)

However, the relationship between a human standing reserve and the technology it serves is not merely a functional one. To serve a technology is not necessarily to be blindly in its thrall, to set aside all dignity or all thought and feeling. Parents who pursue autonomous home education are questioning the dominant technological enframement of mainstream education. But this does not mean that they are not willing and ready to act as standing reserve in different kinds of ways within different views of education. In questioning the role of standing reserve, parents are questioning the technology as a whole but in actively choosing to be a willing contributor to a situation which they consider to be ‘right’, parents are retaining the power of their own subjectivity. They are not ‘reduced’ to a standing reserve, but exalted to one. This is an idea perhaps expressed by Peim and Flint as, “‘standing reserves’ are beings that logically embody more possibilities than is evident in the subjects and objects of reason” (Peim and Flint, 2009, p356).

Paradoxically the role of the standing reserve, as Holt urges it, is that parents stand back and do not intervene but allow children to explore the world for themselves. If the standing reserve does nothing, is it still a standing reserve? In the interventionist world of education, doing nothing is the most radical and dangerous act of all; a powerful, deliberate act that has to be sought out and actively pursued. Such a standing reserve, cannot help but be politicised through its contrast to the dominant technology around it. In such a state of self-awareness, it seems unlikely that this

critical resource could become simply subsumed as an objectified element of the technology which it sustains.

Holt's final argument suggests doing away with the term 'education' completely. This is perhaps the ultimate act of dismantling the technology of education as we know it. We must be able to name and identify technology in order to make the means – ends connections that define it. If things merely happen and we do not have ways of explaining why then we have lost instrumentality. Holt's explanation of learning is not this haphazard. Learning he believes is 'natural' and therefore beyond the influence of technology, beyond human control. In Heidegger's theory of technology, man is the ultimate controlling force. In Holt's theory man is simply an example of 'the natural' whose naturalness stands instead of technology.

Thus in some important ways, Holt's thoughts on home education and learning do not fit the understanding of technology in the ways that mass schooling have been seen to fit it. These points of dissension offer the chance to question the technology of education and invite an exploration of different ways to think about education.

The Badman Review of Home Education 2009

Shortly after this research began in 2008 an example of the technological view of education and its enframing came uncomfortably close to home education in the UK.

In the wake of the Khyra Ishaq¹ case Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, commissioned a review of elective home education in England which was submitted in June 2009 by Graham Badman, a former director of children's services for Kent County Council. The review was hotly contested by home educators and a handful of parliamentary supporters and became the subject of a select committee enquiry. During this enquiry extreme reservations were expressed over both the conduct and the conclusions of the review. Despite this, Badman's recommendations were accepted in their entirety by the Children's Minister, Delyth Morgan. They only failed to become law as a result of timing. The calling of the general election of 2010 meant that the Children, Schools and Families Bill 2009, to which the clause on home education was attached, became subject to the wash up procedure prior to the dissolving of parliament. As part of the brokering with the Opposition to pass the bill quickly during this period, the clause on home education was dropped.

The Badman Review and its impending consequences politicised and mobilised the home education community in very new ways. Amongst other things, the Badman Review created a closing of ranks amongst home educators; many of whom were genuinely fearful of how they would be affected by the planned changes to the law. As a researcher the need to tread very carefully and to make clear to potential participants that this research embraced their views, valued their understandings and would not support their opposition became very important. The climate in which the

¹ Seven year old Khyra Ishaq starved to death in her mother and her mother's partner's care at their home in Birmingham in 2008. Six months before her death she had been withdrawn from school to be home educated. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-10770907>

data was collected was a tense one and at the same time the results of the research took on a political dimension that was not envisaged at the outset.

It must be noted that not all contributions to this research came from the UK; some were received from USA, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia. In these countries the Badman Review and the timing of the research were not of any additional relevance, yet much that was contained in the Badman Review went beyond the direct action recommended to the UK government and into the discourse and views that prevail in other modern, Western societies.

The Cultural / Political Climate and the Prevailing View of 'The Child'

The Badman review (2009a) brought into relief the assumed self-evidence of the technological enframement of education as well as focusing more explicitly on the tensions between the prevailing roles of State and families when it comes to the raising and education of children. These are both areas in which the very existence of home education begs important and difficult questions.

Setting out his proposals for the BBC News Channel Mr Badman summed up:

“They [parents wishing to home educate] will be judged on their plans. These statements should contain some milestones for children to achieve, ... For example by the age of eight, I think they should be autonomous learners, able to read.

...

An education should be broad and balanced and enable children to make choices.”

(Badman 2009b)

Badman sees no need here to justify why education should be planned, or why its goal should be to enable children to make choices, why milestones are appropriate or what being able to read means. These ideas are presumed to be reasonable givens within the dominant enframing of education and require no further explanation. It is unsurprising that Badman approached home education in these terms; nor that he is instantly suspicious of anything that does not fit them. His sole piece of 'evidence' on the matter of autonomous education is a quote from a court case:

“In our judgement ‘education’ demands at least an element of supervision; merely to allow a child to follow its own devices in the hope that it will acquire knowledge by imitation, experiment or experience in its own way and in its own good time is neither systematic nor instructive ... such a course would not be education but, at best, childminding”
(Harrison and Harrison vs Stevenson quoted by Badman, 2009a, p44).

The key words of 'systematic' and 'instructive' reflect not just Badman's own ideas given in the previous quote above, but also the whole dominant view of education as technology. It may or may not be telling that 'the child' is referred to as 'it', throughout this passage.

Recommendation 2 of the Review calls for a review of the terms 'suitable' and 'efficient' as they are legally applied to education and argues that:

“Such a review should take account of the five Every Child Matters outcomes determined by the 2004 Children Act, should not be overly prescriptive but be sufficiently defined to secure a broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated curriculum that would allow children and young people educated at home to have sufficient information to enable them to expand their talents and make choices about likely careers.”
(Badman 2009a p39)

This quote encapsulates within it the notion of childhood as a time of development and preparation, through the expansion of talents, for the careers and adult life that lie ahead. It also expresses the view that education provides the opportunity to shape and work on the individual to produce an end product and that therefore educational legislation is about social management as well as individual goals; that children can be steered towards the 'choice' of certain ends. Badman's perspective adheres to the view that certain inputs, illustrated by his stress on the form which the educational curriculum should take, are a kind of technology which can be applied in order to achieve those pre-decided ends. His words have an historical echo, paraphrasing as they do the UK government's concerns with Summerhill School and their demands in that case for "*timetabled lessons, prescribed study programmes, systematic assessment and attainment 'in line with national expectations'.*"

(complaints 4 and 6 by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in his Notice of Complaint to Summerhill School in 1999 quoted by Brown, 2002, p97, italics original).

A common interpretation of home education is that of 'school at home' and indeed Badman's attempt to extend school into the homes of home educators is a logical step from inside the view of schooling as the applied technology of education. As Brown puts it, "it is as though these requirements describe the necessary conditions for effective learning" (Brown, 2002, p 97). The Badman Review adheres to and extends a "normative grid" (Flint and Peim, 2011, p70) whereby the performance of the child can be judged against pre-set plans and targets which measure not only the normality of the child but also and simultaneously the efficacy of the education he or

she is said to be receiving. The essence of the technology of education lies in its instrumentality. The link between the child and his or her achievements in pre decided areas on the one hand and the enframed view of the education being provided for them on the other, is immutable. Causality runs from the educational provision to the level of the child's achievement through the measuring stick of subject specific age related norms. There is no way of understanding the one without reference to the other.

As part of, but also in addition to, applying the technology of education, the Badman review postulates a particular but perhaps this time rather more controversial view of 'the child'. The "automatic correlation between children and education that our world constantly proposes" (Flint and Peim, 2011, p76) lies at the centre of the Badman review alongside the view of 'the child' as a subject; dependent and incompetent and in need of protection "from and within the adult world" (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, p 65). These two concerns: the child in need of education and the child in need of protection come together as an obligation that is not primarily individual but social; a responsibility to society to ensure the provision of these things. This is particularly seen in Badman's recommendations that the state, through Local Authorities, should have the automatic right to question children without their parents present, the automatic right to enter family homes and the capability to deny individual families the right to home educate (Badman 2009a, Recommendations 7, p 40 and 24, p 45). Thus Badman positions parents and families as part of the adult world from which children, potentially at least, require protection. What Wittgenstein (as discussed by Maruyama 1998) describes as the 'otherness' of the child is clear; children are a

section of the population who demand special handling. Almost as powerful however is the position assigned to parents (or at least home educating parents) who in the terms of the Badman review are also 'other' and are to be fundamentally mistrusted in their task as parents, therefore requiring to be monitored within the context of their own homes and families.

Extending the Technology - Families and Parents in Modern Western Society

Smedts (2009) argues that technological ways of viewing and understanding the world in general have crept into homes and families, particularly in the form of "parenting" (Couchman 1983 cited by Smedts 2009). Being a parent has become a verb - "parenting". To simply be a parent is virtually meaningless; it is what one does as a parent that is paramount. Parents are often viewed and treated by the political system and by child care professionals as people who do or should do, certain things in order to achieve certain ends. Sure Start centres and parenting classes for instance have been implemented as 'outcome driven' ways of achieving measurable, more effective parenting skills leading to better early years education results (Department of Education 2003). Being a parent, as being a teacher, has become a matter of applying the right technology, of doing the right things. Actions and behaviour that do not adhere to this normative designation of correctness are incompetent and call for intervention. In short good parents are the appliers of the approved technology (Smedts 2009).

Heidegger (1977) argues that there is nothing inevitable about the employment of technology; it presents not a fate but a possibility. If we see technology as a given instrument then we are caught in its power; in our own desire to master it. If we start to ask questions however about how the instrumental has come to represent the kind of causality which it does, then we are starting to get at the essence of the technology and at the possibilities that lie outside it as well as those that lie within it. Smedts (2009) argues that the boundaries set by enframing, whilst powerful are not inviolable. At the edges of any enframing lies a space in which it is possible to pause and reflect on other ways. Whilst the totality of educational enframing may appear impregnable in the general political sense in which it is used by Badman, in the individual sense in which it impacts on a family, a child, a particular life there is still sufficient space to question its meaning and relevance.

Smedts (2009), using the example of approaches to IT in both the classroom and at home, argues that whilst a powerful and prevailing view presents education and 'parenting' as the application of the right technology, parents can and do question what is considered 'normal' and 'valuable' for children. What allows this questioning is the personal parent – child relationship; "indeed, the claim a child makes on her parents, the sentiments of care she awakens (Noddings 2003), makes parents the ideal inquirers into these values, ideas and conventions" (Smedts, 2009, p 78). Or as Suissa (2006, p 75) puts it, being a parent involves "opening oneself up to a creative response to the real presence of a particular baby rather than following rules about 'babies' in general". Whilst it may be much easier for parents to do as the experts say and not to make their own decisions, Smedts argues that sooner or later parents

“are confronted with the limits of the system and feel invited by, feel the claim on them made by, their child and the child’s needs” (Smedts, 2009, p86). In other words, parents find a limit to the prevailing view that applying the right technology will solve both their own and their children’s wants. The desire to get things right for their child means that parents rather than being simply part of the standing reserve of education are in fact “people who are capable of independent practical judgement” (Smedts, 2009, p78).

Suissa (2006) tackles the problem from a different angle: if parenting refers to the performance of certain tasks then anyone who performs those tasks may be seen as a parent but this is clearly not the case in the many examples in which children are cared for in either the short or long term by people who are not their parents. She reaches the same conclusion as Smedts; being a parent cannot be reduced to a technology. Rather than a parent as someone who does, she concentrates on uncovering the being part of parenthood; “parents as people” (Suissa, 2006, p72) who “are often confused and constantly challenged by the experience of being a parent; developing, refining and questioning their ideals and values; and struggling to find a balance between their selves and their children, their love and their anxieties, their ideals and their fears. Crucially, they are engaged in a process not just of doing—‘parenting’, in other words—but of being” (Suissa, 2006, p73). At this point of being parents cease to be ‘standing reserve’. They are in that form of passivity that places them outside Heidegger’s enframing and opens them “expressly to the *essence* of technology” (Heidegger, 1977, p 26 italics original).

This state of simply 'being' with questions, emotions, doubts and multiple considerations about themselves and about their children may well render impossible the pursuance of the clear cut aims that Heideggerian technology postulates. Whilst schools, educational policy and the parenting gurus may be decisive about what they expect from parents, for parents themselves delivering this, being a good parent, may involve conflict and contradiction, in which at least sometimes, other considerations may win out. Not the least of these contradictions may be that having aims in the sense of nameable, recognisable goals is not amenable to close emotional and personal relationships (Standish, 1999, p41). To construct such relationships in terms of aims, would be to suffocate and distort them and if home education has as its heart the parent/child relationship then the imposition of educational aims onto this relationship is likely to be problematic. Yet the hegemony of the technological view of education leaves a dilemma for many families beginning home education.

Parental acceptance of the child as an individual has to be reconciled with the need to position that child within the normative grid, by achieving, and if necessary, forcing, a particular kind of educational performance; a reconciliation which in the following example led, albeit after a painful period of transition, to a new understanding of education. The son, aged 11, was withdrawn from school after having been bullied, although he had always failed to fit into the school environment in a way satisfactory to his teachers. His mother gave up her job to devote herself to his education at home but found herself in the throes of very profound struggle about how to reconcile her view of education with her relationship with her son.

“I borrowed school books to see what children his age were doing. I made sure I understood everything before getting him to do it. Then I’d get fed up with the battle and say “Go your own way” and he would for two weeks and then I’d get guilty again, feeling I was letting him down if I let him get away with doing too little work. It was so difficult when he wouldn’t do anything. After battling all day I didn’t want him as a son.”

(Home educating mother in Thomas, 1998, p62)

The conflict is only resolved when the mother drops the educational aims she has sincerely attempted to adhere to:

“But the more I did the more I asked: What’s the point of this? Why write things down just to have them on a piece of paper? ... I now feel that what I did to try and force him was wrong. Now I’d say – leave the child alone for a year. Don’t try and cultivate interests. ... It’s me who’s imposed the pressure. I found it very hard to accept that what we do now is the best way. It’s taken me four years to get here.”

(Home educating mother in Thomas, 1998, p 63)

The technology of education sees parents as part of the standing reserve of educational technology; resources that can be mobilised in, for instance, school – home partnerships. In the case of home education Badman sees parents as the implementers of the technology of schooling. But for parents who choose to home educate it may be at just this point, the point where they are assumed to be part of the standing reserve that supports and enforces the technology of schooling, where they find themselves at the borders of enframing, questioning their assumed roles and sometimes also the technological essence of the whole enterprise. The precipitation to this point of doubt may well be for many the difference between ‘the child’ as envisaged by policy makers like Badman and the child in front of them; their child.

The Literacy Episteme – its Power and Influence

I turn now to a different aspect of my question – the matter of literacy and how our understanding of it impacts on ideas about learning to read.

We live at a time when literacy is undeniably important; at least the importance with which we endow it is undeniable. Illiteracy stands alongside poverty, disease and malnutrition as a serious condition that threatens life's chances (Olson, Torrance and Hildyard 1985). Literacy is linked, on a personal level with intelligence (Long 2009), socio-economic potential, personal liberty (National Literacy Trust 2012), social class (Long 2009); and on a national or social level with development, political engagement, economic growth, gender equality (UNESCO 2006), women's rights and agency (Blunden 2004). The Dakar EFA (Education for All) literacy challenge as espoused by UNESCO is no less than to enhance "the literacy skills and practices of all individuals worldwide" (UNESCO, 2006, p 161). They do not say why, as if such an aim needs no justification but must be universally accepted as a good thing. Once again these associations seem to embody a technological claim; literacy is a form of instrumentality, a means of achieving other things.

Literacy is important in ways which reach far beyond an educational subject matter or even an economic good. Rather as Brockmeier and Olson (2009) argue it has become an episteme – a way of perception through which we reach and understand other things. For Brockmeier and Olson "the cultural discourse of literacy" can be understood as "an historical a priori" (2009 p7); it is the frame in which and from

which we organise and understand experience. Despite the fact that we live in a complex world of symbols and signs, of inferences and extrapolations that we must work with and through, literacy is not just another example of a general human function. Instead it has become the metaphor through which we understand our own thinking. “We read pictures, cities, landscapes and decipher texts of cultures, lives, and minds” (Brockmeier and Olson 2009, p 4). Our ability to do this *is* literacy and this in turn has become synonymous with cultural competence so that thinking, literacy and proficiency often appear as one and the same.

What is Literacy?

The literacy episteme is described by Brockmeier and Olson as being the “overarching cultural discourse” (Brockmeier and Olson 2009 p5) which frames our understanding of what literacy is and through which the activities and issues that we know as ‘literacy’ become meaningful things; matters that can be seen as ontological realities; bounded, knowable and open to manipulation.

“Only within the literacy episteme can the social, intellectual, and cultural implications of writing become epistemic objects: “things” that appear as intelligible objects of theory and investigation and whose investigation is considered to be fulfilling societal demands and cultural interests.” (Brockmeier and Olson, 2009, p 5).

Thus the learning of literacy, the practices of literacy, research into literacy all take on meaning and shape only through the literacy episteme. Yet even within the framework of the literacy episteme an ambiguity lies over the meaning of literacy. Its primary definition is the ability of an individual or society to read and write to some

basic level. Its secondary definition is an acquaintance with certain types and works of literature. Olson and Torrance (2009) after putting forward this two part definition go on to argue that an educational connection has been made between these two such that basic literacy skills may also serve as “an introduction to important social or communicative practices, such as managing information for various intellectual purposes or entertaining and expressing oneself” (Olson and Torrance 2009 p xiv). Holthoon (2009) goes even further than this arguing that the secondary definition of literacy is “the knowledge that a person can acquire using this ability [to read and write]” (Holthoon 2009 p432). It seems that the two meanings of literacy provoke the desire to make a connection through instrumentality. In the definitions from these authors the first idea of literacy consists of basic skills that are seen as foundational for the perceived purposes of carrying out the second meaning of literacy; the gathering and transmitting of information. It is the kind of connection that lies behind the instruction of literacy in schools – a technological view that one thing will enable or lead to another. However, some of the research evidence to be presented here suggests that this connection may be looser and less linear than Olson and Torrance suggest and that the connections between the two meanings of literacy are both more and less than that one comes first and enables the other.

A second important strand of answering what literacy is revolves around the relationships between the things which seem to define it – thinking, speaking, reading and writing. From Aristotle onwards the connections drawn between these things have run the links of representation from thinking through speaking to the written form; a line of connection which has “led to a downgrading of writing, since, it has

been thought, written words are symbols of the sound emitted by the voice, which are in turn symbols of the 'affections of the soul'" (Pattison, 2011, p 180). The result is a view expressed by Daniels (2009, p 36) that "since writing represents language, it must represent the sounds of speech". Derrida designates this assumption as the "ethnocentrism of the Western view of language" (Pattison, 2011, p 180); an argument echoed by Harris (2009) who regards neither the visible speech argument nor the substitution theory of writing representing language as adequate forms of understanding. Instead he argues they have become "'the writing myth' of the Western tradition" (Harris, 2009, p47) and puts forward the alternative view that "speech and writing are both completely independent, having quite different semiological foundations" (Harris, 2009, p46).

Derrida (1978) has questioned the metaphysical tradition which subordinates writing to speech, arguing that linguistics and philosophy have supported this view by advancing the idea that "words can communicate thoughts or meanings without any direct link to the material sign, their inscription" (Brockmeier and Olson, 2009, p 14). In the visible speech theory of writing it is the material sign, the written sequence of letters, which is secondary to the immaterial spoken word. This reflects a metaphysical position of logocentrism in which the mind is privileged over the body and which binds ideas about reading and writing to philosophical and religious motives covered over and obscured now by layers of time and culture and yet still influencing the way we think about how children learn to read.

For Derrida, passing over the sign as if it alone can provide a transparent link between the information of the senses and the working of the mind will not do:

“the concept of the sign cannot in itself surpass this opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history.”
(Derrida, 1978, p355)

Derrida call this phonocentrism or phonologism and argues that in treating the written word as a symbolic version of the spoken one in which the sign itself is of little consequence, we are calling into question the deep seated metaphysical opposition of nature and culture as he discusses through the work of Levi-Strauss. According to Derrida, universality is the criteria of the natural,

“Let us suppose then that everything universal in man relates to the natural order, and is characterized by spontaneity, and that everything subject to a norm is cultural and is both relative and particular.”
(Derrida, 1978, p358)

This is a position taken up by Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) who, in their study of early reading children, argue that reading needs to be taught because it is a “manufactured system” (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p7). They acknowledge the cultural imperative to learn to read in a literate society but argue that given a different geographical or temporal location this need not be the case. This stands in contrast to the “genetic imperative for developing language” (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p7), presumably based on the idea that language is common to all human societies. Their argument therefore too demonstrates the metaphysical separation between the natural and the cultural. The cultural is manufactured, the natural is instinctive; the

natural is common to all societies, the cultural is not and, according to them, the cultural has to be taught, but the natural does not. However, if the written word is simply the spoken word in visual form, “a transparent symbol of the immaterial word” (Brockmeier and Olson, 2009, p 15), then it too must be considered as part of the universal system of language employed by all human society. Whilst not all societies might have literacies which can be likened to Western reading and writing, some social anthropologists (eg Schneider cited in Seymour-Smith, 1986) argue that culture can be studied as a whole system of meaning and symbols or that culture is a system for the generation and transmission of information (Bateson cited in Seymour-Smith, 1986). Both arguments imply that symbols and representation are common to all cultures; indeed spoken language is precisely such a representative system. Such arguments make the designation of a culture as non-literate or pre-literate a matter of definition – it already being accepted that representational forms of communication will be practiced. The written word is simply a version (albeit perhaps a sophisticated one) of the symbol and representation found in all human society.

Here we have what Levi-Strauss termed a ‘scandal’ when discussing the incest prohibition. Language as a system of representation is universal to human society and therefore natural; if reading and writing are simply different manifestations of this same system of representation then they too must be natural although our entire discourse and practice treats them as cultural. Only by returning to Harris’s argument that writing and speech are two separate systems with different

foundations can we escape the paradox inherent in the writing is visible speech argument.

The designations of natural and cultural are tempting ones in education where education can be seen as the bridge that connects these twin pulls of the human condition, although as Stainthorp and Hughes' argument illustrates such a division is hard to maintain. The clear cut opposition postulated between the natural and the cultural denies the connections and indeed the blurring of these apparent binaries; not least because any human behaviour can be argued into the opposite camp. Ultimately what is designated as natural and what as cultural about human beings is a cultural matter dependent not on the attributes of either culture or nature but on the historical and political arena in which the argument is deployed. This discussion will be returned to later on when considering the views, strongly expressed by contributors to this research, that children are 'natural' learners.

As far as literacy is concerned however, the implications of choosing between the visible speech and the symbolic representation points of view are not merely philosophical or theoretical. The argument is of central importance in the question of how we go about teaching children to read and indeed whether it is necessary to teach children to read at all. The argument that writing is visible speech lays the theoretical base for the teaching of phonics; it also however raises the question of why do we need to teach a 'natural' human behaviour at all. The view that writing is a separate system of communication employing forms of representation with a more

complex relationship to thought begs ways of learning to read that are not based on speech.

Institutionalising Literacy

The intellectual construction of literacy is however, only half the story. The other half is, as Brockmeier and Olson express it, that “structures of communication are always also material realities, shaped by manifest social, economic, political, and military interests” (Brockmeier and Olson, 2009, p15). Such interests have led to the institutionalisation of literacy learning, as part of the effort to ensure “common destinies” (Chartier, 2009, p464) whether of religious, political or social natures. At the end of the twentieth century Chartier sees the “sense and value of compulsory education as [deriving] chiefly from the economic and practical uses of literacy” (Chartier, 2009, p464).

Two different but related issues stand out in the literature on literacy as being particularly important elements in the institutionalisation of literacy. The first of these is the need to measure literacy and learners’ achievement of, and progress in, literacy and the second is the bedrock assumption that how children are taught to read is how they will learn. Thus there is a vast debate, ‘the reading wars’, on the most efficient, effective and best ways to go about teaching literacy in school. Deciding on the relative merits of any approach completes the circuit back to the need for measurement. These two concerns, measurement and teaching, stand at

the forefront of educational policy making and as highly influential elements in defining what is meant by literacy. Schooling has thereby become implanted in the literacy episteme.

Measuring literacy

Measuring literacy is an essential element of education. What we can measure is what we can aim for and thus literacy has become a tautological yard stick that measures itself, literacy *is* achieving the average mark on the age appropriate test. There is no test for literacy; the test is literacy. Despite the mind muddling contradiction inherent in the practice, this approach is rendered unproblematic, I think through its roots in the technological view of education in which test scores are the measured outcome of measured inputs and those test scores are reified into 'literacy', or its lack.

An example of the perceived importance of literacy measurement is given by The World Education Forum which, in April 2000, brought together in Dakar, Senegal 1,100 participants from 164 countries in order to commit to the achievement of education for all (EFA) through the attainment of six specific educational goals. These included,

“improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence for all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all especially in literacy ...”
(The Dakar Framework for Action 2000 p8).

Measuring literacy is a bedrock principle of this drive;

“To address these formidable challenges, national and international policy-makers must have state-of-the-art knowledge of where literacy has been more or less achieved, how it has been (and could be better) measured and monitored and why certain groups have successfully acquired strong literacy competency while others have not.”
(UNESCO Education for all Global Monitoring Report 2006, on line, no page numbers).

There are immense difficulties in doing this across cultural, economic and social divides, as the report goes on to outline, but these difficulties must be faced because without measurement the project becomes virtually meaningless. Measurement is necessary to show that progress is being made. This display of progress again depends on the worthiness of comparison. Measurement must enable meaningful comparison to be made between communities, countries, schools and individuals, past and present. And this means that the form of measurement must be standardised. One possible way of achieving this is through the education system itself; “reading and writing skills are measured in reference to school practices that are being universalised as enrolment ratios increase worldwide” Chartier (2009, p 452). Thus the whole official literacy enterprise is caught up in the need to measure and compare and this, more often than not, begins with, and may well be almost totally tied into, what happens in schools.

Teaching Literacy

As with the issue of measurement, what literacy is, and the teaching of literacy have become inextricably intertwined; each shaping our understanding of the other. The

position now is that literacy can barely be discussed away from how it is taught any more than it can be discussed away from how it is tested.

For literacy to be taught an 'approach' is essential; a view of literacy that links the actions of a teacher on the one hand and the priority of measurable outcomes on the other. Because measurement needs to be standardised and because literacy learning is so tightly tied to literacy teaching in schools it follows that teaching also needs to be, as far as possible, standardised. Thus when Brockmeier and Olson write that "it is widely assumed, perhaps optimistically by educators that literacy skills are generalisable" (Brockmeier and Olson, 2009, p 18) this may not be so much an assumption as the necessary implementation of an institutional requirement.

Schooling needs definable, testable skills achievable through generalised, standardised input that can be seen to be leading to a generalisable, definable, testable brand of literacy. The idea of reading as a standardised skill which can be learned in a general sense and then applied to the particular is an essential element of the institutionalisation of literacy. Such an approach can be seen in reading programmes and schemes which aim to 'build skills' through 'stages' prior to the introduction of 'real' reading material such as books (Bald, 2007). Without such an approach, for instance if reading instruction is based on locally relevant material or on children's own interests, it is difficult to see how it could be standardised and how without standardisation it could be measured for comparative purposes.

The best way to teach children to read is a hotly contested area in which the nature of knowledge as scientific or otherwise has been employed as one kind of sorting

mechanism between the right and the wrong. Kim for instance has argued that by the late 1990s “a sufficiently large body of basic research findings to forge a scientific consensus over the processes underlying skilful reading and the instructional practices that facilitated reading competence” (Kim, 2008, p 373) was in existence. Street similarly points out that in some countries now there is “a requirement for ‘scientific-based’ approaches that can provide sound evidence of which methods and approaches are superior” (Street, 2009, p 331). However, this ‘consensus’ is not the argument clincher that it might be supposed to be. Coles (2000) attacks the evidence base and causal connections presented in some of the most influential research that purports to fall into the scientific category as ‘bad’ science. Nevertheless whilst the debates on how reading should best be taught go on, for now in current educational opinion and certainly in teaching policy, phonics has the upper hand (Department for Education and Skills, 2007).

Phonics programmes fit nicely into the progressive stages that make standardised instruction and measurement an easy matter (see Department for Education, 2012). In addition they link coherently to the view of writing as ‘visible speech’. Thus an apparently logical relationship emerges that justifies both the theory and the practice without space for protest. The institutional demands of teaching and measuring are knitted into the intellectual view with the whole being supported by a scientific and research base that justifies them both. Statements such as, “the visual symbols that must be learned represent a spoken language” (Goswami, 2009, p135) express the narrative in which reading relies on the phonic system that ties the written word to the spoken one. She goes on to argue that “awareness of the phonological structure of

one's spoken language is clearly fundamental to the acquisition of literacy" (Goswami, 2009, p138) and that "developmental studies of reading acquisition across languages show that individual differences in reading development are (for the most part) governed by individual differences in phonological skills" (Goswami, 2009, p 135). This prevailing attitude demonstrates Harris' "writing myth" of the Western tradition but it is not just an expression; it is also a way of perpetuating the myth through "the establishment of pedagogic programmes in which children are taught to write by explicitly correlating individual letters ... with sounds" (Harris, 2009, p 47).

Whilst much that shapes the institutionalisation of literacy is based on the needs and primacy of maintaining what Street has called the "autonomous" model of literacy (Street 1984 cited in Street 2009 p 337), there has also been a good deal of work that portrays literacy as a situated practice that is part of everyday life in communities and families. New Literacy Studies, now not so new, have worked over the past three decades or so on bringing to the fore local literacies previously suppressed and marginalised by the dominant form of literacy as presented and practised in schools. The arguments have centred on exposing the richness and variety of community literacies and on having this richness recognised and respected by schools and the dominant discourse on literacy. However, the primacy of institutionalised pedagogy continues to be apparent in the way that New Literacy Studies defer to these institutions and their ultimate power in defining what literacy is. Street for example cites how

“most ethnographies of literacy have addressed pedagogical issues implicitly if not explicitly, starting of course, from Heath’s (1983) explicit concern to bring to the attention of educators the “invisible” home literacies of their pupils.” (Street, 2009, p340).

So ethnographic work on social practices and local literacies must return for its legitimation to the accounts of literacy held by formal education; wherever literacy might begin (at home, in the market place, in the church, in the community, in a children’s game), the episteme holds that its ultimate destination is school. One of the implications of this is that no matter how literacy is learned at home and in the community this is only relevant in so much as it is able to influence pedagogical practice in formal settings. Street writes, “the most fruitful accounts of literacy for educational purposes have come from ethnographies of out-of-school literacies” (Street, 2009, p 341). The implication seems to be that what is successful out of school must be brought into the classroom. The logic that if learning to read outside school is successful, then there is no need to implement the learning of reading in school is nowhere to be seen. Even debates about learning through intent participation in social situations through shared activities are noted for the implications they have “for how literacy programmes might be designed and run.” (Street, 2009, p332). The power of schools and educational policy to promote the defining discourse seems to echo the Heideggerian view of schooling as technology. It is the technology of literacy education that turns its standing reserve into objects that serve the subject. In this case it seems that literacy as it is experienced has no more worth than the power it can muster to support the literacy episteme; the dominant discourse and the ‘regime of truth’ about literacy.

Literacy for Education or Literacy as Education?

“It is widely assumed that the skills involved in creating and using texts are sufficiently important that they justify an enormous investment in education”

Brockmeier and Olson (2009 p 18). Literacy, as discussed earlier, has been linked to all manner of social and personal good. In putting such heavy emphasis on the teaching and learning of literacy schools appear to be promoting for their pupils this ticket to the ‘good life’. Yet mass schooling itself has served to reify and reinforce, rather than simply react to, some of the links made between literacy and personal, social and economic success.

“Literacy is overvalued because of the very structure of formal schooling – schooling that, in Bruner’s words, involves learning ‘out of the context of action, by means that are primarily symbolic.’ The currency of schools is words – words ... that are shaped up for the requirements of literacy.”
(Graff, 1987, p18)

If a child in school cannot read and/or write satisfactorily then he or she has failed – institutionalised education without literacy has been made almost unimaginable by a schooling system that rests entirely on the ability to read and write and pays at best only lip service to the myriad other ways in which people learn. Children who don’t read in school have their ticket to the good life removed in school, by school.

Learning Literacy

The ‘reading wars’ (Adams 1993 and Goodman 1996 quoted by Street 2009), the concerns over the design and implementation of literacy programmes and other

debates on how literacy should be taught, no matter which view is supported, base their seriousness on the foundational principle that how children (or adults) are taught is important, because how they are taught is how they will learn. Stainthorp and Hughes' (1999) study of children who learn to read before school without being taught takes as its starting premise that children who learn without teaching learn in exactly the same way as children who learn through teaching:

“We hypothesised that children who are good readers at a very early age prior to being taught would show much higher levels of phonological skill than children who are similar in vocabulary development but who are not yet able to read.”
(Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p59)

The authors believe that children who learn to read by themselves do so through self-acquired decoding methods, exactly in accordance with the school programme their peers will later follow, and that this provides a base which will then allow them to build a wider and abstract structural understanding of what reading is:

“Because of their word-reading ability, their everyday encounters with books would have enabled them to internalise a deep understanding of how print works.”
(Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p 59)

What is not clear from Stainthorp and Hughes account, and they acknowledge this themselves, is how children might gain enhanced phonological awareness in the first place, “Of course the question we cannot answer is how the YERs [young early readers] came to have these precocious abilities” (ibid p165). There is much however in research that suggests that, at the very least, this is not the full story.

Tolchinsky arguing from a developmental perspective considers that literacy should not be viewed as a teaching issue; “a developmental approach to literacy assumes that the steps by which children become literate cannot be equated with the way in which they happen to be formally instructed.” (Tolchinsky, 2009, p468). Her work suggests that children begin learning literacy by establishing for themselves “a set of distinctive, formal principles that set writing apart from other notational systems and separate what is readable and writeable from what is not” (Tolchinsky, 2009, p479). In a reverse of Stainthorp and Hughes views, Tolchinsky argues that these principles enable children to understand writing as a structural system before they are able to fill in any detail such as the significance of individual letters.

Furthermore she goes on to suggest “that writing actually develops simultaneously at many levels. Children do not move unidirectionally from smaller to larger units. Rather, what children come to know about texts and about the representational meaning of writing permeates the whole process of learning” (Tolchinsky, 2009, p480). Her work shows how children only just beginning to engage with the ideas of writing show an awareness of genre; asked to write a shopping list they produce a differently laid out example of pre-writing than when asked to write a story. Her conclusion is that “the problem of casting information into a given genre is solved at a very early age” (Tolchinsky, 2009, p 480). Bissex’ account of her son learning to write at home (Bissex, 1980) similarly shows an early awareness of genre with Paul’s early writing experiments including a card, a game, lists, a story, letters, signs, a newspaper and a book; all laid out differently and with a specific awareness of how each finished item should look.

For children being formally taught through a pre-set series of stages such as those laid out by the Department for Education (2012) different pathways into literacy are bound to be obscured by the concentration on the mastery of supposedly linear elements. This difficulty is one for research as well as reading programmes; the researcher themselves continually standing in the way of what it is that they want to look at. Stainthorp and Hughes' study (1999) offers a pertinent example in which the authors' own theories are used to make sense of what appear to be the children's experiences. They see the child as an individual agent who, as a result of certain inputs acquires, either through teaching or, exceptionally, on their own, a set of knowledge based skills by which they can decode print. Their view is not the only one however. Hodkinson et al (2008), who argue that it is unhelpful to pursue the idea that one input or set of inputs will work for everyone, would presumably have interpreted things rather differently. They instead are looking for a hybrid of embodied construction and participation theories where the individual is part of their own context and learning is based within "the integrated processes of participation and ... [the subjects] on-going (re)construction of their own habitus" (Hodkinson et al, 2008, p40). Thus learning to read, as learning anything, would be an intensely personal process in which there is no single way forward. Dewey as discussed by Biesta argues that things "are what they are experienced as" (Biesta, 2009b, p65). Accordingly literacy for a child at a pre-literate or inexpert stage of literacy must be whatever it is experienced as. That could mean a pattern found in certain places or a mix of more or less familiar shapes associated with a wider experience such as the titles for a TV programme, the colours of a slogan on a T-shirt, their name on one of

their possessions etc. Any meaning attached to the written word will be located in the personal and contextual circumstances and situations in which it is encountered. Given this it would be appropriate to consider reading not necessarily as a purely cognitive skill to do with an individual's mind (and therefore accepting the Cartesian separation of mind and body – Hodkinson et al 2008) but as an embodied experience which can also have emotional, physical and social dimensions. In doing so, what matters is children's experience of literacy rather than the question of whether literacy and the processes of reading can be explained in ways which purport to be objectively or universally real.

Tolchinsky (2009) offers empirical evidence that the visible speech theory is not how children themselves experience writing. Her work with young children who are experimenting with writing for themselves suggests that they see figurative connections between the marks that they make when pretend writing and the meaning they are hoping to express. Thus the word 'elephant' will be made longer than the word 'ant' to express the relative size of the animals in question. This is so even when the actual words of the children's native languages do not correspond to this logic. Similarly young children in the studies she cites were reluctant to make tangible marks to represent null quantities, impossible situations, falsehoods or contradictions to actual situations. So for instance in a study by Pontecorvo and Rossi (2001) children would make marks to represent a number followed by the word 'pears' but when asked to write down 'no pears' were reluctant to represent this idea as a mark on paper. The researchers' explanation is that because no pears is 'nothing' and therefore, to the children's mind, cannot be expressed by written marks

which are 'something'. Bissex (1980) describing her son Paul's early experiments with writing similarly notes, "in typing his name he mistakenly ran his first and last names together, but decided that was all right because he was "all one", indicated by a sweeping gesture up and down his body" (Bissex, 1980, p17). In such ways "a symbolic relation has been established, although not one that is connected with the sound patterns of words" Tolchinsky (2009, p476). She concludes that "writing is not understood by the child as merely putting words on paper but rather as a representational issue; hence, the struggle between meaning and the formal properties of writing" (Tolchinsky, 2009, p480).

Tolchinsky's work highlights "how active children are in their learning of cultural artefacts such as written language" (Tolchinsky, 2009, p482). Other examples of such proactivity are offered by Gee (2009) in his consideration of children's interests and pastimes. He discusses, for instance, the complexity and speciality of some children's cultures; for example the card game Yu-Gi-Oh. Young children playing this game handle a complexity of rules written in specialist language the equivalent of which they are not likely to meet in school for several years; "in fact, in complexity, it is far above the language many young children see in their schoolbooks until they get to middle school at best and, perhaps, even high school" (Gee, 2009, p 317). According to Gee children as young as seven handle this type of language in expert fashion and this is only part of "informal specialist-language learning ... better represented in popular culture than in school" (Gee, 2009, p317).

Gee goes on to discuss the importance of situated meanings for children's learning. Children he argues, need to 'play the game' before they can 'understand the manual'. He uses the example of video games and then extends this in metaphorical terms to the subject content matter taught in schools. His resulting view is reminiscent of Holt, "school is too often about reading the manual before you get to play the game, if you ever do" (Gee, 2009, p321). Students who have 'played the game' at home will not be harmed by schools' roundabout presentation but for those who have not the results are "disastrous" (Gee, 2009, p 321). Such experiences of technical, specialist and academic forms of language are an important part of ensuring continuing success in school, but they are not consistently offered in school, "These practices are common in certain homes and in some of the popular cultural practices of children. They are, perhaps, less common in the early years of schooling" (Gee, 2009, p323).

Like the advocates of New Literacy Studies, Gee goes on to explicate how schools could tap into such practices to teach "school-valued content" (Gee, 2009, p317). However it also seems to be his view that out of school experiences can offer children meaningful encounters with literacy that are very hard to emulate within the structures of institutionalised literacy given the pressing criteria of measurement and teaching; "the creativity of the capitalist has far out distanced that of the educators" (Gee, 2009, p317). Again the question must be begged, if out of school practices lead so apparently easily and efficiently to levels of literacy that outstrip those presented in school, why is it that the most that we seem able to do with such information is to suggest that schools, with all their given restrictions, do their best to

copy them? Why is the question of literacy learning outside school not more deeply explored whilst schools turn to matters that they might be good at?

Summary

The literacy episteme is not just a background to the study of how children learn to read; it is all we have in the way of asking questions, offering explanation, the tools to hand for making sense. The literacy episteme itself is responsible for the question “how do children learn to read?” as well as for the more specific question of how the children in this study have learned to read without being taught. These are questions that only make sense in this episteme; that recognises as things the ideas of children, learning and reading in the first place.

With this sense of eventalisation in mind, I now turn to the questions of methodology and epistemology in carrying out my own study of children learning to read.

CHAPTER TWO

A Meeting Place

Chapter One introduced some of the key ideas and debates which order our thinking about literacy, education and being a parent. It is from this base that ideas which challenge this dominant way of thinking, such as those to be presented in this research, receive their 'alternative' description. In this chapter I turn to developing an understanding of research as a meeting place, not just of different ideas, but also of people.

Researcher and Researched – Me, Them and Us

Me

I came to this research with a mixture of personal and academic motivations. Early on in my life as a parent I found myself at odds with the cultural circumstances discussed in Chapter One, found my own versions of the dissonances between the role I was expected and the role I wanted to play in my children's lives, the tension between being a 'good' parent and being the parent I wanted to be, the view of 'the child' with which I was presented and my child. Home education is a particular decision (which we took) but it is not a solution that makes the questions of education and of being a parent go away; as Suissa (2006) argues, these are on-going. In particular a thread that runs through home education is one about learning; what it is,

how it happens, how it can be recognised, and what part I as a parent should or could play in what my children learned. These questions turned up every day; not through any special philosophical effort but simply through life: “What should we do today?”, “Why have you painted yourself green?”, “How come Jamie next door can write his name and my kids can’t?”; but most of all, “Where on earth have they got that idea from?”, “How on earth do they know that?” These questions reached a crescendo when our elder daughter started reading which she did apparently spontaneously; without questions, without help and without any signs of either effort or achievement. I could not begin to see what had happened. Interpretivist approaches to research argue that our values structure what we see and that observation itself is an expression of theory. But what if we don’t understand what we see? I took two Open University courses on child development and learning. Little that I studied resonated with my experiences at home. By now our other daughter was reading too. But our son wasn’t. He continued not to read in any recognisable way until he was nine, but he had a definite relationship with literacy; he could use it in specific ways and situations although I didn’t believe that he could ‘read’. Nothing was revealing itself to me; instead the questions only seemed to multiply and deepen. By the time I had spent the best part of a decade as a participant observer in children’s autonomous paths to literacy I did not feel that the mystery could be resolved by observation. My instinct, and the instinct that fired this research, was to go and talk to others who had also watched children learn to read by themselves.

My own position as a home educator has given me access to a group that is not always amenable to 'outsiders' and it gave me as well a common ground and empathy for communicating with and listening to/reading the accounts of other home educating parents who have done similar things and had similar experiences.

Robinson and Hawpe (1986) argue that the personal stories of others require to be met in a collaborative way by those to whom they are told. I am personally eager to hear these stories and to find ways of believing them by looking for the areas of mutual understanding and allowing the ideas met in individual narratives to become part of the way in which I understand other narratives, including my own. Mischler (1986) argues that on hearing a story we have to bring in more than we are given to make the story comprehensible. Undoubtedly my own feeling of belonging in the world of home education, and my own experiences of having children who learnt to read at home without being taught encouraged me to seek out these stories and on hearing them to find resonance with my own experiences and in doing so no doubt to make, albeit unconsciously, inferences from partial information, connections and understandings because they make personal sense to me. However, it is also my contention that long term involvement in a way of life is as good at dispelling our illusions as it is in creating them. I do not know that I did the 'right thing' for my children, I have become less rather than more certain about what education is and I am as mired as ever in the question of how to be a good parent. I have had my good times and my bad times, my confidences and my doubts and the sum total of experience is not any particular whole at all.

I am part of what I want to understand in this research but there is no privileged knowledge in my self-involvement. Nightingale and Cromby argue that the contribution of the researcher can be revealed through reflexivity which “urges us to explore the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research” (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p 228). Their suggestions put forward the view of a researcher who stands in relation to their research; a picture which Foucault describes as “relationships between text and author ... in which the text points to this figure that, at least in appearance is outside it and antecedes it.” (Foucault, 1977, p1). The text becomes then a ‘thing-in-itself’ that stands somehow apart from its own source and from any form of interpretation even that of its own creator. The creator is equally a bounded and distinguishable self, knowable in particular ways. To judge this thing-in-itself as biased or as fair, as an accurate or inaccurate depiction of reality, demands in turn on the one hand a ‘true’ meaning for this text and, in addition, a rationalist approach to the human mind and thought that postulates an autonomous faculty of reason through which we are able to dispassionately know ourselves (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) in the roles of both creator and reader of such texts.

A researcher stands in a two faced position as both a reader and a writer; as a reader who gathers multiple meanings for themselves, but who then, as a writer, casts out their work for the interpretation of others. Barthes (1967) envisages the text as a multi layered fabric drawn from innumerable sources, whose ‘meaning’ does not lie within it, but within the minds of those that read it. Meaning cannot be handed on but must constantly be recreated by each new reader (Barthes 1967). As the text

makes its way towards its readership it is not a complete work that holds a unity or a meaning, instead it is an open space waiting “to be traversed, not penetrated” (Barthes, 1967, p5) by those who make contact with it. What is it then that a researcher has done and where in the multi-layered text of indeterminate meaning does the author him or herself exist?

Foucault (1977) considers the changing functions of the author’s role even within the same text; a point of view that problematises any clear cut, steady relationship between text and author. Certainly within the text of this piece of research my own role has been one of inconstancy; from receiver and responder to creator and collator. I am personally involved as a researcher seeking to impose a certain kind of order, as a writer creating an aesthetic work, as a PhD candidate fulfilling a certain set of criteria, as an individual who has in a particular way put their own ideas at stake. I have responsibilities to myself and to others that the text must fulfil at the same time that it must inform and enlighten within certain parameters of originality and conformity (Peim, 2010). In the inseparable mix of demands that these functions bring to bear, I do not find it possible to say which sides of experience and which parts of my changing mind have been brought to bear in which specific ways on which issues. Instead the consequences of our own thoughts and mind are not knowable even, or especially, to ourselves. The tools with which we might undertake some kind of regressive analysis back to a perceived point of origin have already decided which and what of those unknowable lines of influence will be ‘discovered’ and named as our bias.

Instead it is only possible in the effort to know ourselves to face the ideas available through consciousness in which, as Nietzsche argues “each of us will always succeed in becoming conscious only of what is not individual but “average”” (Nietzsche quoted by Varvaro, 2001, p8). The matter goes beyond honesty and beyond the willingness to recognise self interest in its many forms and into the realms of how far an individual can be seen to stand as an independent subject. Wittgenstein, in his early work, divides the world into two: the things which can be said and those which cannot (Biletzki and Matar, 2011). In the case of the text I see this separation as that expressed by Foucault (1977) in the distinction between the writer (who cannot be said) and the author (who can). The author is the nameable producer of an object, a text, whilst the writer is the purveyor of a meaning which cannot be named, which has no metaphysical existence. I stand on the brink between these roles; as the writer an historical implement in the formation of a piece of work over which I do not have full understanding and over which I hold no authoritative interpretation; as the author occupying a formal point at which certain functions and responsibilities can be attributed to me and for which I must stand as answerable.

Them

In November 2008 Alan Thomas and I set up a website (www.howchildrenlearnathome.co.uk) . On the website we explained about our research interests, gave information about ourselves, about our joint and Alan’s

previous research. We stated our affiliation with the Institute of Education, University of London². We also posted a questionnaire with full details about participation, confidentiality, anonymity, withdrawal and the purpose of the research. It was felt that an internet based survey would allow us to cast a wide net of invitation in a non-threatening way.

Potential respondents were alerted to the existence of the questionnaire through a notice in the Education Otherwise (EO)³ bi-monthly newsletter, through key contacts, word of mouth and announcement at a major home education event (HESFES) in the UK. We also published the website address at the end of some articles written at the time for 'Juno' (a natural parenting magazine) and for 'Who Cares?' which is the newsletter of the organisation Full Time Mothers. Links to the website were also published on the EO and Schoolhouse⁴ websites. The aim behind the advertising was to gain as large a sample as we could although we had no provision for people who might have wanted to respond but were without access to the internet. In fact, enthusiasm for the questionnaire became quite widespread and unsolicited publicity in the USA and Australia led to an unforeseen rate of response from abroad. We also had responses from New Zealand and mainland Europe.

² At the beginning of this project I was a research associate at the Institute of Education, University of London and transferred to the University of Birmingham in May 2009 in order to pursue my part in it as a PhD. Alan Thomas and I conceived of this research, set up the website and wrote the questionnaire together. Thereafter, all work documented in this thesis is my own. This arrangement has been approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee.

³ Education Otherwise advertises itself as "a membership organisation providing support and information for families whose children are educated outside school and for those who wish to uphold the freedom of families to take proper responsibility for the education of their children." It operates UK wide.

⁴ Schoolhouse advertises itself as an organisation which "offers information and support to parents and carers throughout Scotland who seek to take personal responsibility for the education of their children". It operates in Scotland.

Respondents were all self-selected (as they would have been with any research method we would have been able to use) and, by definition, therefore interested in the research with something of their own to contribute. The responses have more than reflected this being full and thoughtful with no trace of the perfunctory treatment that sometimes accompanies the filling out of forms (Robson 1993). The payoff for this approach has been that we were unable to measure a non-response bias for those who may have seen the questionnaire, been eligible to respond but decided not to.

Beyond the practicalities lies a deeper question about what motivates people to contribute to research. Accessing the questionnaire was not without effort and those who responded did so with a depth that is conspicuous. In particular I have been struck by those respondents who have added messages to me on their questionnaires, "Good that you a doing this research" is one such, others have wished me luck. Other parents are writing years after their children have learned to read; the events are long gone but the desire to tell remains. One parent corresponds now every six months or so, telling me about her children's reading; what they have been doing, how it is all going and her own thoughts. What does taking part mean to these people and why are they so prepared to share their family life with a stranger? Considering this question, I speculate again on this research as a meeting place in which the motivation to participate arises from a set of historical circumstances that stretch from the personal to the cultural and political. In a pressing political situation research might itself be seen as an engine of possibility; a

way of telling how it really is, and of forcing understanding onto the decision making powers. Alternatively, research can be seen as the accumulation of information to be archived in the collective storehouse of human wisdom from where it can rarely be of any benefit to those who contribute to it. But these people who have written to me make me feel that the meaning of research goes beyond its immediate political potential or the stock piling of knowledge. This work bears a witness to a time and a place and to people and the things that they believe.

And Us

As 'the researcher' it might seem at first glance that I occupy a particular and unique place as the decision maker who sifts and interprets material according to their own individual stamp. But as I worked at the responses I found this idea inverted; they ordered my mind instead of me ordering them. The responses informed me and they also informed each other; interpretation emerging as a dynamic mix of meaning retrieved from a melting pot in which it is no longer possible to delineate and trace individual contributions, including my own. My feelings mirror those of Barthes who wrote on the subject of authorship, "all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin" (Barthes, 1967, p 2). Whilst Barthes is writing specifically about works of literature such, it seems to me, must be, and less controversially so, the endeavour to understand that is research where the gathering of many voices is a specific aim of the project and where the text is literally "a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture" (Barthes, 1967, p4).

Instead of being some point of origin, Barthes' god-like author, I find myself working alongside 220 others; all of us sharing our lives, perspectives, interests, politics, biases, prejudices, insights, intuitions, ignorance and experience. Whose voice is this research then? Indeed, can voices be distinguished and separated? Does one part of it belong to me and one part to those others who have contributed? And how do we know who has contributed? Of his authorly endeavours Taylor (2001) writes "all writing is ghost writing. This work, like all others, is haunted by countless specters. Some I know, other I do not; some I name, others remain unnamed... their silence speaks through my words in ways that remain cryptic to author as well as to reader" (Taylor, 2001, p196). The meeting place becomes a fascinating polyhedron greater and more meaningful than we can ever recognise. Yet the strictures of a PhD demand that this multifarious throng is suppressed and a claim of individual authorship is made. Here the enterprise of research seems to reveal itself in a very personal expression of Heidegger's fears over technology, "the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct" (Heidegger, 1977, p 20).

The questionnaire on which this research is based was set up in such a way that participants did not have to name themselves or give any kind of contact details. If they chose not to identify themselves their e-mailed response could not be traced thereby ensuring their full anonymity. However, few people took advantage of the option to remain anonymous – only a handful out of more than 300. Most of those who contributed chose to name themselves, to be authors rather than writers; a distinction made by Foucault (1977) partly on the grounds that an author must bear

responsibility for what has been written in his name, whilst a writer cannot be called to account. Yet the demands of academic ethics call for research participants to be subjugated to a certain position; anonymous contributors who cannot claim formal authorship although their writing forms the basis of this project.

Neither I nor the contributors themselves have the power to override the conventions of academia which consider anonymity an ethical essential. The decision is pre-made hierarchically with no doubt the most benign of motives. It is however also the beginning of stripping away individuality in order to privilege generality, a key part in technologising the research process by deliberately creating a standing reserve of respondents/participants who have no individual identity but only the collective function of serving the research end. In this sense, the essence of research as revealed through the appropriation of this standing reserve turns the supposed beneficiaries of research into a resource which must stand, as Heidegger says, in grave danger of being subsumed by it.

Whilst Thomas (2009, p147) defines ethical rules as being “principles of conduct about what is right and wrong” examples such as this one illustrate that the relationship between such principles and right and wrong is not a straightforward or clear one. The problem is that the rules of conduct apply regardless of context such as the principle of preserving anonymity and confidentiality or ensuring a right for participants to withdraw from research. These are pre-decided codes of how to behave. Right and wrong on the other hand are subjective categories likely to change according to perception and positioning within any given situation. It is not

logical to suggest that the application of a code of conduct can in itself provide an answer to what is right and wrong in any given situation. Indeed Gray argues for an incompatibility between ethical rules and morality in that she considers morality to be “the ability to understand what is required morally without having to resort to rules and guidelines”(Gray, 1995, p 65). The difficulty of making moral sense through a concentration on ethical rationality is apparent through the differing basis of these principles. If conduct is based on ethical guide lines then these must be applied at the time of the action, regardless of circumstances; if notions of right and wrong are used to judge whether actions taken are permissible then the research has to be placed within some larger context of morality and related to this; perhaps by looking at what it is hoped to achieve.

Basing ethical decisions on a set of pre-decided principles is a difficult approach in that the question must be begged, which principles, decided by whom? A university code of ethics, can offer rules about how a researcher should behave but should these go far beyond an extension of the behavioural norms generally employed such as respecting others and attempting to align actions with some kind of common good (Small, 2001) then they run the danger of overriding the negotiation of relationships within the research situation. Formal ethical procedures necessarily embody an assumption of power. To remove this from the researcher as an individual and to hand it on to a committee does not dissipate the power nor make it more likely to be better used. Gray argues that “ethical guidelines, no matter how precise they may become, cannot ensure a moral disposition” (Gray, 1995, p 69) and this may be as true of a collective as of an individual. Instead a hierarchy of power is erected with

the participants who do not make decisions at the bottom, the researcher above them, the ethics committee at the pinnacle. To put ethics in the hands of the researcher (or a committee above the researcher) assumes that researchers hold the moral high ground and are in a better position to say what is right and wrong than anyone else taking part in the research. Maybe it is such an imbalance of power that brings about the possible scenario in which researcher and participants seem to have opposing interests such that in the same project the researcher may benefit whilst the participants may be harmed. In this picture, research is something that is done to people rather than done with people.

In the act of naming themselves I see contributors negotiating a process that includes the content of research data as well as the positions and relationships within the research project. Ethically I believe that this negotiation should continue as far as possible. Howe and Moses (1999) discuss the possibilities of a “participatory paradigm” (Howe and Moses 1999 p37, citing Howe 1995) arguing that justice and equality need to be sought in the “status and voice of research participants” (ibid, p37). In this spirit, I see all the participants in this research as powerful people who have exercised that power by taking part and then in their decisions about what they would like to tell me, including naming or not naming themselves, and by telling me their stories in whatever ways and in whatever measures they see fit.

Adhering to the requirement of anonymity however, displaces any act of negotiation and I experience a certain disquiet in my acquiescence to this and wonder if not a small start in dismantling the taken for granted power roles of academic research

might be to at least offer the opportunity to contributors to have their contribution more fully acknowledged.

In these first two chapters I have discussed some of the making of this research, the circumstances of which it is a part and the people who have contributed to it. I now turn to the question of how to pursue knowledge from this point of meeting.

CHAPTER THREE – In Pursuit of Knowledge

Being, Doing and Thinking About

The University Idea of Knowledge

Thinking about children learning to read has been part of my life for a long time now with the organisation of these ruminations into a PhD thesis being a relatively recent turn of events. My subject matter has not changed but the thinking about my thinking has had to become more self-conscious, more tailored, more conformist to the view of knowledge recognised and endorsed by university epistemology. Over a PhD hangs an idealised template of research that lays out the format of what is good knowledge and what are the appropriate ways of presenting good knowledge. These are prevailing standards; part of the historical circumstance of this research. The questions of methodology: what constitutes evidence, what makes a valid argument, the logic of an academic narrative are not self-evident approaches to creating, acquiring or believing knowledge. Rather such things are themselves historical creations; questions and concerns that have come about not as natural adjuncts to knowing but from political, cultural, intellectual intersections of ideas about what knowledge is and how to pursue it.

For the most part I have tried to be a good student, who follows the standard suggestions and conforms to the advice of research guides for students such as Thomas (2009). In these texts research is presented as another example of technology; the right tools employed in the proper production of a certain kind of

knowledge. But the ideas encompassed by such notions of methodology and by such standardised procedures of research also need to be problematised. Despite the academic 'front' frequently depicted by texts that present research as a series of stages and argument or findings as the result of the logical progression of thought, there are also grounds for thinking that this ideal may not always be met in practice (for example Watson 1968).

For my part the personalities, the emotions, the distractions, the mental meanderings, are a real part of the substance of research. These are things that are more than can be said, although they have no place in the official world of research or in the texts of what to do and how to do it. Yet to me they are essential stuff of human understanding. What is sayable, demonstrable, presentable is the tip of what we know. More than we can name lies half hidden, without acknowledgement, in fleeting wisps of presentiment, intuitive leaps and gut feelings. These are thoughts without words, but somewhere in them lies the personal experience of coming across what feels like knowledge and the reasons for such a feeling. That the sensation of understanding and the path of explanation can exist so separately is not a feeling to be overcome or suppressed. On the contrary I see this recognition as essential to the subject matter of this research as well as to the act of research itself: "the 'I' who knows such-and-such a scientific truth is not identical with but is an abstraction from the I who is always 'some real, actual thinking human being'" (Pattison, 2011, p192) – the human being that education is seeking to understand.

Internal validity

The validity of a piece of research, i.e. the legitimation of its claim to embody some order of knowledge, depends critically on understandings of what knowledge is. The view that in postmodern social science the scientific, empirically based, positivistic view of valid knowledge is untenable is now widespread (Cho and Trent 2006). This is in keeping with the Derridean view already expressed here that whilst representation is inescapable, validity cannot come from a claim to accurately represent a part of reality through continuous attempts to come closer and closer to its object (Derrida 1978). For instance in this research, participants recount and discuss their experiences and thoughts on their children learning to read; a process which is open to all manner of vagaries from forgetfulness to political bias. Such is the nature of all dissemination, which is necessarily some kind of construct, some kind of abstraction. However the argument runs deeper than that such accounts may lack validity as they cannot be, however honestly told, a full or accurate reflection of reality. The full consequence of the Derridean argument must be that there is no 'essential reality' accessible to us from which any particular version can be a distortion (Mischler 1990). Taking instead a Deweyan and transactional view of experience (Dewey quoted by Biesta 2009), the status of research data can be reconsidered from an interpretation extrapolated from a partial and subjective experience of a given and independent reality to a presentation of real knowledge as it has been transactionally experienced and this would include the experience of recounting events to a third party in the form of questionnaire responses such as are being used in this research. Taking this view of experience means that the possibility

of respondents deceiving themselves in their understandings or of misunderstanding their own experiences does not exist. In other words the epistemological view taken is not, “how well does their understanding reflect the reality of their experience?” but “what conditions, ideas and concepts have allowed them to experience these things as they have and to reconstruct them as they do?” Things are taken as being what they seem to be in the moment of their happening, which in this case is the moment of their reconstruction.

In the belief that things have to be accepted for what they are and do in the moment this research has taken subjectivity as an inevitable and desirable starting place and any claims of validity are placed within this epistemology of subjectivity. Without the framework of empiricism, Mischler (1990) argues we need new ways of understanding validity and establishing the trustworthiness of knowledge. If knowledge is socially constructed, then its validity is to be located not so much in methodological adherence to procedure but in the positioning of that piece of research within the social practices and discourses of the research community (Mischler 1990). More specifically its validation depends on the extent to which it is accepted as trustworthy by others. Cho and Trent (2006) divide the rationale for trustworthiness between transactional and transformational validity. In the first of these validity is achieved through the interactive process between the researcher and the researched such that there is an on-going revisiting and refining of data. Transformational validity rests on the action that is achieved through research as part of the process of social change towards emancipation and justice (although of course these two terms do not offer an unproblematic assessment of validity either).

Cho and Trent (2006) argue much can be done in the name of transactional validity during the course of research such as reflexivity, member checks, openness and recursive action such that validity is an on-going process within research characterised by continual dialogue between researcher and researched. This kind of discursive approach has been taken here in that before beginning the PhD much 'work' had already been undertaken through my naturalistic participation in home educating circles. I had spoken extensively with other parents, read personal accounts in newsletters and interacted with many children and families exchanging views, information, experiences and ideas in reciprocal and discursive ways. This long conversation has continued through the formal research, particularly through parents who contacted me more than once. All respondents were e-mailed copies of their own responses so that anything they wanted to change, delete or add could be done so easily. In addition I have carried on meeting parents, talking about reading and about the research. Some of these people I know to have taken part as respondents but others have not; their comments and thoughts, whilst not formally noted and quoted are nevertheless part of the swarm of ideas shaping the research along its way. However, such contributions and actions whilst important are not sufficient for a piece of research to claim for itself validity through intrinsic virtue.

Mischler (1990) argues that rather than validity lying within an individual piece of research, it must be sought in the total flow of research; in the ways in which research is critically evaluated, used or rejected by those who took part in it, by the research community and by other interested parties. Validity cannot simply be

achieved through research design but also and as importantly is a consequence of whether and how well disseminated, published, brought to public attention, discussed and criticised it is after its completion as a piece of work. Validity is attained as part of “the social discourse through which trustworthiness is established” (Mischler, 1990, p 420). This is a continuing element in the argument for transactional validity and also the arena for transformational validity; the potential for a piece of research to actually influence other events. Applied to this piece of research, transformational validity lies on two planes. The first must be personal in that there may be people who on reading about the experiences of other families where children have learned to read autonomously feel reassured by the shared experiences or allow the research to be an influencing factor in the decisions they take. In the questionnaire responses a few parents have referred to the influence that certain literature and theories have had on them and the course which they have decided to follow. On the second plane lies the potential influence on policy that research into autonomous and home education in general may play in future legislative decisions.

Questions of validity here, intersect with those of ethics in terms of how should research be positioned in order to influence others and is the influencing of others itself a valid role of research. Thomas (2009) argues that it is, suggesting that the question of ensuring ethical research can be approached in terms of balancing means with ends. Lather makes this argument more specific by proposing that we ask pointed questions: “where are we going with democracy in this project? Who gains and who loses and by which mechanisms of power?” (Lather, 2003, p9).

Neither acknowledges that a means end justification can only truly be supported in

retrospect. This is partly because at the beginning of a research project the ends can only be surmised; the possibility is strong that what will emerge from the research is something rather different to the things that were envisaged, (or were simply blanks), at the beginning. The means and the end will not come into the same view until the research is completed and ethical decisions can only be looked back on. Even then, we cannot predict how research will be used or by whom. If the ends of research include the practical difference that it might make then ethical decisions must include very far reaching speculation into the future. In this particular case the experience of the Badman review (Badman 2009a) lays open an abyss of doubt about how research might be used. The current research for instance could (and I hope would) be used by home educators to argue their case about how different learning at home can be; but the possibility that it might also be used by some future version of Badman as research evidence that many home educated children aged ten and over cannot read (and therefore become a platform from which to argue that they are not being properly educated) is a possibility that cannot be dismissed. But both these possibilities, at this moment, are purely speculative. Amongst other consequences, this means that validation is not a once and for all decision about a piece of research but is an on-going process which may change over time or between the different interest groups that encounter it. In this view a piece of research never completely reaches a finishing point at which the revisiting, reassessing process and the reach of its influence may conclusively be said to be over. But if the ends of research do not include its possible future application (because they cannot be accurately predicted) then the purposes of research must also be narrowed to those things which do not include practical consequences, such as the expansion of knowledge or

the witnessing of particular experiences or beliefs. Such a restriction would make a means – end approach of little assistance in the decisions that run alongside research.

As discussed earlier I see this research as an event at the confluence of other events; arising at this time and in this place as a result of, and as part of, a flow of happenings, sentiments and ideas; its validity (transactional, transformational or otherwise) can be seen as a consequence of its place within that flow, the extent to which it meshes with the circumstances (intellectual, social and political) and mood around it. Finding an appropriate and useful place within this flow depends on making the right connections with other pieces of research, with home educators and with their experiences and ideas and with policy makers and with the sphere of political possibilities and desirabilities. Any piece of research needs to be positioned then in such a way that these connections are facilitated. In this sense validity becomes a matter of where a piece of research takes up position and how this stance draws attention to particular aspects of itself by constructing a space of visibility (Lather 1993). The critical questions for validity then become those which hold a piece of research in such a position: knowledge from what, for what and knowledge by whom, for whom. Aguinaldo puts the matter as moving from the question “Is this valid research?” to “what is this research valid for?” (Aguinaldo (2004, p130). Validity becomes a question of the strength of links to both the purpose of research and to its audience; is it fit for its designated purpose? Does it speak to those who need to hear it?

Where research like this seeks ultimately to make diverse connections across potentially conflicting views such as those of policy makers and home educators its positioning needs to be a flexible one which can be approached from many sides. Such is the rhizomatic system suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) of a multi-connected complex in which there is no centre, no beginning or end only a network of interconnections and interrelations. Instead of a main root there are numerous starting points branching off in all directions and confounding the thought of a linear or logical journey. In this spirit, this research seeks to pitch itself not as being about the truth of how children learn to read but as an historical document able to draw connections between particular representations and their circumstances.

Lather sees rhizomatic validity as one of the “counter practices of authority” (Lather, 1993, p677). One of the problems for this particular piece of research is how to draw together and represent diverse experiences in ways that do not aspire to being an authority but instead lay out possibilities for different ways into understanding what literacy is and how it might be accomplished. Any way of judging such an attempt as valid or not valid falls either into its pragmatic accomplishments (which also have to be agreed on and measured in some way) or into nominalist realms; things that are entirely dependent on the ways that we chose to define them. Rather than aspiring to validity as a claim to knowledge I find more appropriate goals in looking for understanding as opposed to truth, and interpretation as opposed to cause and effect, a merging together of the roles of author and audience and a project of sharing rather than authority. Validity may then be found in the measure of success achieved in finding ways of representing beliefs so that they remain faithful

to their source whilst at the same time also becoming in some ways comprehensible to people who do not share them.

External validity and Generalisation or Lack of?

There is no reliable secondary data on home education in the UK. It is not possible to ascertain accurate numbers or any kind of demographic profile of home educators (Petrie, Windrass and Thomas 1998). Any sample to population generalisation is therefore impossible; there is simply not enough information available to claim the representativeness of any sample. In addition all samples in this area of research, including this one, are entirely self-selected and, in this case, restricted to those with internet access and to those who heard about the questionnaire. Even if more were known about the home educating population a sample to population generalisation would still likely fall on our lack of understanding about how children learn to read by themselves. In what ways the sample represented the whole would depend on the variables considered pertinent and these in themselves would constitute a theory of learning.

Criticism of sampling has bedevilled home education research and was a cited factor in Badman's dismissal of much of the research he examined (Badman 2009c). Small and unrepresentative samples make statistical generalisations about home education currently impossible. This research does not attempt such generalisations nor does it include any hypotheses for which characteristics need to be held constant for the making of comparisons. Instead this research is based on a working generalisation,

held amongst some home educators that children do not need to be taught to read. This research is about exploring this generalisation and finding ways of understanding it. Sample limitations do not interfere with the exploratory and qualitative nature of the research; the aim here being to concentrate on the insights which can be found from within the sample and to begin exploring ideas of how learning at home takes place; rather than to ascertain how wide such practices might be or to link any other characteristics with home education or its forms.

However, as home education has expanded it seems reasonable to conjecture that the belief that children will learn to read without instruction may have expanded at least proportionately through a process which Stake calls “naturalistic generalisation” (Stake, 2000, p23). This kind of generalisation arises as people share information and ideas and in doing so see similarities between their own experiences and that of others. Accounts of children learning to read autonomously circulate through home educating communities, newsletters and web site forums, the occasional publication (eg Thomas and Pattison 2007) and home education gatherings such as HESFES and LiTTLe (home educating conferences held annually in the UK) forming a collective wisdom. Parents are able to combine this community knowledge and experience with their own personal, situational knowledge to make individual choices about their children’s education. My own introduction to the idea that it is not necessary to teach children to read came from such sources and I participated in the process of naturalistic generalisation by finding resonance between my own children and my own beliefs and the things that I heard. At this level it might be possible to think of home educators as a loose community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

A situation with many similarities is discussed by Simons, Kusher, Jones and James (2003) who describe a Teacher Training Agency (TTA - a UK government agency) programme implemented with the intention of drawing teachers into the research process alongside university research work. It was found that the teachers in the project treated data differently to the researchers; developing their own processes for the use of evidence generated in their research roles. Teachers focussed on the particular; the things that were pertinent for them in their situations and for the children whom they taught. They linked relevance to their own experiences and whilst the establishment of wider validity or control of variables was not possible, they fed their own insights back into their own practice. Although they shared their research at both the collegial and collective level they were not seeking nomothetic, law like statements that could be applied across the board. Evidence for them came to mean "information which is indicative of action or which is incorporated into a judgement preceding action" (Simons, Kusher, Jones and James, 2003, p357).

Stake (2000) urges us to capitalise on this natural human capacity to experience and understand. Certainly parents listening to other parents and transferring the ideas of a community to their own lives and own child are likely to be using tacit understanding rather than the kind of formal matching procedures that might apply to research (Firestone, 1993). As Firestone goes on to argue analytic or sample to population generalisations are not helpful when making individual decisions; instead parents make personal decisions about whether knowledge from other families is

pertinent to their situation and their child. This is generalisation as a practice rather than as a theory.

However, whilst the teachers in Simons et al's study (2003) are very cautious about extending their generalisations beyond the immediate situation, parents in this study, having reached their decisions by naturalistic generalisation, went on to often make much wider generalisations. Parents' experiences apply solely to their own children and even within families there was much stress on the individuality of each child but the overwhelming majority of parents did not believe that their child could read because of some unusual inherent ability or characteristic or some special element(s) in their environment. Whilst they treated their children as individuals they did not attribute their child's literacy to individual reasons but commonly generalised their experiences to all children in statements like "children do not need to be taught" (see Chapters Five and Six). Parents here are moving from the particular to the general in a way which research finds very difficult to emulate. Indeed Hargreaves calls this distance between what happens in practice and what research is able to offer as a theory or generalisation the "fatal flaw in educational research" (Hargreaves 1996, quoted by Simons, Kusher, Jones and James, 2003, p348). The question concerning generalisation in this particular research is then the extent to which it is possible to follow this chain of thought from individual families, through a level akin to a community of practice through to something more universal.

One paradox here is the purpose of generalising over home education. Despite parents' extension of their experiences from the particular to the general, home

education in practice works in the other direction. Decisions about how to home educate rest (at least currently in the UK) with parents and, as argued above, parents do not operate on generalisations instead they make personal decisions about and with their children. These decisions are far more complex than any generalisation would be able to represent; taking into account myriad nuances of circumstance and individuality. As a result there will always be multiple ways of accounting for any set of particulars and as Lincoln and Gube (2000) point out that there is never a single generalisation which must emerge from a particular piece of research. Such individuality, as opposed to generalisation is an oft stated (although difficult) goal of mass education provision (Brown, 2002) so it seems somewhat perverse then to make generalisation a goal of research on home education. Instead the enterprise may be better served by keeping hold of diversity and accepting that it is not always possible or helpful to put together all relevant perspectives in order to summarise a phenomena (Lincoln and Gube 2000).

However, backing off generalisation is not necessarily to restrict what it might be possible to learn from the experiences of these families; their experiences can be seen as of relevance to learning in other places and to learning other things not through generalisations but through the transference of ideas. Guba and Lincoln (2000) argue that rather than make generalisations, research can instead be used to create working hypotheses which can be tentatively and carefully transferred from one set of circumstances or context to another. It is, for instance, interesting to toy with the thought of what would happen if no attempts were made to teach children in school to read until they are seven or eight years old.

Returning to considering research as an historical event; seeing autonomous home education as a political and ideological, as well as educational, movement of the late 20th and early 21st century, calls for a different kind of generalisation; one that is capable of drawing together a recognisable social group purely on the basis of their collective thought. Parents have responded to questionnaires as individuals recounting their own stories; they do not all think the same things in the same ways and they are all capable of changing their minds substantially on the issues involved; many say that they have done so already. Despite this, it is also possible to see these parents as some kind of community or movement on the basis of their common views and actions. Casey (1995) points out that in such circumstances individuals do not represent nor need to be typical examples of their community but that part of their identity is an extension of the collective. Accounts therefore are not just autobiographical stories but are also the history of the people (Casey 1995). Whether home educators should be described as a 'community' or a 'people' is a difficult question. In an historical sense however and in order to follow my own preference of understanding these views and thoughts as a product of the intersection of various and particular ideas and circumstances, it is necessary to acknowledge the collective nature of their thought through some level of generalisation.

The Nature of Subjectivity

Interpretative approaches to research data rest on the elucidation of meaning located within text and as, in such forms of analysis, there are no “absolutely good reasons for deciding what counts as knowledge and what does not” (During, 1992, p4) this runs the risk of becoming a never ending regression; an endless and unfulfillable quest for “original meaning” (During, 1992, p3). Heidegger’s approach to hermeneutics pulls up short the difficulties of this in the concept of *Dasein*. In this sense understanding is not something to be achieved; something that we do or fail to do but rather “understanding is a mode of being, and as such it is characteristic of human being, of *Dasein*” (Ramberg and Gjesdal 2009 on line, no page number). We know the world in a tacit and pragmatic way and interpretation is about the foregrounding of certain aspects of the world. *Dasein* is the fundamental embeddedness of humans in their way of life; no interpretation either of self or of the world about the self can be achieved without reference to this embeddedness, to *Dasein* itself. Thus ‘reality’, the stuff that research seeks to find, does not consist of stand-alone facts but is a feature within a web of meaning and held in place by the “structure, sign and play of social relations” (Derrida, 1978, p 287).

In this vein, Flint and Peim (2011) argue that understanding the nature of something is about understanding the nature of the world it inhabits and the dynamic relationships identities have with their surroundings. Ontological divisions isolate ‘things’ from their ‘world’ so that they can be seen as objects with a ‘relationship’ to that world and once these divisions have been established an epistemological act

must be used to replace and re-establish them. This form of understanding is a continual stumbling block in articulating what it is that this research is trying to achieve. In order for 'reading' to be understood it has to be isolated, named and defined as a thing and then replaced into the world. Whilst not disagreeing with the concept of Dasein, the ontological divisions on which even it must rest divide research from the rest of life, postulate a background and a foreground, things and their relationships, the circumstance and the event, the cause and the effect. These concepts have served educational research well because they fit the needs of mass schooling well. Home education that eschews the divided life of home and school, work and play, learning and leisure and which does not measure education in terms of subject matters, timetables, curricula, age related targets and normative assessments may be served less well.

What I have called the intersection of events; the individual, cultural and political circumstances in which and from which this research arose, is not a context with its connotations of a passive backdrop. Things do not happen against an historical background or within a social setting; instead things are history, are society. This research is the event; not a reflection or an account or a description of something external to its own existence. In this way, ideas are the world in which they make sense and this research is not subjective in the sense that it is a product of the conditions that gave rise to it; instead it is the manifestation of those conditions and as those conditions are unique, the here and now, the question of subjectivity makes no sense. Things can only ever be what they are in the moment. In this sense,

research only needs to present itself; the question and the attempt to answer the question are events, complete in their own right.

Geertz argues that,

“Understanding a form of life, or anyway some aspects of it to some degree and convincing others that you have indeed done so, involves more than the assembly of telling particulars or the imposition of general narratives. It involves bringing figure and ground, the passing occasion and the long story into coincident view”.
(Geertz, 1995, p51).

In this process, research is not the transparent conveyor of some form of truth; instead understanding is the passing occasion itself to the long story of what knowledge is taken to be.

The Role of Subjectivity

The question of how children who are not taught learn to read, hinges on the interpretation of certain key ideas and the relationship that is perceived between them; reading and teaching. As Barrow argues “any particular methodology itself carries with it certain implications about the nature of education or what constitutes educational success” (Barrow, 1999, p17). In accepting as an implicit premise of the research question that children at home learn to read successfully, the judgement of what it actually means to read successfully has been made unavoidable; the research question itself reifying what has already been discussed in Chapter One as an abstract notion without substance, let alone a means of measurement, of its own – the ability to read.

This study has relied on purely parental judgement of the achievement of reading. Methodologically this decision is open to the criticism of the lack of standardisation such a strategy will inevitably produce. Respondents may hold very different ideas about what constitutes reading, they may have different ways of defining reading themselves, they may not have the wherewithal to make an accurate ('objective') judgement on the matter, they may be biased ('subjective') in how they perceive their children, they may be guided by wider or different principles about education. On the other hand, whilst standardised assessment might appear to avoid some of these difficulties it also embodies ideas which themselves sit uneasily with the alternative ideas of education sometimes expressed by home educators (Thomas 1998, Thomas and Pattison 2007). As such seeking out and accepting parents' subjective decisions about their child's reading is part of breaking down the asymmetrical power relations of research (Stronach and MacLure 1997) and actively negotiating the research process.

Reading may be measured in a variety of ways; any particular form reflecting a particular theory about what reading is. Other research on children who learn to read at home (Clark 1976, Stainthorp and Hughes 1999) has ascertained the achievement of reading by testing via a standard script or following the assessment of a professional teacher. What constitutes educational success is a research decision and a demonstration of the researcher's power. The researcher's perspective becomes embedded in the idea of success which is then tautologically used to measure that success. We have no way of objectively measuring success in reading

only methods that will bring different assumptions to bear. White (2009) argues that when we use indicators to judge the amount of a concept present, it is not the concept itself but the behaviour and events to do with it that are actually being measured. Thus reading tests tell us how children perform in reading tests (Coles 2000); they do not tell us about reading but about the indicator that is being measured. In other words what is being measured is determined by the nature of the yard stick, rather than the other way around.

Parents' thoughts on their children's reading lie at the heart of this research because these things bring us much closer to the meaning literacy has within families and for children themselves. In addition this information helps reveal how non-reading children view literacy and how they come to engage with it; things which performance on a standardised reading test cannot show. Taking a non-systematic view of reading assessment also allows for the possibility that successful reading is not a standard attainment but something that may be rather different for each individual. The picture that this approach gives us cannot now be tested for accuracy against some other, different way of measuring reading ability when the thing being measured – the ability to read – does not exist anywhere independently of its measurement (McHoul and Grace 1993). Thus validity, in the sense of are we measuring the thing we intend to measure is not possible as, as far as reading is concerned, there is no 'thing' only its measurement. The only validity possible is one that lies within its own enframing and tautologically re-enforces itself.

Taking 'reading' to be something that needs to be understood in context and that is different between individuals is a perspective that means reading cannot be tested for but only demonstrated as a facet of a person's complete life and not a detachable skill. Even so Mace reminds us that "the literacy behaviours we see in others can give us only the most superficial idea of what it is that anyone is *making* of what they are reading or writing" (Mace, 1988, p62). As Farrell (2008, p11) asks "how exactly does one "test" for understanding or meaning-making?" Parents can offer interpretations but not explanations (Bruner 1996) nor can the criteria of success and the meaning of reading be satisfactorily reached through a researcher led, decision making process. The result is that this research cannot define success in reading. Instead and in keeping with the ideals of liberal education and their commitment to autonomy – that individuals make up their own minds, "make their own sense of the world" (Barrow, 1999, p18) - not only should children decide for themselves if they can read successfully but they must do so.

Asking Questions

Setting Up the Questionnaire

One of the key challenges of investigating autonomous learning is that how to distinguish when learning is or is not taking place remains an unanswered question. Researching learning to read informally presents particular difficulties in terms of recognising what is data and what is not in a process which is not directly observable and may potentially be taking place over the very long term (ie a decade or more).

With no way of being able to designate any situation as a learning one it is impossible to observe or record a “session”. Long term, ethnographic study would seem to lend itself to researching informal learning; accepting that the people most likely to be able to do this would be parents (eg Bissex 1980 who observes her son Paul learning to read and write over a number of years). Some of the problems inherent in this approach are highlighted by Thomas (1998) who based part of his research on the prolific diaries kept by a home educating mother over a number of years. Her careful and abundant notes include transcripts of conversations and her own thoughts as well as observations and descriptions of the way her daughter spends her time. The diaries bring home to Thomas the “sheer difficulty of recording instances of learning or experiences which might contribute to learning” (Thomas 1998, p 80). Diary writing relies on careful observation but also on day to day theorising about how learning takes place. The richness and detail contained in the diaries is obvious from the many excerpts which Thomas quotes, yet the diaries remain as interesting for what is not included as for what is; one example being how the child in question learns to tell the time. This she does with enough dexterity to calculate what the time will be an hour and three quarters hence yet the diary contains only one reference to an incident which involved telling the time.

As a practical exercise diary writing requires long term commitment and a dedicated sample of contributors who would have been hard to recruit given the time and resource restrictions of PhD research. In addition having already been a long term participant observer in children’s autonomous learning I wanted to widen this observational base with a different and perhaps rather more structured research

approach. I considered a fruitful way forward would be to ask for parents' reflections in the form of interviews or through a questionnaire. Looking back over experiences in a general sense would allow parents to communicate the flavour of experience and their own feelings without making the demands of long term observation. It would also be a way of capturing parents' own learning philosophies rather than relying solely on researcher interpretation such as would be the case with visual methodologies for instance. An internet based questionnaire was considered capable of reaching greater numbers over a wider area and would perhaps go some way towards addressing the dismissal of home education research on the grounds that case studies and small samples are not sufficient to inform policy decisions (Badman 2009c). Its disadvantage would be that whilst widening participation in some respects it would also restrict responses to parents confident and competent enough to complete the questionnaire and of course to those who were able to access it. As an advantage it would be an arm's length way of collecting data, minimising any feeling on the part of respondents that they needed to answer in a particular way or with a particular type of experience. Although previous work would clearly mark me as sympathetic towards autonomous home education, the questionnaire stated that all experiences whether good or bad, structured or unstructured would be welcome.

The initial intention was to follow up some of the questionnaire responses with semi-structured interviews and many of the respondents indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed either face to face or on the telephone. In the event, the

number and detail of responses received precluded this being undertaken as part of the PhD thesis but remains an avenue to be explored in the future.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions each of which was given an unrestricted space in which respondents could answer, allowing parents to give as much or little information as they chose. No answer alternatives, categories or scales were given (apart from question 2 on sex of the child). Parents could answer about a single child or more than one child or the whole family as they saw fit. In fact the responses varied considerably in length with some responses fitting on one side of A4 and others running for pages. All of the questionnaire and instructions could be seen on one internet page so respondents could scroll around and see exactly what was being asked of them. The layout is clear with all questions in the same format. No time prediction for completing the questionnaire was given as this would be entirely a function of how much respondents wanted to write.

The questionnaire attempted to ask open and non-leading questions; the intention being to seek detail rather than supply it and then ask for comment or verification. Nevertheless there were unintended presumptions in the questions that came to light gradually during the process of analysis. These assumptions were about the nature of learning and teaching as well as reading and during the course of analysis I became increasingly aware that a particular framework had indeed been set up which would guide contributors' possible responses. The idea of the leading question is based in an empiricism which also postulates by inference that a non-leading question is possible (Kvale 1996) yet the idea that reading can be researched

away from a set of ideas about, if not a whole theory of, reading seems to be equally untenable. As the research progressed I wondered more and more about this methodological paradox but have reached no practical suggestions. How to go about researching and constructing alternative ideas about education through the ideas and discourse of the mainstream is and remains an on-going dilemma. In the meantime Kvale comfortably writes, “leading questions do not always reduce the reliability of interviews but may enhance it” (Kvale, 1996 p 28). Indeed it seemed to me that the responses were very good at challenging the assumptions and pre-suppositions that underlay my own thinking and have been directly provocative in spurring me on in the endeavour to deconstruct at least some of them.

Choosing the Questions and the Rationale behind them

Previous research (Thomas 1998 and Thomas and Pattison 2007) as well as personal experience had opened up an enormous field of questions around children learning to read at home. The questionnaire was intended to hone in on how, in the absence of deliberate teaching, children might go about exploring and engaging with literacy for themselves. The gatekeepers to this question are parents and thus the questionnaire needed to address how parents understood and judged their child’s reading, how they understood teaching and learning to read themselves and how these views fitted into their wider philosophy of education, children and life in general. The finalised questionnaire ran as follows:

1. Age of your child now:

This was asked this because it was expected to find a range in how far parents were looking back and remembering the experience of having a child learn to read at home as there seemed no reason to restrict the study by insisting on recent experience. In fact some parents wrote about their now adult children whilst others talked about children currently in the process of learning. Over time parents may well build a narrative of how their child learned to read that they become used to handing on and shaping in re telling. Knowing how long ago parents are talking about might help to understand things that are said further down the questionnaire.

2. Male/Female:

As a basic characteristic which would help sort the data, this was included despite the unknown element of its relevance. Alongside other questions it helped to build a picture of the family and child in question but its significance in this type of sample is clearly limited.

3. Is your child home educated or in school? If s/he has experienced both could you give brief details?:

Many home educated children have been in school at some point. If the child in question was at school before they learned to read then what happens to him or her in school needs to be taken into account. On the other hand if parents were

to feel that despite being taught reading in school their child did not learn until they were taken out of school this would also be relevant.

4. Did your child learn to read at home or at school?:

Again this question clarified that the children in the study did learn to read at home. Despite seeming to offer a clear choice, the box for parents to write in followed the same format as for the other questions. This meant that parents could add comments or clarification rather than just yes and no.

5. Did you or another family member teach your child to read?:

This question was left open ended although it could have been followed by a yes/no box. If it had been a great profundity and variation in responses would have been lost as this question generated a large amount of very significant data. With hindsight it is a very loaded question and very revealing of my own stance, at least at the time of the asking.

6. If so, what methods did you employ? (eg phonics, reading scheme, flashcards etc):

This question revealed how parents went about teaching and also proved immensely helpful in considering how parents themselves saw and approached learning to read.

7. If you do not feel that you taught him/her and they are now reading, what do you consider to have been the main factor(s) in gaining that skill?:

This question gave further insight into how parents understood the processes of teaching and learning and how they viewed reading.

8. At what age would you say your child became able to read?:

Previous research (Thomas 1998 and Thomas and Pattison 2007) has shown considerable variation in the ages at which children learn to read at home. Again the non-prescriptive presentation gave parents the chance to answer differently and raised the whole issue of whether (and why) it is necessary to put an age on reading.

9. What sort of things is your child interested in reading?:

This question would help reveal three things: how parents judged that their child could read, the sort of things that might motivate a child to begin reading and thirdly the level of proficiency the child had attained.

10. Does your child enjoy reading?:

Whether a child enjoys reading or not could potentially be a key element in their learning and in their uses of literacy. On the other hand, thinking about children who don't enjoy reading could also be revealing about how, when and why children learn to read.

11. Based on your experiences, what have you personally learnt about the process of learning to read?:

This question offered parents the chance to recount their own observations and express their own learning philosophies. It also sought to capture contributors' own meanings and to reveal some of the wider contexts of understanding and theory in which parents were thinking about reading (Silverman 2011).

What do we need to know about parents?

The questionnaire did not ask parents for any socio-economic or educational information about themselves. The correlation between these things and children's attainment levels in school is a long standing one, and it might be considered both useful and usual to collect such data. The reasons for not doing so in this case are both political and academic.

As discussed earlier, this data was collected at a very sensitive and difficult time for home educators in the UK – the intended target sample. Amongst the suggestions, conjectures and rumours flying around at the time was the idea that parents should themselves have reached a certain standard of education and be in possession of certain resources before being 'allowed' to home educate their children. To have asked questions about socio-economic status or educational attainments in such a climate might have created the idea of a link between my work and such suggestions and would have run the risk of severely reducing the number of parents willing to complete the questionnaire. Whilst the political context in which the data was

collected heightened the need for researcher sensitivity people who have agreed to answer a questionnaire on reading and are then confronted with questions about their social status might well feel offended or misled even without the air of persecution which accompanied the Badman Review.

Academically the question must be addressed of how such data would be made use of should it be collected. Before collecting personal data from people I consider it a matter of good ethics that the reasons for so doing should be clear. In this case it is hard to see how such data could inform research on autonomous paths into literacy. The sample here is unrepresentative (we do not have sufficient information on home educators either in the UK or abroad for any current research to make claims of representativeness) thus any information that suggests a correlation with socio-economic factors, gender, characteristics of parents, nationality, religion etc would be almost meaningless. This difficulty notwithstanding there are other reasons for proceeding here with restraint.

Work on social class and educational achievement uses the measurement of school standard tests (Perry and Frances, 2010) and this immediately begs the question of how transferable such standards are to home education. There has been only one study of class and home education carried out in the UK. Rothermel (2004) found, according to her sample, that home educated children from working class homes outperformed their middle class home educated peers in end of reception year PIPS (Performance Indicators in Primary Schools) assessments. However her acceptance that school standard tests are an appropriate measurement of achievement amongst

home educated children begs both practical and epistemological difficulties. Some home educators may be keen to level peg with school and may regard school tests and exams as an appropriate measure of success in education but, as the data here shows and as the discussion of what constitutes educational outcomes in Chapter One further serves to illustrate, many may find this inappropriate. On a practical level a child who has not followed the national curriculum could not be expected to perform well in tests on the national curriculum however that is not to say that they have not achieved well in whatever form of education they have received. Without standardisation however the terms of any comparison that can be made with other children, either school or home educated, is inevitably reduced.

On a more philosophical plane many home educators may consider age related, subject specific, pre-determined targets as inappropriate measures of educational attainment. In the sample used here the ages at which children are said to begin reading vary far more widely than the bench marks of school success would deem permissible; indeed the term 'success' itself may be felt inappropriate by some families. If we cannot determine a reasonable definition of what should constitute educational success, at least within a given sample of home educators, then linking the idea of success to any external factor becomes impossible.

Should a consensus about educational success be reached within a sample the purpose of linking this to socio-economic status still requires further examination. In studies of class and education (Perry and Frances, 2010) middle class labels are used as a proxy for certain practices within families that are deemed to contribute

significantly towards success in school. Such models of 'successful parenting' are overwhelmingly based on white, middle class European/American samples who play their part as the 'standing reserve' by carrying out particular activities such as reading to children and supporting school education, talking, playing and interacting with children in specific ways (Prins and Toso 2008). In this sense such practices can be seen as representing, "the legitimate pedagogic action, ie the pedagogic action endowed with the dominant legitimacy" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 p23). However the use of class to mark this imposition of the dominant culture is not a given and as Gorard and Taylor argue despite being "powerful and useful" such classifications remain theories and so should be susceptible to change" (Gorard and Taylor, 2004, p156).

Parents in this study have different ideas about how to enable their children's education as they have different ideas about what education is. This research and other work (Thomas and Pattison 2007) suggests that whilst many families may engage in some of the activities recommended to parents of school children with the aim of cultivating literacy they may also deviate from the 'ideal' behaviour in other ways. In addition, the rationale behind the behaviour can critically alter the nature of activities taking place. For example, reading aloud to children is an often exhorted 'standing reserve' activity. A BBC website for instance tells parents "Reading with your child is vital. Research shows that it's the single most important thing you can do to help your child's education" (BBC, 2012). The purpose behind reading aloud is explicitly given that children will do better in school as a result (Children Better Prepared For School If Their Parents Read Aloud To Them, 2008). Parents at home,

on the other hand, see different links between reading aloud and children's literacy and creating these links is not necessarily the purpose of their reading (see Chapters Five and Six). In many of the home educating families the intention behind reading to children is entertainment and enjoyment – as illustrated by the number of families who continue to read aloud long after children are reading for themselves. Where the intention behind ostensibly the same activity is different it would seem pertinent to ask how the intention might actually alter the activity. In other examples the 'ideal' behaviour may simply not take place in any form. Another 'standing reserve' role of parents is to encourage children to do their homework (BBC 2012). Home educating parents on the other hand often eschew any insistence on any type of 'work' being done and explicitly state that the age at which children begin reading and writing is not of consequence. Having acknowledged this, the use of a 'middle class' label to act as a proxy for certain values and behaviour may be quite misleading.

At both ends of the correlation therefore between socio-economic status (or other markers of social positioning) and children's educational attainment and the grounds for linking these two, lie doubts which must be further explored before such data can be put to explanatory use. Given the depth of enquiry which this situation begs I believe that it merits a study in its own right rather than being an adjunct to research the focus of which lies elsewhere.

Getting Answers

Analysing the questionnaires

In all, 311 questionnaire returns were received. 220 of these have been used in this research. The remaining 91 returns came from parents who answered that they had taught their children to read at home and who did not raise issues with the idea of learning emanating from teaching. These returns are being analysed separately and it will be possible in the fullness of time to compare the two sets of data and the usefulness or otherwise of the way in which they have been separated. Of the 220 questionnaire returns used here, 171 came from parents writing about a single child and the remaining 49 from parents writing about more than one child. In all 296 children were involved in the research; 157 boys and 139 girls. Two home educated adults, one male, one female spoke about themselves. The ages at which the children were said to begin reading ranged from 18 months to 16 years. The responses were all given a serial reference number and labelled M, F or Fam to indicate that they referred to a male or female child or to a family.

Analysis of the questionnaires has been carried out in two stages reflecting two aspects of understanding. First has been a concentration on the detail of language and in particular the disputation that has arisen around the words 'teach' and 'read'. How respondents envisage the concept of the 'child' is also examined. The second stage considers the framework which puts events together in sequence and uses one event to explain another. A continuous comparative method was used to expose the most frequently occurring concepts, recurring patterns of expression and similarities

which could be regarded as fruitful areas for discussion. The most repeated of these were taken not because they are endowed through numbers with explanatory status but because they give the most fodder for further thinking. The aim was not to produce a stable order, unearth a consensus nor to impose a classificatory function but rather to furnish a landscape around which further consideration can take place.

Tonkiss argues that the “primary interest in personal accounts is not so much the views being expressed but how different views are established and warranted” (Tonkiss, 1998, p 253). With this in mind, my concentration has been on the relationships between ideas and understandings of different elements: how reading is understood, how children as learners are understood and how these two concepts both emanate from and give rise to ideas about how children learn to read in the absence of direct, deliberate teaching.

Looking at Words

The tool for telling the story is language and to analyse its contribution Tonkiss (1998) recommends identifying recurrent key words. In this analysis I have concentrated on the use of two key words that seem to be problematic across the responses. These words are ‘teach’ and ‘read’. The use of, and disputes over, these words are set in the wider struggle of the discourse of education to find appropriate vocabulary and adequate concepts to describe how children come to literacy in autonomous ways.

Language, Daiute and Lightfoot argue “is neither transparent nor an accident but the embodiment of social relations, culture and ideology” (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004, p 85). Language neither corresponds to reality by acting as a set of representations that mirror the world, nor acts in terms of a coherence theory that somehow hooks on to reality (During, 1992). Instead, language orders thinking by offering culturally constructed possibilities of meaning. From this point of view language is about the construction of the social world. Similarly McHoul and Grace argue that discourse shapes not just the ‘real’ but “the conditions of possibility” (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p39) for the real; discourse itself directs meaning so that “truth becomes a function of what *can be* said, written or thought” (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p 31 italics original). Such Foucauldian discussions of discourse analysis are concerned with the problem of how to separate a given statement from the dominant discourse (McHoul and Grace, 1993). In Foucault’s terms the texts contributed to this research are neither ‘pure’ (because they are inevitably expressed in certain constructive language) nor made from human creativity but are instead already part of the flow of power. The Derridean view that meaning is a “free play of signs” in which a vocabulary can be actively chosen to create a form of significance (Novitz, 1985, p 104) does not seem to adequately reflect the problems of attempting to take up a position outside the mainstream. In trying to think about learning to read differently and understanding learning at home differently to learning in school the problem is how to avoid joining parents’ accounts to the body of thought that is already education and which defines education. In the belief that understanding difference cannot be achieved through the duplication of ideas that already exist many might wish to distance themselves from the concepts and vocabulary which are so tightly associated with schooling.

Yet, as things stand there is no alternative developed discourse of education; instead, accounts of reading have to be constructed from what is to hand in terms of concepts, categories and words.

In the struggle over key concepts in this research, particularly that of 'teaching', there is evidence of what Foucault might call discontinuities – instances and places in which the dominant discourse is implicitly or explicitly seen to be inadequate. To think differently is to question the discourse and to do this there has to be a space in which and from which difference can emerge but there also has to be a common means of expressing that difference such that it can be communicated and shared. This research, based on knowledge in its narrative form, is also about “the disintegration of narrative elements” (Aylesworth 2010 on line, no page numbers) and about how the dominant discourse of education can be, and is being, challenged.

Looking at Frameworks

In their responses parents recounted a version of how their children learned to read within the framework offered by the questionnaire. This framework set out possibilities of relevance and importance, shaping the responses so that the finished product is a creation of the joint authorship of researcher and respondent. The framework of the questionnaire means that responses accord to the definition of “a narration” as given by Scholes (1981 quoted in Carter 1993, p6) as “the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time”. However the open ended nature of the questions and the individuality of

responses makes Carter's expansion of this first definition also pertinent when he argues that in constructing stories authors are attempting "to convey their intentions by selecting incidents and details, arranging them in sequence and employing a variety of codes and conversions that exist in a culture" (Carter, 1993, p6) creating as Robinson and Hawpe put it, "a cognitively efficient compromise between uniqueness and universality" (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986, p117).

Robinson and Hawpe (1986, p112) argue that "stories are a means for interpreting or reinterpreting events by constructing a causal pattern which integrates that which is known about an event as well as that which is conjectural but relevant to an interpretation." Telling stories, as Mischler argues, is a way of "making inferences on the basis of partial information" (1986, p247) so that an extensive but inadequate array of information is honed by selection, deletion and conjecture into a complete and convincing story. Thus before it is even told the story has a purpose (explanation) and a framework (cause and effect). Robinson and Hawpe call this a "story schema" (1986, p 111). Stories need to adhere to this schema in order to be coherent; a story, like an argument, has to be convincing in its own terms before it can aspire to be an acceptable version of events in some higher sense.

Thus a chain of understanding is constructed between what children do, what parents notice, how they recount that noticing, how this is in turn interpreted and how all these things might be related to learning to read. At each stage of this certain observations and behaviour are turned into 'evidence' and given a place in a scheme of understanding whilst inevitably other things remain unnoticed, are glossed over or

ignored. Selecting details and making connections is a complex process influenced by myriad factors. This process cannot be seen as simply about the nature of reading and learning to read but is also about the authors; myself and the parents who responded, about the wider culture in which our lives are set, about the form of the research and, perhaps for some of us, about a small and differentiated niche of understanding being tentatively put together around what it means to learn to read. We are involved in the construction of something new although we cannot privilege that construction in any way; as Geertz puts it; “floundering through mere happenings and then concocting accounts of how they hang together is what knowledge and illusion alike consist in” (Geertz, 1995, p3).

Looking for Meaning in Metaphors

The use of metaphors in educational literature and discourse is widespread and a consideration of metaphors used by parents offers a rich analytical seam. The power of metaphor to “cross the borders between the spontaneous and the scientific, between the intuitive and the formal” makes them “amazingly informative objects of analysis” (Sfard, 1998, p4). Metaphors can be used to bridge together empirical, sensory information with ideas, and to connect abstract concepts with each other. More fundamentally, metaphors can be seen as underlying the way we talk about, conceive and even experience situations. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that even where metaphors do not appear to be being used overtly they still permeate language and therefore play an important role in the structuring of any world view (Holt, 1984, p 112). Their view is based on the Derridean one that metaphor is not a

special instance of the use of language but that all meaning is metaphorical; it is “not so much that metaphor is in the text of philosophy ... rather these texts are in metaphor” (Derrida, 1974, p60). As Sfard puts it, the “choice of a metaphor is a highly consequential decision. Different metaphors may lead to different ways of thinking and to different activities” (Sfard, 1998, p5).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors allow us to address abstract concepts as if they are entities or substances with discrete boundaries. For them, our predilection towards ontological metaphors is based in our own physicality and in our own experiences of physical objects. By this means ‘learning’, an abstract concept, can be objectified into a specific entity as it is in nouns such as ‘the learning process’, ‘learning outcomes’, ‘the achievement of literacy’ and even ‘education’. Personifying or treating complex phenomena such as learning as an object gives us a means of dealing metaphorically with it. For example ‘the learning process’ allows us to see learning as a defined series of steps leading towards a clear end. Further entailments of ‘the learning process’ would include the learning as a journey metaphor including its references to paths, milestones and progress, or the learning as a structure metaphor including its references to building blocks, foundations, higher skills and so on.

In metaphors literal meaning is eschewed for meaning through qualities or characteristics of words; “metaphoric resonance occurs when the characteristics of the words interact, not when literal meanings interact” (Jensen, 2006, p 43). Such interaction is not just a way of describing the world but is a means of presenting the

world which opens up “a whole new level of possible understanding that exists on a more human social plane” (Jensen, 2006, p38). This presenting of the world is perhaps particularly important in educational thought because, as Elliot argues, “theories of learning are dependent on metaphors, because they are centrally concerned either with mental acts and conscious processes or with the operations of mental mechanisms below the level of consciousness, all of which are describable only by metaphorical means” (Elliot, 1984, p 38).

One of the consequences of ontological metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson argue, is that they lead to assumptions that certain kinds of activity can be clearly identified and distinguished from other kinds of activity. Their example is that of ‘labour’ which can be differentiated from activities that are not labour. The assumption is “we can tell work from play and productive activity from non productive activity” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p67). Similarly, seeing learning as a kind of activity assumes that it can be differentiated from other activities. This in turn fits into the ideology of schooling – children go to school to learn and to engage in learning as an activity in its own right which can be differentiated from play or work or other activities. These assumptions are much less obvious however when we turn to learning in a more general sense. As Lakoff and Johnson continue to argue through the labour example, viewing learning “as merely a *kind* of activity” leaves out important issues “of who performs it, how he experiences it, and what it means in his life” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p67, italics original).

Although metaphors may treat abstract concepts as if they are ontological entities, this does not ensure a standard or even widespread understanding of such terms. Parents in this research for example may conceive of 'learning to read' in different ways to primary school teachers or compilers of achievement tests. Such concepts as learning, progress, achievement, improvement, education and so on are, as both Elliot (1984) and Jensen (2006) argue, not representations of reality but culturally conceived concepts which must therefore be dependent for meaning on the culture in which they are employed. Lakoff and Johnson's objectified entities are, as a result, inherently unstable and even more so if they are being metaphorically identified with a second concept, as in the expression 'education is liberation' or from this research "learning to read is a natural process" (11Fam). The use of this metaphor involves the concept of learning to read being identified with the concept of a natural process. And as neither concept has either a physical manifestation of its own or an agreed cultural meaning, it is the speaker who must imply and the listener who must infer both the meanings of, and the connections between, the two concepts. Thus it is easy to see how metaphors may hide or lose meaning (Lawton, 1984) as well as reveal it, and how they may lead to the assumption of unwarranted claims in the transference of ideas along the chain of connections that create understanding.

In addition, language is an historical construct that changes over time and in usage. This, together with the culturally constructed nature of abstract concepts such as 'education', means that metaphors reflect more than the individual understandings of those who employ them. For instance the metaphors of 'the sun rising' or 'things falling to earth' are metaphors which many use but which often do not reflect those

individuals' understanding. Jensen (2006) suggests four different categories of metaphors – active, inactive, dead and foundational. Dead metaphors are those that have lost resonance and are now just common expressions like the examples above. Foundational metaphors are deep metaphors which seem to be natural expressions of our perceptions, one example might be the perception of education as a technology that permeates so much thinking as if it were a given. For the listener the difference between these two may be far from obvious. It is possible that parents simply use the verbal tools to hand – expressions like 'progress', 'achievement', 'basics' are metaphors which undoubtedly reflect elements of how our society as a whole views education, yet when they are used by parents whose actions question this view it is an important, but unanswered question, as to whether their vocabulary choice is restricted and restrained by the dominant view or whether it is at some level an accurate reflection of an individual's own world view. For instance it is very difficult to tell in extracts such as the following whether the metaphors of time, structure and movement employed are dead or foundational ones.

“They *began* by learning letter names and sounds ... *then we moved on* to using wooden building blocks to spell common, easy words ... *Eventually* we began getting 10 word readers from the library ...”
(11Fam, italics added).

Thinking of reading as a 'code' which children need 'tools' to address and which equates to a 'process' may just have become the parlance of learning to read; dead metaphors, rather than deep seated beliefs, foundational metaphors, or the thoughtful reflection of live metaphors.

Taylor (1984) suggests a partial solution to this difficulty by arguing that a metaphor is alive when the dual nature of its meaning is obvious. When the metaphor is taken literally, then it is dead or hidden. His argument begs the question of to whom does the dual nature need to be obvious – to the speaker who may be using a dead or foundational metaphor either without reflection or in some literal sense, or to the listener who may still catch the nuance? Because of this, analysing metaphors requires an overt standpoint. It also begs questions about the kind of precision of meaning which it is reasonable to expect language to deliver, because this in turn will limit the depths of analysis it can bear.

The analysis of metaphor is not able to answer to criteria of consistency, precision and clarity, instead “haziness, inexactitude and imprecision” (Lather, 2003, p 10 quoting Foucault, 1970, p 355) are part of the territory if language is to be assumed as the vehicle of meaning. Metaphors have limitations about what they can tell us; not just about the world but also about the world view of those that use them. .As Taylor argues, we should not be tempted to see metaphors as models of learning but rather “metaphors of education represent the claims made by groups to impose their own sets of meanings on experience” (Taylor, 1984, p 17).

Thus the analysis of metaphor does not extract meaning in any absolute sense, nor even meaning that the speaker or writer might recognise as their own. Instead it seeks an exploration of the swirl of ideas that make up communication; a way of “using language to experiment with different kinds of truth” (Mace, 1998, p 89). The examination of metaphors follows the epistemology adopted in this thesis of seeking,

not to come closer to a piece of reality, but to locate events in such a way that some insight may be gained into why things have been experienced in the way that they have and how experience and expression are linked together in explanatory ways.

Educational Metaphors

According to Sfard (1998) education is caught between two dominant metaphors; those of acquisition and those of participation. Sfard argues that acquisition metaphors use the idea of the human mind as a container to be filled with knowledge which then becomes a possession. Learning is about gaining ownership. This metaphor covers a wide range of ideas about how learning takes place from passive reception to active construction by the learner, to concepts transferred from a social to an individual plane and finally learning as “a never-ending, self-regulating process of emergence in continuing interactions with peers, teachers, and texts” (Sfard, 1998, p 6). Such metaphors are marked by the use of vocabulary such as: construction, internalisation, transmission, attainment, grasp, representation, material, whilst teachers deliver, convey, facilitate and mediate.

This is an ontological metaphor which sees knowledge as an object which can be passed around, deposited or built up in an individual’s brain as a personal possession, for example in the following quotes metaphors of construction (basics and tools) are entailments of the metaphor of learning as acquisition (having).

78M: “Once he *had* the *basics* ...”

29Fam: “As long as you *give them* the tools ...”

(italics added)

Sfard’s other dominant metaphor is that of participation as exemplified in Rogoff’s apprenticeship in thinking (Rogoff, 1990) or as in Lave and Wenger’s legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In these metaphors, having is replaced by doing. Whilst acquisition suggests an end point, participation is on-going and activity is not considered separately from its context. The kind of vocabulary employed in these metaphors is about situatedness, contextuality, cultural embeddedness and the aim of learning is to become a member of a community. The learner is a person whose interests lie in participating with other members of the group rather than in the accumulation of a private fund of knowledge; “learning a subject is now conceived of as a process of becoming a member of a certain community. This entails, above all, the ability to “communicate in the language of this community and act according to its particular norms” (Sfard, 1998, p4). The emphasis is not on the individual, but on the group. Parents appear to see learning to read in terms of participation in comments such as the following:

38Fam: “Everyone else was doing it, they wanted to do it too.”

57F: “Observing others reading, having a desire to do the same has been the biggest motivator.”

16F: “If they are surrounded by it they will want to do it.”

These metaphors return to the ideas discussed earlier of how discourse shapes the object of which it speaks. 'Learning' is created into a possession or a skill with an outcome that can be objectified. Seeing learning in these terms is more than a way of understanding; it can also be used to rationalise choices and particular educational practices. Both the metaphors of acquisition and participation can be seen as entailments of the meta-metaphor of education as technology; a metaphor itself so extended that it is able to transcend theories which at first look quite unlike one another.

Cause and Effect in Metaphors of Acquisition and Participation

Sfard (1988) argues that theoreticians of intellectual development, from Piaget to Vygotsky have proposed that to understand learning we need to understand how old knowledge may give rise to new. Inhabiting both the metaphors of participation and acquisition this question is addressed through a "conceptual transplant" (Sfard, 1988, p4) which addresses the question of 'giving rise to' through the explanatory logic of cause and effect. A cause is implemented, whether deliberately or accidentally, leading to an effect which can then be understood in terms of its causes. The desirability of seeking out this cause and effect link is rooted in at least one of the overall justifications of educational research; that the purpose of understanding learning is to facilitate intervention in it, so that educators will "know better what sort of help they should give" (Wells, 1986, p19). Cause and effect constitute a theory of control; enabling us not just to look backwards with understanding but also to look forwards with deliberation. A cause can be made into a tool to achieve a desired

effect, can be named 'teaching' and can be enacted by various means including the deliberate and systematic actions of other people or the cultivated development of certain behaviours within certain environments.

The thought that if children are not didactically and deliberately taught to read, something else must cause them to learn was the thought on my mind in question 7 of the questionnaire:

7. If you do not feel that you taught him/her and they are now reading, what do you consider to have been the main factor(s) in gaining that skill?

This question rests on the unarticulated premise that reading is an effect and that, given this, a cause for it can be found; the question itself follows a line of logic from within the discourse of education as a technology. Learning is an effect and education is a way of causing this effect by employing particular means in order to gain pre-set ends; "wherever ends are pursued and means are employed, wherever instrumentality reigns, there reigns causality" (Heidegger, 1977, p 6). Education as a technology and research as a science both rest on the central notion of linking cause and effect in a successful, logical partnership. Yet cause and effect are themselves examples of a way of thinking about the world, a discourse of understanding, rather than the reflection of some kind of physical and given reality:

"It is not possible to detect a cause empirically or prove that one exists philosophically. We can never directly sense a cause. We merely induce their existence from our own experience of the association of two or more events,

and this is nothing more than a habit of mind – immutable though it appears...
our notion of cause is little more than a superstition”
(Gorard, 2000, p 3-4).

The difficulty of establishing cause and effect in a positive, demonstrable way led to Popper’s suggestion of falsification as the proper way to pursue scientific knowledge and to uphold the rational process (Barnes, 1974). Because no theory can be definitively shown to be true, Popper argued, the only sure way for scientific knowledge to increase is by demonstrating theories to be wrong. Whilst no amount of re-testing can show a theory to be universally right, one demonstration that it does not hold, shows that it cannot be universally correct. Popper called this procedure falsification and argued that if a scientific statement can be falsified then so, logically, the theory on which that statement rests is simultaneously falsified and should be abandoned. However, transferring this idea to education the, at least practical, limits of the procedure of falsification become apparent, as illustrated by the debate on reading. Whilst it is readily acknowledged that some children do indeed learn to read without being taught (eg Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999) this acknowledgement has in no way falsified the perceived need for teaching within literacy education. On the contrary, Stainthorp and Hughes continue to argue that, “nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of children need direct tuition” (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p 165).

Gorard (2000) argues that such changing of propositions in the face of falsifying evidence is based on a non-logical appeal to familiarity. If all swans are white until the first black swan is spotted, the proposition ‘swan’ is expanded so that it no longer refers to a big white, water bird but to a big water bird which may be black or white.

The proposition black is left unchanged on the non-logical grounds that it is the more familiar of the two concepts in question. Lakatos (discussed by Noddings 1998) argues that core concepts lie within a 'protective belt', such that changes will occur around them but not to them. That some children learn to read without being taught (Stainthorp and Hughes 1999, Clark 1976) has not led to a falsification of the causal link between teaching and learning. Of the three variables in the statement (teaching, reading and children) it might be thought that teaching or reading would be the more flexible, less familiar elements which might be subjected to alteration. It must be a testimony to the strength of the concept of teaching that Stainthorp and Hughes chose to address the concept of 'the child'. Labelling the children in their study as "exceptional" (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p156) they simultaneously imply a 'normal' child, part of whose normality is established in that such a child does not learn to read before they are taught. By such an assertion the 'evidence' they find is tailored to a view of reality that supports the dominant discourse of education. Their proposition of 'the child' is based on an idealised type who fits into, and is essential to, their theory of learning and teaching. This idealised type is upheld in preference to the empirical evidence of their own study. Perhaps the teaching/learning link is simply too big and too important, too familiar a part of the prevailing educational discourse to be subjected to the ordinary laws of science.

The teaching- learning link has formed an important point of discussion and thought for many of the contributors to this research. The following chapters, devoted to data analysis, begin with this important question.

CHAPTER FOUR

Challenging Teaching as a Cause of Learning

Question five of the questionnaire asked whether parents (or any other family member) had taught their child to read. This question was a pivotal one in my mind at the beginning of the research. I was intrigued by my own experiences and by stories I had heard about children who seemed to spontaneously begin reading and children who were 'self-taught'. Particularly wanting to seek out these children I assumed that the answers to this question would allow the research to separate naturally into two parts; children who had been taught to read at home and children who had not. My blunt approach however was made untenable by the large number of respondents who took issue with the term 'teach' and did not want to commit themselves to having taught or not taught their child to read. Parents challenged the term both directly and indirectly.

Direct challenges to 'teaching'

87 contributors out of the total 220 made some direct challenge to the use of the term 'teach' as it was used on the questionnaire. These challenges took a number of different forms.

Dissatisfaction with the term 'teach'

Three contributors addressed the appropriateness of the term head on:

31M: “teaching not really the right term”

26M: “I wouldn’t characterise the process as either us (his parents) teaching him or him teaching himself to read. We see it more as a co-operative venture”

45F “For good order, we don’t feel we have taught them to read ...”

Twenty three contributors gave a qualified response to the question which expressed uncertainty about the use of the term. For example six respondents replied “not really”. Other replies included:

68M, 11M: “not explicitly”

16F “not directly”

12F “not particularly”

22M “I wouldn’t really say we did”

59F: “I think I did.”

In each case parents seem to be questioning whether or not what could be termed ‘teaching’ had actually taken place.

Seven more contributors indicated their feelings of inappropriateness about the term by placing it in inverted commas. For example:

4F: “We did not ‘teach’ her to read”

62M: “Really, he picked it up without any actual ‘teaching’”.

22M: “People learn things when they are ready, whether somebody is there to ‘teach’ them or not”

21 contributors replaced the word ‘teach’ with a different term. The most popular of these was “help” used by 7 contributors (59M, 79M, 70M, 29Fam, 56F, 51F, 41M), followed by “assistance” used by 4 (67M, 66M, 8F, “taught/assisted” 38Fam) and “facilitate”, also used by 4 (45Fam, 5Fam, 43Fam, 37M).

Other words used to replace ‘teach’ were:

“stimulate” (45F), “encourage” (48F, 41M), “guidance” (54F, 21M) “support” (18F), “convey” (44Fam).

Thus far it seems that parents are questioning the appropriateness of the word ‘teach’ for the part which they considered they had played in their child learning to read. In avoiding the term ‘teach’ or by their reluctance to categorise their own actions as teaching or not teaching parents are raising the issue of what teaching is and how it can be recognised. Substitute terms like ‘facilitate’ and ‘support’ suggest a gentler, more child-led approach to adult input than the traditional view of didactic teaching. Such alternative vocabulary, is also found in mainstream literature on literacy learning (eg Wells, 1986) and it could be argued that such words simply go more explicitly into what a teacher does; the job of a teacher being to support, facilitate, encourage and so on. However, the rejection of the term teach and the preoccupation with what it means and how it might be replaced suggests also a

strength of thought and feeling attached to its use which goes beyond finding the right expression.

Questioning the concept of 'teaching'

Altering the vocabulary may act to change the nature and implementation of the relationships that surround learning, but nevertheless words such as 'facilitate', 'support' and 'help' do not by themselves constitute a shift in the conception of teaching/learning relationships. Many contributors however made comments that seem to question not just the right way to express such relationships but the basis of their existence altogether.

Eight parents, when asked whether or not they had taught their child, simply referred to how they read to their child:

54M: "He basically learnt as we read to him."

13M: "My husband and I read to him."

43M: "We just read books to him."

7M: "We simply read a lot of books together"

34F: "She was read to so frequently, it's hard to say."

2F: "We read to her, she then started reading to us."

23F: "Both parents read to her a great deal but no formal teaching was used."

24Fam: "I read to my daughter a lot"

Three parents added a little to the reading but without going so far as to call this 'teaching':

40F: "I always read books to my child, and often put my finger under the words as I read."

58M: "I read and sometimes point to certain words that keep coming up like 'mommy'. That's it."

33M: "Hmmm. We read to him. Lots. ... We employ conversational learning on an ad hoc basis eg driving past an Asda store, we will point out and say "A for Asda".

Another parent replied:

34Fam: "showed him letters ... Then watched jolly phonics videos."

These parents chose not to describe their actions as teaching; the question implicit in their descriptions being not just a semantic one about which actions should be counted as teaching but also a conceptual one about the two part relationship between teaching and learning. Parents did certain things which they connected either at the time or afterwards to their child's later ability to read, yet they have not endowed these things with a teaching-learning link.

How this reluctance is best interpreted returns to the discussion in the previous chapter. Foucauldian ideas argue that rather than reflecting the world as a form of reality, language orders thinking by offering culturally constructed possibilities of

meaning. Aylesworth (2010) for instance argues we cannot know things in themselves; the objects of our knowledge must conform to the means we have of representing them. Such argument makes the things we know synonymous with the things we are able to articulate. And what we can articulate pertains not only to the here and now but to a “complete system of experience” (Aylesworth, 2010, on line no page numbers) which is not individual but collective and historical. The individuality of experience must be fitted into the relative inflexibility of words, the meanings of which is a matter decided not by the users of language at any given moment in time but by a weight of cultural convention that ensures conformity of thought and the continuance of certain ideas across generations. Where parents turn away from the expression ‘teach’ this may be a rejection of such continuity and conformity. ‘Teach’ may be considered an inappropriate word, not just for what it might mean here and now but also for its history and continuing associations.

On the other hand, the idea of finding meaning in language through any discourse or narrative analysis presupposes that discourse itself is subject to endless variation; to multiple forms of meaning and understanding otherwise such enquiry would be a finite exercise akin to looking up words in a dictionary. But supposing a flexibility of meaning within words seems to equally presuppose a different relationship between thought and language. At the outer limits of this idea, Pinker (quoted in Brown 1998) argues for ‘mentalese’; a mental life that is independent of language and where things that are nameless are not necessarily rendered unthinkable as a result. In this case the ‘fit’ between thought and word is an approximate one; thought being free to roam the bounds of human experience without restraint with words merely acting as

the receptacle for some occasional expression of this. Here language captures meaning rather than constructing it. Parents have ideas about learning which the term 'teach' is not flexible enough to contain although it seems that there is no substitute word which can be adequately employed to express their experiences and thoughts in its stead. The rejection of the term 'teach' is not in favour of another. Without an adequate ready to hand term, language becomes an obstacle that must be overcome in the expression of meaning rather than the genesis of that meaning. The experiential challenges to teaching seemed to cut many contributors semantically adrift from the means of expression at their disposal.

Teaching as a Theory of Mind

Teaching is more than a group of actions performed by one person towards another; it is a "set of beliefs about the mind" (Bruner, 1996, p 50). Bruner argues that folk pedagogies hold, often unarticulated, views about children and their minds and that such understandings shape the role of the teacher in their approach to education and the differing forms of instruction which they consider to be appropriate. The understanding that informs action, rather than the actions themselves, is what makes the teaching/learning relationship possible and 'real'. Instruction is a perceived possibility based critically on very particular understandings. The views of these parents may well reflect a theory of mind that separates their kind of education from teaching more thoroughly than the presence or absence of any particular practice would be able to do.

The idea of teaching as a conceptual rather than a physical action surfaced in the comments of parents who referred to the intention behind their acts rather than to the substance of acts themselves:

7F: "We certainly didn't think we were actively teaching her anything."

40F: "I don't think I taught her"

This parent set out the differences between what teaching might appear to be doing and what she felt its limitations to be. In her reasoning teaching cannot be a primary act; that has to be learning and therefore the actions of another can only back up learning.

52F: "I don't believe in 'teaching' so much as 'facilitating' someone's learning. You can make someone memorize anything though, but that doesn't mean they understand it and can act successfully and reliably on that memorized information."

A slightly more oblique questioning of what teaching is was made by nine respondents who answered in the plural when asked if anyone had taught their child to read, for example:

10F: "We all participated in part",

64M: "The whole family helped him (mum, dad, sister and two brothers), but he mostly taught himself"

45Fam(b): "The whole family facilitated her to teach herself",

23Fam: “We all help each other”.

67M: “Myself and my husband

38Fam: “I taught/assisted them and they taught/assisted each other.”

8F: Me, my husband and my mother have all ‘assisted’ her

These responses question the view, implicit in the question, of learning happening through a single conduit, one person – ‘a teacher’. In doing so they challenge the classical idea of a teacher dispensing knowledge and culture, as opposed to other models of learning such as learning through a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) or socio-cultural learning (Rogoff 2003). The idea of a single, recognisable teacher is not coherent with the idea of learning taking place as the result of being in a particular environment. Nor perhaps with the idea of sequenced stages of learning where a number of people might be contributing to learning in an uncoordinated manner.

The biggest single challenge to the idea of teaching came from the large group of contributors who asserted that their children had taught themselves to read. Of this group of 39 contributors, 25 simply said that their child or children had taught themselves, for example:

19F: “I would say she taught herself.”

42Fam: [My husband said to me] “you didn’t teach them. They taught themselves. You just knew when to get out of the way.”

18Fam: “My four eldest have taught themselves to read”

The remaining 14 gave some idea of the context in which their children had taught or were teaching themselves by referring to their own role as being one which made self-teaching possible or at least easier.

11Fam: "It was a group effort (the kids and mine) as they more or less taught themselves and asked for help from me when needed"

5Fam: "They taught themselves and I facilitated."

54F: "I would say she is semi-teaching herself with guidance from my husband and I."

22F: "She taught herself with help (when asked for) from her mother."

45F: "We help them teach themselves and give them plenty of chance to practice."

Two themes emerged as central to the idea of self-teaching. The first of these is the emphasis placed on learning as opposed to teaching and the second, the idea of children conducting their own learning, pro-actively and independently, but using others (parents) as resources in this process.

The following seven parents moved the emphasis expressed in the question from teaching to learning:

11M: "He learned to read, we didn't explicitly teach him"

12M: "My child learned to read because it was what he wanted to do. I couldn't stop him if I wanted to."

25Fam: "They learned rather than being taught."

6F: "She LEARNED how to read"

51F: "I helped her learn, I didn't 'teach' her."

56F: "I am trying to help her learn to read"

35Fam: "I guess they learned"

And the following six explained their own roles not as teachers who initiated or managed the process but as human resources able to answer questions or provide back up when it was requested.

37M: "We facilitate when we are asked by him for assistance"

22F: "She taught herself with help (when asked for) from her mother."

10Fam: "I just answered questions when asked."

11Fam: [They] "asked for help from me when needed."

44Fam: "Mainly we answered their questions"

59F: "I was available to answer her constant questions. The process was child-led but the level of involvement from me was very high."

55F: "She very much wanted me to work with her, so I did! ... I can't say that I really taught her. She wanted my help so I gave it."

How to Consider Teaching

The term 'teach' as it was used in the questionnaire was directly challenged in various ways by a number of respondents. Many parents were not happy with the

conventional use of the term and found grounds to dispute it. Many sought other ways to describe their relationship to, and part in, their child's learning. In challenging the use of the word 'teach' parents seemed to be making two points. Firstly, they were questioning the content of the idea of teaching. In these cases 'teach' did not seem to be considered an accurate way of describing the style and content of the adult/child interaction that had, in their view, taken place. In particular such challenges confront what teaching consists of and how it should be conducted.

Other challenges seem to strike more strongly at not just the nature of given teaching/learning relationships but at the whole conception of such a relationship. Parents did things which they connected to their child's reading but did not equate these to teaching. Bruner argues that:

“Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message”
(Bruner, 1996, p 63).

In Bruner's theory of mind teaching and learning are shown to be inextricably linked; two sides of the same coin. This view is an inevitable part of accepting teaching as a theory of mind; the very idea of pedagogy, regardless of its form, is based in the “classic assumption ... that children learn because they are taught” (Trevvarthen, 1995, p97). Bruner is inside his own theory of mind when he makes the suggestion that children will adopt ways of thinking about learning from their teachers' practices. But away from his theory of mind what follows from teaching is not given, rather it

seems that it is the epistemology of teaching that has gone on to create, as its own counterpart, the ontology of learning.

Contributors here are doing more than grappling with semantics they are also engaging with the fundamental enframing of what education 'is'. The Foucauldian understanding of discourse moves away from discourse as solely to do with language and "closer towards the concept of discipline" (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p26) ; a body of knowledge. Such a body of knowledge then itself becomes a discipline in that it disciplines the minds and thoughts of those that move within it. From this imposed order grows a physical reality as the discourse produces the objects of which it speaks (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p21). So the discipline of education has reified the understanding of teaching from a theoretical concept into an act performed and from there into a material object; a person who is a teacher. Thus, following Foucault's argument, an object is formed, the teacher, from the discursive practices that understand learning as a product of teaching. (The immense power of this idea is often met by those trying to understand home education through the ideas and terms of the dominant discourse. "Are you a teacher?" is quite often the immediate reaction of a nonplussed stranger when meeting their first home educator. An affirmative answer is not just information about a person's profession; it provides the link that allows home education to be understood in terms of the dominant educational discourse.) However, where the discourse of education is challenged, pedagogy questioned and the role of a teacher denied it is no longer tenable to rest on the comfortable yet dangerous idea that "that the way we teach is the way children learn" (Clark, 1976, p105).

Experiential Challenges to “Teaching”

Some parents challenged what is meant by teaching when their experiences failed to match their expectations. 25 responses fell into this category.

These challenges seemed to come about when parents expected to teach only to find these expectations confounded. There were three kinds of situations in which the expected link between teaching and learning was not realised. In the first parents expected to teach their child but had that teaching rejected, in the second parents taught but felt that teaching to have been ineffective in promoting learning and in the third, children pre-empted their parents by beginning to read ahead of the teaching process.

Teaching being rejected

These children rejected the idea of being taught to read by refusing to co-operate with their parents' teaching efforts:

19M: “He resisted any attempts on my part to get him to read.”

17M: “My son was very resistant to ‘being taught’ when he left kindergarten.”

38F: “We decided, as we did everything else at her pace, to do learning to read at her pace too. This was further enforced by her blocking us completely if we ever did try teaching her anything – if anything, it put her back.”

50M: "I started fairly structured 'teaching' when my son was 5 but it was so resisted by him and he seems to be such a private learner."

30F: "Tried phonics and flashcards but was very resistant... she knew her letters, but resisted any form of formal teaching"

13F: "She would become hysterical at any attempts by me [to teach her]."

73M: "The more I tried to 'help' my son learn to read, the more he resisted."

36Fam: "The younger girl was never more than polite about the flash cards, so we did not pursue them. She took an interest in letters at about the same age as her sister - before 3 - but then developed a strong antipathy toward anything resembling instruction in reading. I have always supposed she did not wish to compete with her sister's legendary exploits, although we did try not to put such pressure on her. In any case, she would actually get up from my lap and leave if I so much as ran my finger under the words while reading to her. One could not comment on oddities of spelling, or similarities of sounds, or any such thing. If one came upon her looking at a book, she would instantly close it and walk away. We did our best to let all this happen without comment. Many other things were happening in our lives and the child was clearly healthy, happy, and learning. At age 7.5, she had taught herself enough reading that she felt able to let us know about it. By age 9, she read *The Lord of the Rings* straight through. Twice."

Others simply failed to become interested in the idea of reading despite their parents' efforts:

41Fam: "I started to 'teach' her at age four but she wasn't interested. Decided to leave her alone...Our daughter is [now] somehow able to read and understand almost any word and if she doesn't she will attempt to read it anyway."

81M: "We did flash cards for the alphabet, he completed headsprout.com online when he was 5. That's it and it didn't really teach him to read, but maybe a start for sounding things out. He didn't show any interest in reading for two years after that."

31Fam: "At age 6, I tried to use the same method as the first son was taught in school, figuring that what had worked for one would work for the other, but that turned out not to be true. My son was not interested; he was terrifically bored and made little progress. So I tried a few other methods (phonics, a Freinet method, and may be others) but nothing seemed to really catch his interest. ... I finally came to the conclusion that we should leave methods alone and just go on doing what we did in daily life."

29Fam: "A. read later than her big sister so I started to worry and sit down and try to 'do phonics' with her. That failed miserably and turned her off reading. I finally just waited and went back to reading to her and at around 5 ½ it clicked for her."

37Fam: "Tried [to teach] but gave up – they were only able to do it when ready, some of my children wanted to – but found it too time consuming - and I felt that what they wanted to spend time doing (playing) was obviously more important."

29F: "I tried using phonics but she wasn't interested and couldn't grasp it."

44M: "He did ask me once if I could teach him but that lasted about a week and he quickly changed his mind."

46Fam: "When she was 5 we briefly tried "how to teach your child to read in 100 easy lessons," which turned out to be torture for both of us."

In all these cases parents decided to stop their teaching efforts and wait for their children to take the initiative in reading. As Tsabar (2014) notes, resistance to the authority of education is commonplace and a good deal of educational practice is concerned with how this resistance can best be managed. However his statement that “the existence of unwillingness to learn as a problematic side effect ... must be subdued as a condition for successful educational action”, appears to be predicated on the supposed teaching/learning link. It is teaching here that is being resisted rather than learning. Rather than being seen as a rejection of learning this expression of agency on the part of children may indicate an ownership of their own learning although not necessarily in the form of a managed acquisition of component skills that result in reading as might be laid out in a formal reading programme. This expression of children’s agency will be discussed again later.

Questioning the value of teaching

Other parents went through, at least to a certain extent, with their plans to teach but nevertheless came to question what they had done and what the effect of their actions had been. Even where teaching is taking place, with co-operation, it is not necessarily easy to say exactly what can be attributed as a consequence of that action:

72M: “It’s hard to say if I taught him or if he just absorbed the skills himself from time spent reading together.”

36Fam: "With the elder child, I followed Mr Doman's method for a while, from ages 1.5-2.5. She quite enjoyed it, but I should state that it was never my impression that she could actually read the flash cards, that is, she did not decipher, just learned to recognize shapes. It was uncomfortably like teaching a parrot to "talk". However, because she enjoyed it, we continued up until the point where she was supposed to be learning to read sentences. She lost all interest at that point, and turned to an enthusiasm for learning the names and sounds of individual letters. Doman, as one may know, disapproves of this pursuit, but I followed her lead and put aside the flash cards. She spent the year 2.5-3.5 gleefully reading aloud letters wherever she saw them. Then, quite abruptly, or so it seemed to me, she began to read independently. She moved from deciphering very simple board books to being able to read absolutely anything - aloud, with different voices for different characters - in about two months. I have never been able to decide what role the Doman training played in all this."

Some parents felt that their efforts to teach actually resulted in the opposite to the desired effect:

26F: "We tried [to teach] before embracing unschooling. ... She still doesn't read. I feel that the 'encouraging' we did has hurt her desire to learn. She now thinks of it as hard and not fun. Yet she continues to learn more and more without our help."

36Fam: "I tried to teach her to read but ultimately she learned at her own pace and on her own. I feel I interfered with her natural process."

71M: “Although I did attempt to ‘teach’ him, I really think he has learned despite me and certainly despite the dreaded school schemes simply through having time to explore things he wanted or needed to read.”

78M: “I put a huge amount of pressure on my son when he was 5 and 6 to learn to read – he knew the alphabet and could sound out words, but wasn’t ready for the next step. I think a lot of that was because I was putting pressure on him so ‘learning to read’ became a big black cloud for him. It took me backing off, a year or two of no pressure and him to get into chapter book series which he could read but the story was also interesting enough for him.”

43F: “Every time I used any method that took the intrinsic value away – flash cards, dumbed-down readers, computer programs etc it was a long time before joy returned with the desire to learn.”

25F: “We made an attempt at learning to read using Hooked on Phonics but it produced a lot of anxiety so we dropped it after 2 or 3 unfruitful attempts at lessons.”

56F: “My fumbling around for the best ways to help her may have assisted and encouraged her sometimes, but I can certainly think of times when they undoubtedly hindered too!”

14F: “I don’t think someone else could take credit for teaching someone to read – only perhaps for providing the necessary conditions.”

This parent had a more theoretical problem with specifically teaching reading:

22Fam: “I read Frank Smith’s book ‘Reading without Nonsense’ and it helped confirm my stance that ‘teaching’ reading requires children start with the most abstract

variable in language, the letter and move gradually to words, sentences, larger meaning. Actually the most effective (and joyful) way of learning to read is to move in the opposite direction.”

The following two families both felt that they had taught their children but were quite critical of that process and what it can ultimately achieve.

32Fam: “We can teach them all we want, but like so many skills and milestones they will achieve it when they are developmentally ready. We could save a lot of time and turmoil for both parties if we just WAITED for the child to be older before we push reading on them.”

35Fam: “Our societal norm probably pushes too hard for reading earlier and on grading the feedback / comprehension versus engaging the natural pleasure and creativity of the experience of storytelling. I doubted this when we started. I don’t doubt it now that they are both reading well and comprehending well and we didn’t grade or push either.”

The following parent questioned that teaching could ever achieve what she clearly felt to be the goal of literacy – a spontaneous love of reading:

38Fam: “Teaching’ does not create a love of reading. A desire and natural curiosity that is ‘aided and abetted’ drives a natural reader.”

Some families quoted difficulties that had occurred in school and the failure of children to respond to the teaching they encountered there before beginning home education. The following are examples of this situation.

One boy (age 11 at time of questionnaire) was withdrawn from school in extreme distress. He was suffering from behaviour problems, OCD and severe headaches.

At home he:

34M: “instantly became hysterical if I tried to teach him to read. Continued to enjoy having stories read to him ... but was totally opposed to learning to read himself.... I continued to read to him and if he needed to write something I would let him dictate to me and I wrote it for him ... Whenever he wanted to know what something said I’d tell him and eventually I noticed that he was beginning to work things out for himself.”

This young woman, now a college student, was taken out of school aged 8:

66F: “left school completely unable to read or spell even her own name. She was said to have dyseidetic and dysphonetic dyslexia, ADHD and dyspraxia. She had no word attack skills at all. Her reading ability was said to be in the bottom 3%.”

At home the mother made no attempts to teach her daughter to read but concentrated instead on “facilitating her education, encouraging a return of a love of words and stories” and exercising her “patience in waiting till she was ready!”

She began to read as a teenager, aged 14, and “loves reading novels now.”

This boy too had very bad experiences in school. He was 11 at the time of the questionnaire:

71M: “Now home educated after years of bullying. It took us less than twenty minutes from finding out that home education was legal to having the de-reg letter written out. He has been home educated for 18 months. [He] is also SEN with we believe Dyspraxia, Dyslexia and visual processing disorder.”

As in the example above, no attempts were made to teach him at home:

“We did not specifically set out to teach him. We found that he was to all intents and purposes terrified /phobic about reading, convincing himself, after years of negative comments that he was unable to read. ... We taught him, by not teaching him. We totally left reading out of the equation for a whole year we occasionally dipped into it to find out what his feelings were towards reading, but we read to him every night and always pointed out signs and menus etc. His reading age shot up from our estimate of 5 or 6 years to age 10 in that year.”

Pre-empting Teaching

These parents began teaching in a fairly conventional sense only to find that their children appeared to be learning independently of that teaching:

30Fam: “began a Christian phonics program at age four, reading it by himself in one month, far more advanced than where we were at in the program.”

39Fam: “I think I might have used flashcards when they were very small, lots of phonics and lots of just saying what the words were [she] got fed up of not being able to read and being bored waiting for me. She was a very impatient child! And at about the age of 3 we found her surrounded by books in their bedroom and announced “Mummy I can read” and so she could.”

50F: “tried a Christian phonics program at age four, progressed nicely, yet child reading at a higher level by age five than the program teaching guide.”

62F: “I use a curriculum called Sonlight – which I buy in from the USA and it has a sort of phonics system but with small books to start with – with one word on each page etc and build up using the various ‘sounds’ of the alphabet etc ... just as I was beginning to teach her she suddenly launched into reading by herself – reading words that I had either never read to her or she had never seen before really easily.”

73M: “We did the book The One Stop Reader when he asked me if he could learn to read (at the age of 8). But he stopped me half way through and announced he could read. I could hardly believe it but it was true.”

76M: “When he showed an interest, we told him about letter sounds and did some simple phonics. He went from having a grasp of simple phonetic words to being able to read above grade level extremely quickly although he hadn’t started to read at all before the age of 7.”

71M: “I used a scheme called ‘toe by toe’ but we only did the first 1/3 of it as his reading was taking off so much by then that it became a pointless chore.”

Other parents seemed to miss the opportunity to teach altogether:

6M: "I knew that letters were the first thing taught in kindergarten so I was going to start here until I realized he already knew the letters. Then, I was going to teach the letter sounds and I realised he already knew them. Then, I was going to move on to sight words since he knew letters and sounds already. I never got the chance. One day when he was sitting looking at a joke book, I realized he was reading it."

43M: "When I withdrew him from school I worried that I should teach him to read and how would I afford the 'easy readers' ... ha! ... In the time I was worrying he had learned to read, in a couple of weeks of being out of school I asked him what a word in a book was expecting 'the'. He read out 'the countries of Oceania and Australasia are ...' I can't remember the rest but I decided then not to worry."

43F: "She was reading at age 5 (which was kind of disappointing as I was sort of hoping to apply the Steiner methodology - however, I'm not disappointed now)."

28Fam "I was a little disappointed at first that my kids didn't seem to need me to help them learn to read, but I got over it!"

In a similar vein, these parents gave up teaching as its effectiveness appeared to run out, only to find that the problems apparently resolved themselves without teaching.

3Fam: "I actually only taught him the technique up to a point. We hit a brick wall with words that had more than 2 syllables and so I left it, only to discover that he started reading long words by himself a month later."

30Fam: “tried to use a Christian phonics program, flashcards, but she would cry and get depressed so I left it thinking I would try again around age six, but she was reading before that.”

In all of these cases parents intended to teach, believed that they could help their children learn through teaching and were then forced by their experiences to reconsider their position and the link (or at least the strength of the link) that they had previously made between teaching and learning.

Challenges to ‘teaching’

The challenges to ‘teaching’, both the word itself and the theory behind it, permeate the questionnaire responses and push both widely and deeply into a core concept of education. Brown argues that , “institutions like *money, marriage and war* are intelligible only in terms of the rules which participants understand as defining those phenomena.” (Brown, 1998, p78 italics original) By the same token ‘education’ is only intelligible by the rules that define it and I suggest that teaching is one of those rules. ‘Teaching’ is both a defining act of education and a theory of mind that sets out the possibilities of education. It is a critical part of a construction that both dominates and restricts how we are able to think about and understand education.

Education without teaching demands different ideas and part of this is the conceptual struggle over whether ‘teaching’ needs to be replaced by a variation on the idea or whether it can be theoretically dispensed with altogether. Yet achieving even a

glimpse of what education without teaching might look like is an inherently circumscribed proposition. Foucauldian arguments as discussed by McHoul and Grace express the limiting power of discourse where “truth becomes a function of what *can be* said, written or thought” (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p 31 italics original). Discourse shapes not just the ‘real’ but “the conditions of possibility” (ibid p39) for the real; its power structures run not simply through individuals but through society and history itself. If teaching is a rule of education, then ‘education’ cannot exist without it. Thus to attempt to describe education without teaching is impossible; if teaching is removed from the concept of education then its place must be filled. So any attempt to dismantle or alter the dominant discourse can only be done through language and ideas that are part of that discourse; such criticism is therefore instantly muted by its own position of being part of what it attacks. Precisely this problem is described by Derrida with reference to Nietzsche’s attack on metaphysics. A circle describes the relation “between history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics ... we have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (Derrida 1978 p354).

So, dissent can only come from within. Employing the word ‘teaching’, replacing it with a different term or even noting its absence, arguing for its irrelevance, attacking its theoretical status or conceptual legitimacy joins an educational position or statement to the dominant discourse and therefore acts to continue and support its power. To really understand teaching requires a decentring from the discourse of

education. Of all the social sciences, Derrida cites ethnography as the one most aware of its own need to decentre and whilst this is never achievable and ethnocentrism has to be accepted ultimately as an irreducible necessity, that does not mean that the issue cannot be addressed:

“It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. A problem of *economy* and *strategy*.”
(Derrida, 1978, p 356/7, italics original)

Talking about children who learn to read without being taught offers an opportunity to decentre from the discourse of education and to question, explicitly and systematically, the order of that discourse. To do this it may be necessary to make use of the dominant discourse, acting in the manner of Levi-Strauss’ *bricoleur*, borrowing and making use of whatever in the way of concepts and language can be usefully employed (cited by Derrida, 1978). This, Derrida argues, is the proper, the only way to proceed; a new discourse cannot be made from some pure and untainted beginning but must be fashioned from what already lies to hand. In their dispute over what it means to teach contributors have struggled to create a new sense of meaning about the role they have played in their children’s learning. This struggle continues in the next chapter where I consider the meanings attached to other key concepts: those of the ‘child’ and ‘reading’.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Counts as Evidence, What Accounts for Meaning?

What does it mean to make a claim of knowledge about how children learn to read? This part of the analysis explores how the contributors to this research have reached the understandings and conclusions that they have. In doing this, I shall look at three strands of meaning – how parents construct the concepts of the child and reading and how they then connect these concepts in an understanding of learning. In doing this I want to suggest as Deleuze and Guattari put it, a “*map and not a tracing ... an experimentation in contact with the real*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p12 italics original). This is a rhizomatic structure of understanding, a way of possibilities rather than a chain of thought to be pursued from a beginning, through a middle to an end. In this exploration how children learn to read is not the end of a line which can be traced back to its genesis in some basis of meaning. Instead these three strands of thought are connected endlessly back and forth with each other, producing a whole that vibrates with a self-generated meaning.

The completeness and coherence of the theory lies not in how successfully the various concepts within it are presented in terms of their internal characteristics or their postulated relationship to some perceived reality, but on the relationships and interdependence between these concepts. Like Saussure’s chess pieces (Rivero 2010) it is not the inherent form of the object as it stands alone but its relationship to other things, the other pieces on the chess board, that create both meaning and

possibilities. So for an understanding of how children learn to read; the ideas of what a child is, what reading is and what learning is must integrate together and be able to complement and support each other. What is needed is a 'fit' between the circumstances of the theory, what the theory must be able to accomplish, the concepts employed such as 'the child' and the understanding of learning that emerges.

Constructing Children

As Stainthorp and Hughes' study illustrates, a successful theory of children learning to read must encompass a supporting construction of the 'child'. In Foucault's terms the construction of an object through discourse is both the product of, and the evidence for, the explanatory power of the discourse itself. There is no concept of the 'child' free from the theories of childhood and no concept of the 'learner' free from theories of learning. The very idea of the child itself is not the filling of an empty space (Foucault 1970) but a small part of a system of difference that divides people into categories not through their inherent characteristics but in their distinction from one another. So it is that the child here can be seen as being "what the others are not" (Foucault, 1970, p144); a specialised category of person who is expected to fill a certain role in a certain way in order to maintain that category and to fit and support a certain way of thinking about related concepts such as education.

The Natural Learner

Aries (1960) traces the changing concept of childhood through history, highlighting the transience of an idea without a self-evident base. Rogoff (2003) has pursued the same theme across cultures. What it means to be a child, the existence of childhood at all, is time and space dependent; there is no 'natural' child. Foucault's notion of eventalisation (as discussed by Mahon 1992) looks not for internal characteristics by which to identify such an idea but to the plurality of events which give rise to it. So, Foucault seeks out the historical context and uniqueness of what might otherwise be taken to be constants of the natural or social order with their own inherent identity. Seeing the child as 'natural' or a 'natural learner', as many contributors to this research do, must be considered a political, historical and cultural position rather than a reflection of biology. Despite the name, natural theories of learning and views of the child as natural are as much the product of eventalisation as any other educational theory. The characteristics of the child postulated by contributors to this research are a naturally curious, naturally motivated, unique individual; a view which creates and legitimises a view of learning as a natural, child paced, independent and individual process. This view of the child as a natural learner based on perceived inherent characteristics rather than a cultural foundation was strongly indicated by many parents.

16M: "Let him learn naturally."

23Fam: "Natural learning. It is a family 'way of life'."

11Fam: "Learning to read is a natural process."

There seem to be two sides to natural learning.

Firstly, that 'natural' seems to refer to an undetermined time scale which will be child negotiated rather than externally imposed:

34F: "They need ... to come to it naturally."

5M: "It is best to let it occur naturally."

20M "It can be learned naturally, motivated by an internal desire to access the greater world and does not need to be taught."

44Fam: "My children both happened to reach their natural reading ages pretty young"

The second idea of natural seems to refer to the actual process of learning being a natural one:

11Fam: "Learning to read is a natural process."

29Fam: "It will happen just as naturally as those skills [walking and talking]."

75M: "We gave him the most basic information and read with him lots and he quite naturally learned to read on his own."

For some parents the idea of a 'naturalness' meant that children would inevitably, and even involuntarily, begin reading.

12F: "They won't be able to help themselves."

10F: "You couldn't stop them from reading given all that."

14M: "The desire to learn anything culturally or socially based is inherently human."

58M: "It comes naturally. You can't help but pick it up."

Metaphors of the Organic and the Natural

52M: "Once they are ready the process is organic for many children."

15F: "It occurs organically."

16F: "It is a natural organic process."

34Fam: "It will naturally arise."

29Fam a: "He quite naturally learned to read on his own."

Metaphors of an organic process echo Deweyan theory that proposes an "organic-evolutionary frame of reference" (Noddings, 1998, p26). In Dewey's mind 'growth' acts as a metaphor of good learning; good learning being that which allows for further learning (Noddings, 1998). This seems to be the view taken by parents in phrases such as "organic process". Dewey's theory however is one of cause and effect in which educative experiences beget growth; the key task of the educator being to arrange for the appropriate experiences. Some parents, however, seemed to be suggesting something more self-contained than that in their metaphors of an organic process; learning happening as a result of its own internal properties rather than through a process of drawing out, or 'forcing' as some parents put it. Instead there is a feeling of inevitability about a natural process which need not, and may be should

not, be interfered with. Thus out of the idea of learning being natural comes a theory of education that seeks to preserve and protect the 'natural' state of being a child rather than to intervene and arrange through particular experiences towards a culturally given end.

44Fam: "It is a natural one [process] when supported and not thwarted."

36Fam: "Forcing interferes with their natural process."

36Fam: "Forcing a child to "learn" to read is counterproductive and interferes with their natural process."

30M: "Reading schemes get in the way of the child's own natural ways of progressing in their reading."

15M:" When reading is taught it is not usually a self-discovery and then is less likely to be embraced."

In these metaphors of learning as natural, social relationships and cultural values are invoked, with implications not just for education but also for political, moral and metaphysical ideas too (Elliot 1984). The natural child complemented by the parent who protects but does not intervene raises questions about the justificatory grounds of education. Biesta argues that education, is "always an intervention into someone's life – an intervention motivated by the idea that it will make this life somehow better: more complete, more rounded, more perfect – and maybe even more human" (Biesta, 2006, p2). The learning is natural metaphor on the other hand sees education to be the opposite of intervention; to be about protecting children in order

to preserve what they are rather than attempting to change them. Education, in this view, might be better defined as the creation of a space in which to flourish.

Deleuze and Guattari quoting Benveniste argue that “a performative statement is nothing outside of the circumstances that make it performative” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p82). Holding that the child is ‘natural’ or a ‘natural learner’ would mean little outside the social and political circumstances in which alternative education exists and is called upon to justify itself. The whole precept of schooling is based on a formulation of the child in which the opposite is held; in which learning is not ‘natural’ but ‘cultural’ and in which the cultivation of the child is deemed to be a necessary and important pre-occupation of society precisely because no such development will take place ‘naturally’. Here it can be seen that language by itself is not enough as a unit of analysis; indeed this example of logos may be leading us away from present experience (Pattison 2011). ‘Learning is natural’ finds its meaning not in those three words alone but in the educational times we live in, in which learning is treated as a special and separate activity, that requires management and is therefore ‘unnatural’. To say that learning is natural in the era of mass schooling is a political statement, a position in the educational debate and a protest against the regimes of our times as much as it is a statement about learning. Taylor argues that circumstance may preclude certain metaphors and takes as his example precisely the metaphor of the natural. He argues that turning “biological and botanical notions of growth and development in to more or less fully developed educational theories” (Taylor, 1984, p 18) may not take into account what is possible in actual educational settings like classrooms. Just as formal schooling may render some metaphors

impossible, I suggest that it is the practical circumstances of some kinds of home education and some kinds of family relationships that give a context in which the 'learning is natural' metaphor can be taken up and developed.

The Individual Learner

Any construction of 'the child' must be based on the precept that distinguishing features common to all children can be used to hold such a category together. As Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) demonstrate in their construction of the normal child, deviations must be considered, for the sake of the theory, as exceptions rather than individuals. Thus the idea of stressing individuality at all sits in a highly limited and somewhat uncomfortable position within any overarching construction of a theory of learning. This must be particularly so where theory takes up a position within the practices of mass education. In Heidegger's terms school children are part of the standing reserve in a technology of education, marked not by their individuality but by their commonality.

Within the commonly held category 'the child' however, lies the apparently counter idea of individuality. As Noddings (1998, p 115) argues, "Few scholars today would reject the notion that knowers actively construct their own knowledge." Given this, as she puts it, apparently unassailable premise, individuality in the learning process seems inevitable. For parents in families, individuality is of course, an essential trait of the personal relationship, as relevant to learning as any other activity. There is a

practical freedom here to express in terms of learning to read that “the self is never simply the reproduced habitus of its socialisation, but due to its necessarily distinct location in time and space and culture, as well as its progressively growing capacity for agency, is characterised by elements of difference and uniqueness” (Olssen, 2008, p99). For families, of course, this idea does not need to be approached through the convoluted labyrinths of philosophical enquiry; for them it is stunningly obvious.

Thirty two parents, including several who had had different experiences with different children in their own family, stressed the role that individuality would have on learning to read, for example:

34Fam: “Be aware of individual differences.”

43Fam: “Reading happens differently for different people.”

1Fam: “It is very different for different children.”

22M: “I think it is different with every person of course.”

44M: “It’s different for everyone just as learning to walk, or talk is different for everyone.”

80M: “Each child is very different in how they learn to read and when they are ready.”

74M: “I also think it is important to acknowledge the difference in children.”

The comparison between two (or more) children sometimes led to parents drawing conclusions about reading more generally.

9F: "I have two children, one who began to read fluently at 6 the other who at 12 is beginning to move towards fluency. That has been more informative than almost any other thing about learning. My elder child has not lived in a different environment to my younger child, but clearly has had a different response to that environment. Having such a natural experiment (with an n of 2) has demonstrated that the expectations that all children should read by age x are faulty."

45Fam: "Having one child who learnt at 3 and another who learnt at 7, I've come to realise that you can't fit children into preconceived moulds of learning behaviour; it depends on the individual abilities and wishes of each child."

16F: "They all learn differently ... I have two 7 yr old sons who are also on the reading journey and they are both doing it completely differently from their sister and each other! ☺"

31Fam: "Learning to read is a very personal adventure and each person comes to it differently at different times and for different reasons and in different ways."

21M: "I've seen children come to reading at many different ages ... being responsive to a child's individual learning strengths is a good place to start."

23M: "It varies for each child. My younger son, now 4, has had the same environment as his brother but has not just 'picked up' reading."

A positive aspect of individuality is that children will learn in a way that suits them:

55F: "they will learn to read in the way that best fits them...When the mood is on, go with what works for that particular child!"

Why children want to read was also seen as relevant to the kind of reader that they would become:

14M: “Some children learn to read as a means and some children will take it farther because they enjoy the written word. You can see the same end result in adults. Some adults use the written word mostly for practical reasons and some gravitate to it as an art form.”

46M: “Different people approach it in different ways. This child learns mainly through hearing. He is especially tuned into sound and has perfect pitch. ... His father and sister are artists and tend to see words as images.”

50F: “Children are different and if they are not naturally bent to be book people it helps to have books based on their passions to motivate the love of learning and reading.”

The importance of individual differences frequently led to the conclusion that there can be no one right, best or pre-determined way to learn to read; a view which some used as an implicit or explicit argument against schools.

16Fam: “I find it amazing that someone can learn in a totally different way to someone else and my experience of home education shows me very clearly that one size does not fit all.”

8Fam: “School based pedagogy is not the only way.”

7F: “I am frankly horrified by the ‘one-size-fits-all’ initiative-driven approaches that teachers are often forced to adopt – and subsequently discard to make way for the next fad.”

26F: “Children are ready for different skills at different ages and respecting that is vitally important to fostering a love of learning anything, including reading.”

27F: “All kids are different and learn according to their own personal time frame and they all learn using different styles and approaches.”

The Motivated Learner

Ninety one of the 220 parents talked about the importance of the child’s own interest in, and motivation for, learning to read. Unlike discussions of motivation in terms of formal schooling, motivation was taken to be internal self-motivation rather than some shade of external persuasion. Parents referred to motivation in either a general or specific way.

General Motivation

Some parents spoke of what seemed to be a general motivation to find out about things:

38Fam: “Natural curiosity.”

14F: “curiosity”

19F: "She is very nosy and always wanted to know what this sign said, what that poster said, what does that text message say, what does that email say and so on."

That this kind of curiosity would eventually settle on reading was accepted by some as a given:

16F: "If they are surrounded by it they will want to do it."

41M: "You don't need to hurry the process, because they will get interested in learning how to read."

32Fam: "If they are surrounded by information they want to acquire ... it motivates them to learn to read."

31M: "He is motivated by a desire to read words on things that interest him."

60F: "wanting to find out how something worked so instructions had to be read."

Other parents cited the motivation to be like others in an echo of Rogoff's participation metaphor (Rogoff 1990):

38Fam: "Everyone else was doing it, they wanted to do it too."

8Fam: "seeing adults read"

36M: [he had] "a strong desire to look up information independently. Perhaps because he has always seen me study products, read books and magazines, information on the Internet."

54M: "Both my husband and I are avid readers. From us he has learned that reading is a way of gaining information/answering questions as well as of relaxing."

53F: "Having a good example to follow has been a real incentive."

56F: "Her cousins showing what they can read has occasionally motivated her."

57F: "observing others reading, having a desire to do the same has been the biggest motivator."

79M: "They have a strong desire to read – particularly if reading is seen to be a highly valued skill in their family"

Specific Motivation

In other cases though the spur to learn to read came from a more specific motivation to do with reading itself:

41Fam: "Her desire to read materials pertaining to her interest."

30Fam: "His need to know things and desire to learn moved the process along quickly and he achieved amazing results because he wanted to do it."

10Fam: "When there was information they really wanted to get, that motivated them to learn."

8Fam: "Feeling the need inside themselves for either information or curiosity/enjoyment."

40F: "I think she was very interested in books and stories."

4M: "Motivation; he read when he needed to."

8M: "My son chose to read when it suited his need to read."

23M: "I think the main thing is to allow them to read whatever they are interested in, even if the topic or book seems "too hard" for their level."

28M: “find them stimulating material to read that is relevant to their personal interest – not insist that they get through some boring reading scheme before they can manage a ‘proper’ book.”

34M: “Having something interesting to read (the Oxford Reading Tree books are the most boring books ever invented and I pity school children and their parents who are forced to endure the daily torture of reading them.)”

And sometimes to do with not just reading but with reading a certain thing:

22F: “just being so interested in a story she heard that she wanted to read it herself.”

2M: “He really took off with Tintin, which he used to pore over excessively.”

23M: “He largely taught himself to read from field guides (he loves nature).”

29M: “He decided that he wanted to read all of the Calvin and Hobbes comic books on his own 😊. I helped him with the some of the bigger words (or helped him look up their definition), but he did the rest.”

Whilst many parents saw a close relationship between motivation and ability this was not always the case. Being able to read and wanting to read are not the same thing and children may, for a number of reasons, not read because they don't want to.

Whereas reading when it is taught relies on the learner constantly demonstrating their newly acquired skills, those children who learn autonomously but don't much want to read leave few clues about their proficiency.

19Fam: “My son, while able to read most things, will SAY he can’t read something if he is worried about it being difficult.”

60F; [At what age would you say your child became able to read?]: “8/9 willingly”

29F: [what sort of things is your child interested in reading?] “Not much at the moment”

56F: “She is very reluctant to tell people she has begun to read however – this I think is partly because she likes having secrets but mainly because she is afraid it will be made a lot of...”

These kinds of answers indicate that parents sometimes could not tell what their child could do but only what their child wanted to do. In some cases separating reading ability from feelings about reading was just not possible.

Constructivist views of education hold that “knowers actively construct their own knowledge” (Noddings, 1998, p 115); in this view learners need to be engaged with their material and to have some kind of “sense of agency to motivate their learning through use of such self-regulatory processes as goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and strategy use” (Zimmerman, 2000, p87). In this view, motivation is no longer simply a desire to do something but rather a plan as to how to go about achievement. At the very least this view suggests that learners need to be aware of their own learning in a conscious way. The idea that the human brain is an organ which can be placed under voluntary control, in a way which say the liver or the heart are not usually held to be, permeates such understanding of learning. The idea

seems to be that the more motivated a person is, the more in control of their own learning they can be and therefore the better they will learn.

Such a view necessarily runs into the belief expressed by parents that learning is natural in the sense that it is an inherent feature of life that does not require intervention. If it is natural to learn, so that learning is not a special state but a feature of childhood, or even of being alive, then the idea of motivation becomes superfluous in the same way that being motivated to breathe is superfluous. The following quotes seem to touch on different ideas about motivation; that motivation may be something that follows rather than leads learning:

19M: "I think one thing that really propelled him to read was wanting to find out what happened next in an exciting story but I was too tired to continue reading aloud. This was definitely how he ended up reading *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* on his own."

52M: "Sometimes we had to tell him that we could not do that immediately because we were cooking dinner, for example. We would offer to read it as soon as practicable but one day after this, he said, "Fine, I'll just read it myself." A day or so later he could and did."

18M: "I got some early readers and when we used them he quickly said 'reading is boring'. I stopped immediately. Six months later he read by himself a Dr Seuss book 'Green Eggs and Ham'. I could hear him one morning in his room."

6Fam: "My son started reading when he discovered the Harry Potter series."

In these examples children seemed to suddenly begin reading, sometimes at what would be considered a 'high' level, without having gone through the 'beginner' stage. This seems to be a reverse of the usual view of learning and its relation to motivation. Instead of motivation enabling them to learn to read, they seem to be able to read and then become motivated to do so - by the time they want to read *The Lord of the Rings*, they can. The following quotes are about children who appear not to be motivated to read, and for good reason; for them at the moment it is a high effort, low reward activity.

36Fam: "The things that interest him are either too long and he feels intimidated by the length or the print is too small. He has difficulty following the small print."

29F: "She likes the idea of it but then gets fed up when she gets stuck on a word."

27M: "When I tried to get him to read it was so effortful that there was nothing in it for him to read something like *The Cat in the Hat*. He seemed happy not to read – it didn't bother him he couldn't."

53M: "He is very capable however he would rather be read to".

These parents describe how reading had to be worthwhile before their children became motivated to engage in it:

27M: "When it became worthwhile for him in terms of what he could get out of it, then he started reading...before that all the effort he had to put into reading something very simple was just not worth it."

37Fam: “Like so many skills – it was having the mental capacity to do it almost effortlessly.”

If some children are not motivated to read until they can read, then the idea of the conscious construction of knowledge, at least at what might be considered the beginning stage of reading, does not make sense. For children who learn to read by themselves the idea of a consciously, motivated learner planning the next move in the construction of their own knowledge makes an inadequate explanation. For one thing, it relies on the perception of a body of knowledge understood as ‘reading’. One parent called the existence of this body of knowledge, at least for her son, into question:

35M: “he doesn’t see reading as separate from functioning on a day-to-day basis. If you were to ask him he would say he doesn’t read because he perceives reading as sitting down with a book with lots of words.”

There is an echo here of the Foucauldian ideas about categorisation and characterisation (Foucault, 1970). The field of ‘reading’ has been laid out in a particular way as part of educational discourse. It does not reflect an ontological reality but is instead a convenience of thought that may, in fact, not be convenient for everybody.

Experiencing motivation to read once able to read, may be a way of interpreting the many metaphors which parents used to describe learning to read as a sudden

change rather than the progressive building up of a skill. These metaphors described movements such as switches being thrown, light bulbs flashing on, launches or things clicking into place.

37Fam: "Both read it [The Lord of the Rings] within months of 'clicking' with reading."

46F: "Then a sudden light went on and she was able to read 3rd grade chapter books and swiftly (within another few months) things like Charlotte's Web"

1M: "It was as though a switch was thrown."

22Fam: "My 9 year old burst into literacy at age 7."

80M: "His reading took off ... from beginner reading to reading novels."

62F: "She suddenly launched into reading by herself."

Of course these metaphors refer to the visible part of learning to read; they are what parents observe rather than what children experience. What may appear sudden may not be sudden at all but may simply be the visible tip of an unseen iceberg. As one parent reflected:

51M: "It can be ... achieved by a largely unseen process, going on within the child.

Learning to read is not dependant on being taught by someone else, nor being exposed to a particular teaching method."

Understanding learning in this way is largely precluded from formal education in which constant demonstration and assessment of what a child has learned needs to be made. This constant assessment rests on and re-enforces the idea that learning

is a process of accumulation which can be understood in terms of progression through a laid out area of knowledge. This idea in turn, leads to the view that motivation is the self-management of this process of accumulation. However, in the kind of learning described here, both motivation and progress may be things that operate very differently.

Characterising 'the Child'

Parents' views here paint a picture of the child as a natural learner yet that naturalness does not simply unfold in a process of maturation like Piaget's stages (Schaffer, 1996). Rather it is itself subject to two particular and intertwined forces: individuality and motivation. The child is an individual whose individuality will be expressed in how, when and why he or she engages with reading. Children's personalities, wishes and other interests are what is assumed to guide learning whilst motivation comes from the individual and is a facet of that individuality. This is a view of the child with profound implications for learning and for the role of others in that learning. It also stands in contrast to the view depicted by Stainthorp and Hughes where children are expected to engage with reading in a pre-determined fashion, at a set age and on the instigation of teaching.

Understanding Reading

To think about how children learn to read, or how they should be taught to read, it is necessary to address the perceived nature of reading knowledge. Any explanation of

reading, must embody a particular perspective on the literacy enterprise and bring with it not only implications for the social, cultural and individual meanings of reading but also, and especially important here, for the educative implications of learning to read. Smith argues that an “examination of the range of topics relevant to reading not only leaves little to be said about reading itself, it leaves little to be added about how reading should be taught. Instructional implications become self-evident” (Smith, 1997, p 2).

In this spirit, I consider it important to consider what parents in this research understand reading to be. ‘Reading’ is clearly a central word to the whole project and was used a number of times in the questionnaire (did your child learn to read at home or at school?, did you teach your child to read? At what age would you say your child became able to read?) Its use relied on parents’ own understandings of what it means to read as no explicit criteria were given as to how reading ability should be judged beyond individual, subjective perceptions.

Is it Possible to Put an Age on When a Child Begins to Read?

Some initial understanding of what ‘reading’ means to the parents in the study can be gained from their answers to the question “At what age would you say your child became able to read?” The question itself presents a view of reading as a finite accomplishment as opposed to a subject field like maths or a practice like communication which are infinite in character. It would, for example, be much harder to make sense of the question “At what age was your child able to do maths?” Three

respondents 37F, 68M (not yet reading), 74M did not answer this question. A number of respondents replied with an age spread ranging from a few months to a number of years. Some added a little more detail:

5M: “read 3 ½ , read well 4”

28F: “4 – quite a few words, 5 – anything”

29M “he became fluent at about 8 – 9 years.”

30F “Posters and signs from 5 years but wouldn’t read a book until 8”

44Fam: “3-4 for simple words, 5-6 for things like the first Harry Potter, although more like 6 – 7 for really fluent reading of more difficult material.”

59F: “ages 6 ½ (beginning) to 9 (confident)”

43F: “8 years, but basics at 3 yrs”

18F: “She could read CVC words by age 3, but wasn’t reading full books independently until 5 or 6. So it’s hard to pick one age.”

12Fam: “5 (novels at 8).”

9M: “started at 2, fluent by 4.”

23M: “words age 2, sentences age 4”

43M: “Logos – 18 mos, books – 5”

62M: “words 2 – 3, books 4 – 5”

78M: “basic reading about 6 or 7, but really reading well at 8”

Although the age ranges given might indicate uncertainty about when a child had begun to read the added comments suggest that parents are using their answers to indicate a progressive process.

Slightly more vaguely some parents answered with an age prefaced with “around” or used “or” to indicate an uncertainty.

28Fam: “around five”,

79M: “5 or 6”

16M: “6 or 7”

46M: “11 or 12. Don’t recall exactly.”

Others were even less certain:

2F: “Not sure, but she was young.”

8M: “Not sure”

Some of the fuller answers gave possible reasons for this uncertainty:

38F: “We know now that she was doing a lot of reading in secret ... When she was about five, we realised she was a pretty fluent reader.”

56F: “there have been a few incidents like this in the past where she has appeared to read but I’ve always assumed other factors involved.”

62F: “It is hard to say but about 5 reading out loud – she could have been able to do it before that age as she did not speak.”

1M: “It was fascinating to observe him decoding the mechanics of the written word (once I was aware he was doing it!)”

32M: “We weren’t really aware that he had [started to read] until he started reading the TV schedule in broadsheet newspapers which made us think he was fairly fluent. This would have been about 8 years old I think, maybe 9.”

45M: “I began to suspect that he was beginning to read on his own due to various reasons ... I was literally shocked at how great a reader he was”

59M: “We don’t know and don’t want to ask how much he can actually read, but we’re sure he’s learning.”

69M: “We knew he was reading by age 3.5 but are fairly certain he was reading before he was willing to speak which began age 3.”

Where children are learning autonomously with only minimal, intermittent or no direct parental input parents are unsurprisingly somewhat detached from the process and therefore less likely to be able to put a specific age on an accomplishment moment. Parents then discover that their child is reading but may have had no sense of any build up process before this point and therefore cannot say for how long their child has been reading. Some of the examples of children who pre-empted their parents teaching illustrate this point as well.

The idea of learning to read as the mastering of a finite skill that can be pinned down to an age was the view of reading implied by the question. It seems that most parents were willing to accept this view in that their answer simply gave an age. Other answers pointed out a progressive dimension by giving an age range. Others still a qualitative depth by referring not just to the ability to read itself but to the nature

of the material being read which might (or might not) indicate a progressive general skill.

Phonics and Reading as a Skill

One way of thinking about what reading 'is', especially pertinent to education, is to define reading in terms of the theory by which it is considered to be learned.

Stainthorp and Hughes for instance describe reading as the mastery of the English writing system such that "reading means that when faced with a text, the reader can work out the meaning" (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p10). This working out procedure is, for them, a combination of decoding and comprehension; an argument summed up (literally) by the equation:

$$R = D \times C$$

where R = reading; D = decoding; and C = comprehension" (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p 10 quoting Gough, Juel and Griffith 1992).

However, they later cut loose from this definition when they argue that comprehension is a language skill and that "language acquisition is biologically determined" (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p10). Thus what really matters, for them, in learning to read is decoding skills and indeed they go on to measure reading ability in terms of the reading of made up, non-words which have no meaning and therefore cannot be comprehended.

This view of reading rests on theories of writing being speech transposed into symbols with reading being the act of returning those symbols to their original sounds, as has been discussed in Chapter One. Reading as a method fits Stainthorp and Hughes contention that children need to be taught; if reading is a method then not to explicitly teach it would be rather akin to asking every child to re-invent the wheel. Understanding reading through phonics theories is a familiar and widespread approach and parents frequently mentioned phonics either explicitly or through related ideas such as sounding out words or decoding, although with varying emphases.

Phonics as main method

Some parents talked about phonics as the chief means by which their child had learnt to read. This view, like that of Stainthorp and Hughes, sees reading as a technical process involving the mastery of a skill.

45Fam: “We’ve used reading schemes and phonics”

40Fam: “Phonics, The Pirates Reading Scheme”.

39Fam: “I think I might have used flashcards when they were very small, lots of phonics and lots of just saying what the words were.”

42Fam: “Almost exclusively a series of phonics work books called Explode the Code... when the kids wanted to learn to read, we used the Explode the Code

workbooks mainly because the kids wanted to learn more quickly than they would by just being read to.”

1M: “Looking back it seems clear he worked it out based mainly on phonics”.

3Fam: “Phonemic awareness”

4Fam: “[used] a modified/abbreviated version of the phonics program from Why Johnny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It”

79M: “He spent hours writing lists of consistently phonetic words.”

77M: “Phonics games played on the computer”.

Where reading is seen as the mastery of phonics this in turn can be taken as an adequate and useful definition of reading. However such a definition would not be in accordance with many other parents’ views.

Phonics on an Ad Hoc Basis

For some, phonics appeared to be treated as part of reading, rather than the definition of reading. Their use of phonics was far more ad hoc: in conjunction with other ideas, only at their child’s request, in response to appropriate questions, only for a limited period of time or limited in some other kind of a way. In these responses it seems that phonics represents less of a system and more of an occasional tool.

Where phonics is seen as only a limited element in learning to read or only one out of several possible methods of learning to read, reading cannot be defined through phonics alone.

These parents introduced the idea of phonics whilst making it clear that phonics had not, for them, represented a method of reading.

37Fam: “a bit of all [phonics, reading scheme, flashcards] with my eldest – less and less with subsequent children (I have 5 children).”

3M: “He did use some simple phonetic books but these were always alongside a vast range of other books”.

7M: “We did talk about sounds that letters make sometimes and sound out words but that was never the focus.”

57F: “verbally teaching some phonics in a very relaxed manner.”

8F: “We have some phonics books...”

37M: “He also watches PBS Kids television shows that focus on reading skills through word recognition and phonics.”

11F: “Before she was 2, we told her what sounds each letter made similar to how you’d tell a baby what sounds animals make.”

Others brought in phonics in response to children’s questions and actions:

44Fam: “We answered their questions (“what sound does that make?” “How do you make an ‘E’ again?” “How do you spell, ‘I love you?’”). And we occasionally directed their attention to something (“Oh, look, there’s an example of o-u-g-h pronounced the other way”).

44Fam: “We did convey the rules of phonics and how they could use a combination of phonics and context to work out new words. The majority of this conveyance was in response to their questions or by way of a follow-up comment.”

23M: “We were there to answer any questions he had about reading a word, or phonics or spelling.”

58F: “Just answering questions about letters and their sound.”

The restricted contribution of phonics to learning was also communicated through the limited time and application that was spent on the idea.

22M: “We used a phonics video programme for two days.”

35M: “He watched some ‘educational’ TV that used phonics”.

29Fam: “A little bit of phonics”.

31Fam: “He just needed other members of the family to answer a few questions on phonics and then he was able to progress quickly.”

25F: “one short attempt at Hooked on Phonics.”

33F: “Early on used ‘Letterland’ – a phonics based multisensorial approach – used minimally.”

47Fam: “touched on very small amounts of using phonics, flashcards but mainly started her off reading ladybird books – The Magic Porridge Pot being a favourite.”

55F: “We did practice some basic phonics, but she tired of that quickly.”

16F: “talking about letter sounds occasionally, the odd phonics video game. Very little of these things though.”

Having been introduced to phonics, the extent to which children actually made use of its ideas was also open to question:

52F: “Our daughter listened many times a tale from the French syllabic method “La Planetes des Alphas” but did not follow the method to learn reading.”

2Fam: “Had a little phonics instruction from me but took off on his own from there.”

22F: “F did take a phonics based online reading program at age 4 which she took about 2.5 years to complete. She wasn’t reading independently at the end of that but it may have given her some skills.”

80M: “Phonics type reading lessons ... provided ‘reading lessons’ from time to time – a couple of months of lessons and then a couple of months off with no lessons at all between the ages of 6 – 8. His reading took off during an ‘off’ time (went from beginner reading to reading novels.)”

34Fam: “He watched the jolly phonics videos, although I suspect he doesn’t use that method (it was all news to me watching those, about word sounds).”

56M: “Teaching some letters and some phonics used an old French reading manual when he was 6 without real success: He really started to read when he was 9 ½.”

Disagreeing with Phonics

Other parents took a definite anti-phonics stance, disagreeing that it was important for reading in theoretical terms:

43M: “forget the phonics rubbish (no offence) it is patronising and overly complicated, a letter a week is rubbish and disconnected.”

28M: “The phonics method can confuse some children and does not help children to become good spellers.”

11M: “We never told him to “just sound it out””.

22Fam: “Nothing about constructing letters, learning phonics, starting ‘small’ makes sense. It’s nonsensical”.

More frequently though, parents connected their disagreement with phonics directly to their own children’s experiences:

2M: “I also don’t feel the need for phonics – I feel my son is confident enough to look at a word and make an intelligent guess about what it means. If he had been taught phonics, I feel this may interfere with his skills and logic may slow him down.”

28M: “After three weeks of attending school where they used the phonics method he decided it was too slow and boring... phonics totally confused him and slowed his reading down as he would stop at every letter and sound it out and got very confused when he realised that hardly any English words are spelled ‘fon-et-ic-lee”.

36Fam: “We read the same stories over and over but I also attempted to force her to learn how to put the letters together to form words instead of just reading and answering her questions because I did not know better “

74M: “He really struggled with the idea of phonetics.”

71M: “He spectacularly failed to pick up phonics and early reading skills at school ... made no progress at all through synthetic phonics.”

29F: "I tried using phonics but she wasn't interested and couldn't grasp it. She knew all the letter sounds but couldn't blend them together."

That phonics might interfere with children's own thought process, bore them or simply not suit them was a key theme in such comments:

40M: "He seldom will try to 'sound out' words that he does not know."

68M: "We have some phonics books but he has shown little interest so I don't push it.... I certainly can't force my son to do phonics workbooks etc."

56F: "Jolly Phonics finger books that had been recommended to me. She played with them but didn't seem to get anything out of them ... I realised while trying to help that she really couldn't pick out the sounds in the individual letters. I was surprised by this as advanced speech has been a defining characteristic of my daughter since she was tiny and I found it hard to understand how she could pick up new words so easily yet have so much trouble picking out the sounds within them. It has become apparent that she is a very visual learner for whom phonics makes little sense."

71M: "His reading has come on a lot more since he was at home more and I feel this has been due to focus on books and stories rather than sounds."

One parent seemed to turn the tables on phonics by suggesting that decoding is not really reading:

15Fam: "Eldest child did not really read until age 12 (was able to do some decoding before that, but not real reading)... youngest is beginning to decode, not reading yet."

Only Phonics in so Far as it Fits into Other Ideas

A strong influence on parents feelings about phonics seems to be the extent to which it fits in (or does not fit in) with their ideas about children as learners. The view of the child as a natural, motivated and individual learner means that many parents only seemed to consider phonics in so far as it dovetailed with this view; if phonics seemed to suit their child as an individual, if their child expressed an interest in phonics or seemed to enjoy phonics. In this way phonics seemed more strongly connected to parents' ideas about children as learners rather than to ideas about the nature of reading. Whether to use phonics or not was often simply a matter of taste:

32M: "My husband tried to do some phonics work with son as he was worried that he wasn't reading at the 'usual' age but didn't persevere with this as son not interested so stopped... I don't think that the phonics trial helped my son as he wasn't ready or interested in reading at that point."

30F: "Tried phonics and flashcards but she was very resistant."

40F: "She never liked phonics".

62F: "I tried phonics with her but with her lack of speech it wasn't that much good as she couldn't say most of the sounds – even when she did start talking."

56F: "Phonics doesn't suit every child – as a very strong visual learner my daughter finds the individual sounds in words meaningless ... she hears words as a single sound."

2F: "She liked Jolly Phonics and tracing letters in different media."

54F: “She knows all her letters and is fascinated by words: she likes to play what we call the ‘letter game’ with a box of wooden magnetic letters: she says a word she wants to see, we sound out the letters and she picks them out.”

7Fam: “We had phonics books in the home, some flashcards available, but they didn’t seem his thing... phonics had nothing to do with any of my kids’ abilities”

36Fam: “Some people need tips and tricks of how letters and sounds create words, others intuitively ‘break the code’.”

46M: “He naturally picked up on the phonetic side of language.”

For families with more than one child at home feelings about phonics could vary:

43Fam: “I have one child who learnt very phonetically by spelling words out and breaking them down into their sounds, and one who learnt by recognising whole words.”

26M: “X hates phonics, but Y quite likes it.”

Across the range of contributions there was considerable disagreement about the part phonics may or may not play in learning to read. For some it might be possible to see reading as the mastery of phonics but many expressed opinions which would not make this a satisfactory definition of what it means to be able to read.

Other Methods

Although phonics is the practiced method of teaching reading used in formal education at the moment, some parents talked about other methods, either commercial/professional ones or of their own devising:

36Fam: “We read the same stories over and over, talked about letters and colored them and drew them and answered questions about words and showed how sounds went together without requesting them to read.”

71M: “I used whole word recognition through a scheme called audiblox”.

38F: “My mum ... bought me a book called ‘Read with Me – An Apprenticeship Approach to Reading’ by Liz Waterland. It’s main target is teachers in schools but it outlines the process by which children learn to read and the different stages they go through.”

74M: “I would say he is a whole word reader”.

5Fam: “Apprenticeship with books of all types.”

45Fam: “We’ve used a variety of different things, depending on what she wanted to do.”

Children Devising their own Method

Some children seemed themselves to settle on what might be described as a ‘method’:

6M: “He learned the letter names by himself and then noticed the letter sounds.”

40F: “My daughter taught herself to read by ‘look and learn’ methods.”

45Fam: “He learned by word recognition; if he came across a word he didn’t know, we only had to tell him once and he knew it after that.”

The Limitations of Method

Other parents comments made it clear that they saw inherent difficulties in approaching reading as any kind of method. For a start, some argued that they did not consider a method to be something that could be appraised separately from the employer of the method.

52F: “The method is not important, the important [thing] is that the child likes it.”

82M: “All methods are good for some children but none is good for everyone.”

55F: “Go with what works for that particular child!”

31Fam: “I finally came to the conclusion that we should leave methods alone ... ‘methods’ are only useful if the child is interested in the method as a way to learn to read.”.

23Fam: “There is not a “one–size-fits-all” magic formula.”

Another parent considered that a single method could not be expected to provide what a child needed over a period of time and other changing factors:

56F: “often requiring different resources to be available at different times rather than following a single ‘method’ throughout.”

Others felt that at least some methods of learning to read were actually detrimental to what they hoped to achieve:

49F: “I think that many of the methods for teaching kids to read may take the fun out of reading and then kids give up”.

43F: “Every time I used any method that took the intrinsic value away – flashcards, dumbed-down readers, computer programs etc it was a long time before joy returned with the desire to learn.”

79M: “Intelligent children learn to read often despite the methods used.”

29M: “We tried numerous different reading ‘methods’. Every time a new one was recommended as ‘the one’ that would teach him to read, we’d buy it and it would fail miserably. It didn’t matter what the methodology was behind it – none of it worked for him.”

No Method

Some families simply eschewed any kind of method:

32M: “You don’t need to follow a structured plan, as they learn anyway.”

66M: “I don’t do phonics or anything else.”

7F: "I'm sure she provides an example of how perfectly ordinary children can pick up reading skills according to their own enthusiasm and their own timetable without the benefit of rigid phonics schemes, textbooks, or set reading materials."

24Fam: "No phonics, no reading schemes, no flashcards and plenty of Dr Seuss".

38Fam: "We did not use a method."

51F: "Formal lessons are absolutely not required: neither is learning the skills in a particular order."

29Fam: "None really [method used]; other than a few games."

32F: "No phonics, no flash cards, no traditional teaching methods were used in our home – for reading or anything else."

An interesting question is begged by the idea of 'no method' about what actually constitutes a method at all:

31Fam: "I read a book by Françoise Boulangier who taught her own children how to read, and as I remember, she didn't really have a particular method but just tried to help them become aware of reading and writing in daily life. So we basically just read lots of books or stories that we liked aloud and borrowed books from the library and used daily opportunities for writing."

Thus what might be considered a 'method' by some, simply dissolves into everyday life:

12Fam: "Living life in a world where words are everywhere."

15Fam: "Given time and exposure children will learn to read and will enjoy it."

7Fam: "Living a life style of literacy."

At the point where methods are abandoned the idea of 'reading problems' undergoes a transformation. Where no method is used, 'problems' do not exist in the same way that they do under 'methods'. Problems are created when children do not react to the method as they are expected to, for instance when children do not catch on to the ideas of phonics or are not interested in engaging with them. If reading is not a method and therefore cannot be taught through a method, what kind of reaction should be made to a non-reading child?

8Fam: "Time usually solves most things: child not reading? Wait 6 months; still not reading? Wait 6 months, etc."

Where parents don't know how children have learned, clearly reading cannot be defined in terms of how it was learned.

7Fam: "A huge mystery to me."

21Fam: "I still don't know [how they learned to read]."

51M: "I must be honest and say I don't know HOW he learned to read."

2Fam: "Not sure how he learnt to read – seemed to happen overnight!"

1Fam: "No clue ... I really have very little idea about how it happens even though I was trained as a Primary School teacher."

Whilst it might make sense for educators to define reading in terms of how they expect it to be learned (and ultimately therefore about how they expect to teach it) this can only be tenable where clear, independent and universal ideas about learning to read exist. For this to be the case 'reading' has to be understood as a product of its methods. Many of the parents here did not seem to see reading in these terms. Instead they viewed reading through the idea of the reader; in this case the child as an individual and independent learner with their own motivation or learning momentum. Logically this meant for parents that each child could be expected to learn differently and no 'method' could be considered universally applicable. The idea of defining reading through the method by which it is learned therefore becomes untenable. However, if reading is not a method, then how it could be taught becomes equally unclear.

Memorising

Is recognising or memorising words 'reading'? For ardent phonics advocates it is clearly not. Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) go to lengths (inventing non words as reading tests) to ensure that the capacity to recognise words does not muddy the waters of ability to decode phonetically. Some parents in this study also made a distinction between reading and memorising:

24Fam: "She was soon reading all kinds of children's books. Not memorising, but reading."

59F: "Over the course of several years, each book was reread a great many times. Most had been memorised, but she still looked at the text while reciting the words."

2M: "He got to know a few books off by heart which he would 'pretend to read' and through this learnt a number of words."

For other parents the line between memorising and reading seemed to be much more blurred. Where children are learning to read through the context of their own lives and those who are learning without a method there seems no reason to make a distinction between recognising, memorising and reading.

22F: "The second time, [rereading] she actually read quite a lot of it with only a few words needing prompting every time, some every so often and a handful with no help at all. Those words are now imprinted on her brain."

38F: "She started out being able to read her name and then her sister's name, then simple words like Mummy and Daddy, dog and cat etc. She just was able to recognise them. We did play a lot of games that involved recognising and matching words, but not with the intention of her learning anything from them. She played on the computer a lot too and I'm sure that helped a great deal."

33M: "He spends a fair amount of time every day looking at his books and will sometimes recite a story he knows well, using the book."

32Fam: "Younger kids often want to read the same books over and over and over. I believe this really helps them to read, as they learn the story by heart and begin recognising the words they are saying."

2F: "She seemed to have a natural talent for memorisation and would quote the next sentence of a story before we could read it."

40F: "My child has an amazing memory for facts. I think she was very interested in books and stories and found learning/memorising the words easy."

9M: "He has a phenomenal memory and started out by recognizing whole words that he had seen while we read to him".

32M: "We'd always read out loud to him and he knew some books by heart word for word so I wonder if that helped him work out the code of reading but don't really know."

Whether or not to consider memorising as 'reading' is to do with the perceived measure of reading. If reading is to be judged by ability to say aloud a previously unseen text (the test applied by Stainthorp and Hughes in their study) then memorising may be of limited value. In this definition the skill of applying sound to symbols must be undertaken anew every time it is needed. If on the other hand, reading is an inherently contextual familiarity with particular situations and objects then memory might well be a chief means of its accomplishment:

22F: "I remember laughing that she recognised the word 'loading' which she'd learnt by looking at it while waiting for various games to load up!"

58M: "He only recognises specific words."

The ability to read and the means by which it is believed to be learned can be seen here as intertwined expectations. Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) believe in a building

up of phonics based skills which can be measured off at any particular point in progress. For some parents in this study however, reading was talked about as a means that can be applied to a particular end at any time without an inevitable progressive element. These parents explained how, to their sons', reading was not an activity in itself but a part of other things:

81M: "I would not call him a reader yet. He is reading little things on his World of Warcraft game, road signs, movie credits ... all things around us but no books yet."

16Fam: "We now find that he can read words such as 'escape', 'organic', 'save', 'exit', 'bungalow', 'dinosaur', 'bytes' but struggles with the traditional phonic words 'cat', 'hat', 'bit' which I find totally fascinating that he retains the words he needs to be able to do the things he wants to do but doesn't retain the words that are of no interest to him."

Here another possibility arises about seeing reading not as a skill that is specifically acquired and then generally applied but rather as a tool to accomplish a particular end which in a secondary way then becomes a more general ability. Thus a child might be able to use 'reading' to play a particular computer game, but appear not to be 'reading' in other situations; thus reading for them would be a functional activity rather than a general skill.

Similarly, the idea of reading as a systematic structure in which progress is built up in a rising order of sophistication or difficulty was not endorsed by all:

22F: “having something that really truly interests the person is really important. Even (perhaps especially) if it’s far beyond their reading ‘level’.”

73M: “My son skipped all those turgid ‘reader’ books and other children’s books and went straight to full on novels.”

43F: “Reading interest started with serious books way above her ‘level’.”

23M: “I think the main thing is to allow them to read whatever they are interested in, even if the topic or book seems ‘too hard’ for their level.”

Silent Reading

Much of what parents know about their children’s reading and most of what is known about children’s reading in school, rests on reading aloud. Competency in phonics, tied as it is to a supposed link between writing and speech, can only be assessed through reading aloud. Despite the preference that some children in their study express for silent reading, Stainthorp and Hughes simply note that reading aloud may slow down a fluent reader (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999). They have no way of assessing the significance of silent reading for learning, despite their own acknowledgement that vocabulary enlargement can take place through reading silently, recognised in the way that children may know and understand a word which they cannot correctly pronounce. The reading of these words therefore did not rest on phonemic skills.

However, away from the theory of phonics, silent reading reveals an activity which may be quite different from the definition of reading given by Stainthorp and Hughes.

Fisher argues that “reading silently to oneself often draws on little or no language mediation” (Fisher, 2003, p 337). As its own medium there is no need for phonological awareness to precede or even accompany silent reading. The symbol on the page can hold an immediate significance without the need for the stepping stone of speech. Fisher indeed goes on to argue: “that sufferers of phonological dyslexia, for example, cannot convert isolated letters into sounds yet can still read whole words so long as these exist in the language, demonstrates how cerebral pathways can proceed directly from grapheme to meaning, by passing the phonological component altogether” (Fisher, 2003, p 337). His argument begs the question of whether dyslexia can be seen as a difficulty created by a particular definition of reading as much as it might be a physical condition. Indeed in discussing whether dyslexia can be said to exist or not, Elliot and Gibbs argue “that dyslexia exists, is ‘diagnosed’ and is ‘treated’ ignores the artefactual qualities of literacy implicit in any proper consideration of the issues” (Elliot and Gibbs, 2008, p485). Despite this however, they continue to acquiesce to the approach that “difficulty with reading is experienced primarily because of difficulties in the process of translating between symbols and speech” (Elliot and Gibbs, 2008, p 481).

It is obviously hard to know exactly what is happening when children are reading silently. As Clark argues “where children read orally or try out aloud words which cause difficulty, it is possible to study their possible strategies for arriving at meaning; where however, as with many of these children they read silently is often difficult to discover the particular strategies they utilize” (Clark, 1976, p105). Unfortunately it is outside the scope of this study to consider the significance of silent reading for

children who learn at home. Suffice to say at this point that the emphasis placed on reading aloud to a teacher in school is simply not the same at home. Most parents did not mention whether their children read silently or aloud but certainly the compulsion to read aloud does not exist and those who mentioned it felt it to be unnecessary:

34M: "Although he was behind at school the only help they ever gave him was to get a classroom assistant to try and force him to read aloud every day."

39F: "Don't ask them to read out loud if they don't want to."

When it is not necessary to read aloud for purposes of demonstration then the choice belongs to the child:

74M: "I also observed that he seems to be reading faster mentally than he reads out loud. That makes it difficult for him to read out loud."

62F: "It is hard to say [at what age she began to read] but about 5 reading out loud – she could have been able to do it before that age as she did not speak."

11F: "She usually 'sounds out' in her head, not out loud."

Literacy

In Chapter One the relationship between literacy and reading was discussed where literacy was seen as being a result of the ability to read; once a person can read in a technical sense, they gain access to literacy by being able to participate in enriching

communicative and social practices. For some parents in the study however, this situation seemed to work in reverse; children became literate and then at some stage after this might move towards reading independently:

15Fam: "Prefers audiobooks and devours literature in this way – I would consider him very literate although he 'reads' little – loves literature, the process of reading less so."

74M: "He still wouldn't pick up a book and read it by himself, however he listens to several talking books a week. So my answer would be yes, he enjoys literacy and I think eventually when he finds reading easier he will continue his literacy interest by reading."

55M: "My eight year old still does not read on his own, but thoroughly enjoys listening to audio books."

58M: "My son had no interest in learning his letters or writing though he LOVES books."

15Fam: "Audio books have brought the world of books to those whose capacity to understand outpaced their ability to read and to those for whom the process of reading is laborious but love books."

32Fam: "Better late than early. Read TO THEM and let them continue to grow in knowledge by listening to stories on CD etc. Their comprehension will be great, and their language sophisticated by the time they start reading themselves. No sense keeping them from knowledge because they can't read it themselves."

This child (age 9 ¾ years) is described as beginning to read yet his literate life is well developed, full and rich:

7Fam: “It was clear from the get-go that he had a literary mind and huge vocabulary. He spends many hours alone in his room listening to Harry [Potter] on CD or to anything he can get his hands on (Madeline L’Engle, HOOK, Katherine Paterson, Pippi Longstocking, Stuart Little, Nancy Drew). My family reads to him (we each have our own novel on the go and he roams from person to person begging us to read). So he’s doing Lord of the Rings, Redwall, The Hobbit and various Nancy Drews at the moment. He has opinions on all of the books, but seems to take them all at good face value. He tells us stories. He draws detailed pictures that take hours to complete as he tells the story that creates the picture. He has fully-formed characters already in his mind that just pop out.”

Similar in many ways, is the story of this boy who began to read aged 10:

53M: “Our home is filled with books and the net is a tool employed by each of the children on a daily basis with six computers in the house. On long journeys we listen to the national radio station and have long discussions about a range of topics, or listen to audio books. At night over dinner we again have discussions about current issues in the news, ideas and thoughts. [He] is now part of a debating group and is generally the final speaker. So all in all words whether written or spoken are a huge part of his life. [He] also has a natural ability for foreign languages as well which he loves to learn though not in any disciplined way.”

From literacy, reading could be left to arise:

42F:[a main factor in her learning was] “the love of reading she absorbed from listening to good books being read to her.”

2M: “I feel that there is no need to teach it, only to perhaps encourage a love of reading.”

27Fam: “Left well alone children learn to read for pleasure.”

One of the main ways in which parents separated the ideas of literacy (the personal, life enriching possibilities of being able to read) on the one hand and the view of reading as a technological skill to be mastered on the other became apparent in the pleasure many children found in reading. One hundred and sixty contributors attested that their children enjoyed reading and many of these went on to underline the importance of personal pleasure in becoming a reader. Question 10 of the questionnaire directly asked parents whether their child enjoyed reading. Many parents simply said “yes” but others went on to describe a passion:

10F: “She reads whenever possible, even walking down the street ... since she was 7 and fell in love with reading.”

22F: “ She only recently (within the last few months) became an independent reader yet now claims it’s one of her most favourite activities, spending 2 – 5 hours a day with her nose in a book.”

25F: “YES! I have to pry books away from her she loves to read so much.”

12M: [reads] “so much that I caught myself wanting to restrict it!”

13M: “YES! People are always surprised to see a 13 year old boy reading.”

25M: “He reads several hours a day.”

42M: “He has to be persuaded to put a book down to eat!”

43M: “We have to fight to turn the lights off at night often as late as 11pm as he wants to read...he reads through meals, in queues, wherever we are.”

51M: “He reads constantly – to the point that we, the parents wonder if we should force him to go outside and run around!”

44F: “My child LOVES reading and spends several hours a day doing so. She complained just yesterday that our local library has almost run out of books for her to read in the children’s’ section!”

61F: “Once she grasped it reading became a revelation and there seemed to be no stopping her – the world opened up to her.”

Where parents talked about children being in love with reading or being passionate about reading, the terms of the metaphor have changed subtly. Reading is no longer something that is acquired, or even participated in; it is not an independently existing field or a curriculum area. Instead it is something that someone is or becomes; ‘a reader’, ‘a lover’ of literature; part of their identity:

5M: “It turns them into people who love to read ... not people who suffer through it for points or a grade.”

15M: I believe that reading can be taught but the joy of reading can only be modelled and that ultimately that enjoyment has to come from within the child.

60F: “Even doing all the work deemed necessary to produce a reader, a reader will not emerge until the reason to read, the motivation is there. This can only come from the child.”

The difference between being able to read and being ‘a reader’ is perhaps also visible in those families where neither the ability to read nor the advantages of literacy seemed to have led children to become ‘readers’ in the ways talked about above. There were 27 questionnaire responses in which parents indicated that either their child did not enjoy reading or felt ambiguously about it. In many of these cases it was not so much that children disliked reading but that they saw it as a means to an end rather than a direct source of enjoyment.

6Fam: “My daughter enjoys communicating with her friends although I do most of the spelling for her. My son enjoys reading a little, but it is not his passion at all.”

41Fam: “Not really for pleasure – although I think that is growing. She reads because she has to in order to achieve her desire to understand the material.”

1Fam: “Chooses not to read much at all. Says he would rather do other things. Does like to read email and text messages, labels, instructions etc. So I guess reads to live.”

14M: “He is not what I would call an ‘avid reader’ or ‘bookworm’. Reading is more a means of gaining information than a fun pastime.”

27M: [He doesn’t enjoy] “the act of reading [rather] what he gains from it.”

28M: “He can read fairly well now although he does not really enjoy it.... He views it as a means to an end, to gain information.”

46M: "Reading is usually a means, not an end unto itself."

47M: "[he does] mostly purposeful reading (seeking information) versus reading for enjoyment."

20M: "I have learned that reading is a tool that gives people access to the greater world."

50F: "She now reads at college level but not for pleasure but to learn."

For children at home, exercising the choice not to read is a rather different situation to that of a school child who would prefer not to read. Children did not have to feel negatively about reading if they could simply choose to do other things:

9Fam: [they enjoy reading] "well enough but none voraciously"

38Fam: "All [enjoy reading] except one. He did for a while and then he got bored with reading."

56M: "He does not want to read books on his own; does not see the interest in reading novels etc!"

71M: "Yes when he wants to..."

73M: "Yes, but wouldn't dream of reading to please someone else."

How do Children see Reading?

Of course where children are learning autonomously how parents understand reading themselves may not be particularly relevant – instead it is how children understand reading that matters.

Some children were aware of reading and of their own ability in terms of reading:

38F: "When she was about 4 ½ she started saying, 'I can't read, can I Mummy?' and I would say that she could read, as she already recognised so many words."

37M: "The other day we were talking about unschooling vs. public schooling and that we learn different things in different ways at different times. He said, "It's like this. I'm 6 and I don't know how to read but I will at some point." And now he is."

51M: "She has expressed concern over whether she will be able to read. Possibly being the only non-reader for the last few years."

From this position of awareness it would be possible to go forward into reading in a purposeful manner as this young man describes:

38M: "It got to the point where there were too many things in daily life that needed reading and I got tired of asking what things said. ... it was not at the top of the list of things to learn until I was 12."

On the other hand, and as touched on above, there is no reason to suppose that children who have not been taught should be aware of reading as a distinct, definable activity rather than simply part of understanding their environment through becoming increasingly familiar with it:

21Fam: “Our 8 year old is picking up words that mean something to her but hasn’t shown much interest really in a lot of reading. Each day she picks up more words from her environment and I think reading will come in one big hit when she is ready.”

54F: “She often asks what words say when we’re out and about. And seems to retain such words and is able to recognise them when she sees them again, which she finds very exciting!”

35M: “He doesn’t see reading as separate from functioning on a day-to-day basis. If you were to ask him he would say he doesn’t read because he perceives reading as sitting down with a book with lots of words.”

Some parents described a change in their child where ‘reading’ actually referred to that moment of discovery in which a child became aware of their own capability and their own capacity to apply that ability. In many ways this links into the discussion earlier about motivation; where the motivation to read seemed to follow the ability rather than to lead it. Children have learned to read without recognising reading as a separable, definable activity and without experiencing what would commonly be labelled as ‘learning’.

30F: “read posters and signs from 5 years but wouldn’t read a book until 8 yrs.”

8M: “He recognised words from about the age of 5 but showed no interest in reading until he was 10 when he suddenly stopped asking us to read his Beano as he wanted to do it for himself.”

4M: “He says ‘one day I just opened a book, thought I’d try and read it. It was about King Arthur. I just read it, just like that. It felt good. I read a lot now. I think it’s fun.’”

81M: “He is beginning to experience the joy and power of knowing what things say around us.”

57M: “He wanted to be able to read game cards so he went asking for what was written. I knew he was able to read when he didn’t come anymore.”

Here Foucauldian arguments on the invoking of categories can be cited again (Foucault 1970). The relationship of alternative education to main stream schooling, including the subject matter of learning to read, remains an important juxtaposition which encompasses not just educational values and practices but also many of society’s other key moral and metaphysical standpoints. Reading and literacy is an important school curriculum area and this importance creates “a certain domain already outlined ... a space circumscribed on the outside but still empty” (Foucault, 1970, p344). However, in the actual practice of learning at home there is no conceptual, ideological, educational or intellectual necessity for a space which equates to the subject matter designated as ‘reading’ in formal education. Nor need there be any gap in thought or analysis, practice or theory for those who see no need for this category. Nevertheless, alternative education cannot avoid such categories and continues to be created through its relationship to the ideas and practices of schooling although this relationship will frequently be one of contrast rather than similarity. In this sense home education fits Foucault’s description of heterotopias as arrangements “which are endowed with the curious property of being in relation with all the others, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected, or mirrored by themselves” (Foucault 1967).

So alternative education can be viewed as a heterotopia for which the labels and categories of formal schooling provide the only usable discourse although such categories may not sit comfortably at all in this different world.

Metaphors of Reading

A window into parents' views on what reading is, is provided by the metaphors used in answering the questionnaire. As discussed at the end of Chapter Three, it can become very difficult to distinguish between dead and foundational metaphors and therefore to grasp the kind of understanding on which the use of very common metaphors is based. It may be that the metaphors of acquisition and structure are unreflectively repeated habits of speech, or equally that they may represent strongly and deeply held views.

Metaphors of structure

Metaphors of reading as building a structure are very common in the literature on learning to read, and include expressions such as 'foundations', 'basics', 'levels', 'building skills' and 'constructing understanding'. Wells, for example argues "parents can and do help children to construct the foundations of literacy in the years before school" (Wells, 1986, p 161). Similar language was used by some contributors:

53F: "after gathering the basics in playschool my reading progressed"

78M: "Once he had the basics, he did the rest himself"

Metaphors of structure can be viewed as entailments of the metaphor of acquisition – things are not only acquired but they are acquired in an order – a process of stages which can then in turn be viewed as creating a structure:

11Fam: “My 4 year old is still in the 10 word reader stage. My 5.5 year old son has graduated to level 2 readers.”

The idea of children acquiring tools, similarly gives the impression of a technical structure being put together.

29Fam: “As long as you give them the tools ...”

30Fam: “Give [them] the tools ...”

30Fam: “a few good tools timely used and placed in the child’s way”

This in turn links to the entailment of ‘decoding’ as a technical approach to reading; the phonics theory of learning to read being akin to ‘cracking a code’.

37M: “It’s truly by virtue of his own desire to ‘crack the code’.

31F: “It’s not that difficult a code to break.”

3Fam: “He saw many of the same words over and over again eg ‘restart’, ‘play’, ‘attack’ etc and from that he learnt to decode words in print.”

36Fam: “Some intuitively ‘break the code’”.

Thus under the broad heading of the metaphor of learning as acquisition the ideas of process, structure, tools and decoding appear to cluster.

Metaphors of liquid

More unusually than the references to learning to read as building a structure, some parents spoke of literacy in terms of a liquid using expressions such as 'saturation', 'immersion', 'washing', 'osmosis' and 'fluidity'. The following three examples picture literacy as a liquid rather than a solid:

22Fam: "We wash them in language... language immersion"

74M: "he grew up in a print saturated environment."

9Fam: "Lots of books around, regular trips to library to pick out books on their choice of topics, reading signs, subscribing to magazines of their choice, writing letters, general immersion in the real world."

Metaphors of immersion and saturation suggest the social learning of Vygotskian theories where learning is an acquisition via transference from the social to the individual. The final quote above seems also to embody elements of the participation metaphor as well as the acquisition metaphor in that acquisition from the environment occurs as a result of participation in the literate world.

Considering literacy as a liquid rather than a solid embodies implications for learning.

Liquids have different properties to solids and treating literacy as a liquid makes

some other metaphorical understandings untenable. The most obvious of these are those which treat literacy as a structure made of 'building blocks' and raised from 'foundations' or 'basics' to 'higher levels'. Fluids cannot be built with, instead they shape themselves to their containers. The containers here seem to be the mind although literacy itself is referred to as a container so that a child can be washed *in*, immersed *in*, literacy. A third container is the world in which literacy itself is contained so that a person can be *in* a print saturated environment. Such thinking can also be applied to the way in which becoming literate happens:

3M: "He acquired the skills involved in a very fluid way."

Acquiring something in a fluid way implies that the shape which these containers are will be the shape which the liquid in them takes up. And if the shape of literacy is not fixed then it takes on the shape of other things, perhaps the context in which it is found or the mind of the child. Unlike the metaphor of structure, there is no pre-set form that progress or process can take without a consideration of the context and of the learner. Thus in seeing literacy as a liquid the idea of a progression from point to point in a pre-determined process is brought implicitly into question. The metaphors of literacy as a liquid suggest that it is something that adapts to the child and the child's environment rather than the child adapting to pre-decided methods and ideas about what reading is and how it should be undertaken.

Metaphors of Osmosis

Osmosis is the tendency of the molecules of a solvent to pass through a semi-permeable membrane from a less concentrated solution to a more concentrated one.

This biological description was used by some parents as a metaphor for the assimilation of literacy:

16Fam: "The whole process of learning to read by virtual osmosis is amazing."

39Fam: "[He] seems to have learned by osmosis."

The metaphor of osmosis depicts the passage of literacy from the environment to the individual, echoing ideas of social learning theory and therefore learning as acquisition. Osmosis again conveys the idea that literacy is a liquid and the idea that learning to read is both a fluid and a natural phenomenon rather than something socially organised.

Osmosis occurs naturally because of the juxtaposition of two substances. It does not involve effort, volition or awareness. It is a purely physical reaction shared by organisms with and without conscious minds. The interface between the two substances needs to be one receptive to a transference but there is no requirement for a third party to mediate, control or facilitate the transference. It is a gradual process. Any or all of these ideas could be made entailments of the metaphor of osmosis and may be being implied in the above quotes. Thus the metaphor of

learning by osmosis ties into other views about the naturalness of learning and about the nugatory role of intervention in learning.

Metaphors of Emergence and Coalescence

The idea of emergent literacy has become an important one over recent decades, and presents an alternative view to the 'reading readiness' approach which focuses on definable skills that children need before they can profit from formal reading lessons. Emergent literacy on the other hand uses the idea of a continuum of literacy development such that there is no clear point where pre-reading and reading can be distinguished from each other (Whitehurst and Lonigan 1998). As such metaphors of literacy as a liquid seem more appropriate to ideas of emergent literacy than those of hierarchical structures. The idea of a continuum of development however clearly embodies a forward progression and the idea of process seems to be inherent in the view. Emergent literacy theories however seem to have an inbuilt end of their own. The suggestion is not that reading can be left to emerge on its own even given the right environment. Intervention is still taken as an essential requisite (Weinberger, 1996).

Only one parent used the term 'emerging'.

16Fam: "I would say this skill is just emerging now."

The idea of emergence suggests a container from which the emergence is taking place. It seems most likely that the envisaged container is the child although it is possible that the container is more than this, the child in their world for example. If this possibility is pursued then this could be seen as a metaphor of participation; the emergence being one of participation in the literate community.

Two metaphors used the idea of coalescence. The first of these:

26M: "Reading, like language, coalesces out of the mist."

Whilst coalescence and emergence suggest two quite different kinds of movement, what both metaphors have in common is that they have personified reading by making it the subject of the verb. It is reading itself that emerges or coalesces.

The quote above contains two metaphors: "like language" and "coalesces out of the mist". As discussed in the previous chapter many parents saw a similarity between reading and talking and, as in this quote, the way in which these two things are learned. Speech and reading are frequently put together where the written word is seen to be the equivalent of symbolised speech but it is possible that the reference to language is something broader. It may refer to communication and to the many 'languages' of symbol and representation from which we are able to extract meaning. Putting reading and language together in the wider category of "communication" makes the reading of a particular set of symbols not a special or different skill but

simply one amongst many modes of communication which make up part of everyday life.

In this metaphor, reading is the active agent that performs the verb, that does the coalescing, rather than the activity being the province of the learning child (or their teacher). If it is reading itself that is active, what is the role of the learner? Is the child simply and passively 'in the mist' until something recognisable eventually coalesces out of it? Constructivist views of learning see learning as an activity performed by a learner; an activity that is definable and separable from other activities (Noddings 1998). Perhaps this metaphor, and possibly those on learning is natural, are hinting at a replacement of doing and activity with learning as a passive enterprise in which being is more important than engaging. Such metaphors link back to the discussion of motivation and whether motivation is actually a necessary component of learning to read. The ideas of natural, osmosis, coalescence suggest that learning to read is something that happens to a person rather than something which requires the engagement, management or even active awareness of either the learner or anyone else.

Reading coalescing out of the mist is a metaphor with an evocative, aesthetic, almost poetic appeal and its presence among the utilitarian language of education and learning is pleasantly surprising when so many metaphors see learning as a form of labour, the accumulation of a private good for personal profit, something at which people succeed or fail; ideas that are often found unappealing or morally suspect if inevitable. Learning often appears to be a necessary evil of life.

Mist evokes the idea of mystery, of things being close but hidden, knowable as shapes or by features rather than by detail, maybe even adventure or excitement as something that was shapeless or dimly perceived reveals itself. The mystery evoked by mist is brought together in the following quote with the idea of coalescence:

14F: “Becoming a reader is a mystery that happens when several things coalesce in the brain.”

The mystery here is not reading but “becoming a reader”. Subjectivity has been returned to the person and once again the idea that reading and becoming a reader may not be quite the same thing. In this metaphor, all known theories are rejected whilst the explanation of “several things” suggests reading as multi-faceted. Again as discussed above, the metaphor lies in being and identity rather than in participation or acquisition.

Challenges to ‘Reading’

The term ‘read’ was not challenged in the same way that ‘teach’ was yet varied ideas about its meaning have emerged that suggest parents could be conceptually wide apart in the ways that they used and understood what it means to be able to read. Across the range of ideas, ‘reading’ moved from a method of decoding letters into speech to an area of life without independent or definable existence at all.

Where reading is perceived as being linked to a method and/or a purpose it can be treated as a body of knowledge. This is the case in formal education which takes implicitly that subject areas exist as epistemological realities, for instance Carr (2003, p135) writes that “the curricular place and contribution of a subject is part and parcel of understanding its contribution to human development”. In such a view, given bodies of knowledge have a definable influence on those who become acquainted with them; a view rooted in technical understandings of education in which a subject matter is an input that contributes to an outcome, allowing therefore for learning to be planned, predicted and measured. If however the subject matter, cannot be defined as a body of knowledge then its place in the technical understanding of education becomes uncertain. If reading is not a method and if learning to read is not purpose driven then how to measure an outcome also becomes problematic. For many of the contributors here, method and outcome did not appear to be the defining features of reading. Rather, emerged ideas that linked the practice of reading with the person who reads; reading being defined by the person who does it rather than a set of internal rules and a body of knowledge with its own independent standing. This view fits strongly with the idea of children as natural, independent and self-motivated learners who will find their own ways and come to their own understandings, and which contrasts with the technological view in which learners are models to be acted on (Smith, 2000). The centrality of the person rather than the subject matter was supported by metaphors of learning that referred to becoming a reader rather than acquiring literacy or participating in its practices.

Where teaching, subject matter and outcomes are all seen as interrelated organisational concepts then the questioning or breaking up of one has a knock on effect to the others in the relationship. Just as parents doubted the concept of teaching, so they also in many cases doubted the subject matter of reading and these can be seen as interrelated doubts rather than concomitant ones. However, these thoughts did not prevent the introduction of reading as a practice nor the effort to communicate its value and uses, only the ways in which this might be done, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

Reading and the Environment

Much work on reading holds the environment to be a critical element in learning to read (eg Wells, 1986). The idea of 'environment' sets a picture of learning in which an independent structure (the thing to be learned) is located in a particular social and physical background. Such a view necessarily gives rise to the question of how should the structure and its environment be distinguished from one another. In the case of an epistemology such as Stainthorp and Hughes', the answer is relatively clear. Reading is a means of mapping spoken sounds onto written letters which stands alone as a 'method' and which can be located in an either appropriate or inappropriate learning context. For example, about the children in their study Stainthorp and Hughes comment; "the parents were providing the sort of environment known to be influential in fostering receptiveness to literacy" (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p156). But whilst this environment put children at an "advantage" (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p156) they go on to argue that "these

positive early experiences are not themselves usually sufficient to enable children to become readers” (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p165). Their comments confirm the separate nature of the perceived structure of reading and its environment.

Reading in an Environment

Social constructivist views based on Vygotskian theory argue the case for situated knowers whose knowledge arises from their location within a specific environment. The individual stands at the centre of their own hub of social practices and interactions and as the individual develops so he or she becomes increasingly part of this practice. Such thoughts underlie Rogoff’s metaphor of learning as participation (Rogoff 1998) as expressed by Garton and Pratt, “what resides in the mind and what is learned cannot be distinguished from the social and cultural processes that support such learning” (Garton and Pratt, 2009, p506). It seems that Garton and Pratt are arguing that subject matter and environment are one thing (and they are using the example of literacy here). However, they go on “any literacy environment, however, must be supplemented with teaching the alphabet and phonological awareness, either at home or in school, because these are fundamental building blocks for literacy” (Garton and Pratt, 2009, p515). This last statement reveals that despite their acceptance of socio-cultural learning, they do not consider it to be sufficient. An appropriate socio-cultural background can only support the practices of literacy. It cannot provide the “fundamental building blocks” of the structure of learning to read. Indeed there are major conceptual difficulties in relating reading to the environment if reading is not seen as some kind of structure on some level. If reading does not

have an independent structure then how it can be distinguished from its environment is not clear; 'reading' as such would cease to exist.

A halfway house here is provided by the idea that reading can be embedded in an environment in such a way that it remains a separable recognisable concept yet one that cannot effectively exist without a habitat.

14M: "The printed word is so embedded in our society and culture he sees it and reads it whenever and wherever it interests him."

65M: "It progressed over a couple of years mainly in the car. He would ask what various road signs said. He also asked me to sound out number plates on cars."

44M: "A supportive loving environment and exposure to people who love to read is more important than the "how" or "when" of reading."

5F: "If the skills are used in the environment around the child and with the child, with considerable respect for the preferences of the children involved, they will adopt the skills naturally"

42Fam: "Creating an environment where reading materials are cherished, fun and an important family activity."

20F: "In the presence of a rich language environment where the printed word is present and used, children come to reading on their own."

One of the metaphors pursued earlier was the idea of literacy as a liquid which fills and therefore takes on the shape of its container. As was pointed out then, this is not a possible metaphor where literacy is seen as having its own structure. So reading

and literacy as a structure less but identifiable entity can be seen as filling the environment amorphously. There were indications that literacy and reading meant different things in different families and that literacy was shaped to their environment rather than being independently in their environment:

UT19Fam: “Our house is full of books, (we call it homeschooler insulation).”

UT7Fam: “We had books, magazines, newspapers, books on tape, books on CD, in our home, car, bedrooms, family and living rooms .. bathrooms ...”

T27F: “I always remember my daughter picking up very quickly on the big bright lights of the supermarket names!”

UT5F: “Reading is important to the adults in our house...”

UT20Fam: “[he] wanted to learn to read because he wanted to know what was happening in the textbox at a game called Runescape on the internet.”

UT2F: “We are a musical family and did a lot of singing. She learned solfa very young and actually learned to read music before the alphabet.”

UT12M: “Menus – looking for those items that have French fries as sides, books – those that have interesting captions that mom passes over.”

UT26F: “She watches us read.”

In these examples, reading is important in different ways, specific to other aspects of life rather, perhaps, than existing independently.

Reading without an Environment

However, to claim that reading is 'part' of the environment is to continue to make a separation between reading and other elements of life. To truly understand reading without an identity of its own is also to, paradoxically, understand reading without an environment. Whilst this idea has taken on strength through the course of the research, things definitely did not begin this way and the research focus has been firmly on 'reading'; it is still hard to see how the 'subject' could be approached any differently. In conducting the research as I have, the epistemological assumption that reading is a separate 'thing' has been embedded in its every aspect. Because of this perspective taken in the project, it would be extremely difficult for parents to talk from a different epistemological viewpoint. Nevertheless, there were hints that some parents might have liked to explore this avenue more:

17Fam: "They will sometimes sit down and read books but more often they read signs and such, things that affect everyday life."

12Fam: "Living life in a world where words are everywhere."

15F: "She learnt how to read just by exposure to the written word."

23Fam: "We are surrounded with things to read all day long (signs, captions on TV, books, comics, magazines, directions for projects, cereal boxes, calendar etc)"

22M: "I think he was exposed to words."

48M: "Reading words on bottles and in the street."

67M: "our world is full of the written word and there are many opportunities for children to learn to read."

58M: "It comes naturally. You can't help but pick it up. It's all around. If the child is exposed to books and words are casually pointed out to them they just pick it up. Just like he can pick up a melody and words of a song if he hears it often enough."

The other thought in which the shapeless form of reading melted almost unrecognisably into life seemed to emerge in the comments which some parents made about the inevitability of learning to read.

9Fam: "Reading is a fundamental skill that will be acquired in a world where the written word is all around them."

3Fam: "It seems to me that if a child is surrounded by reading material, very little, if any, teaching is necessary."

18M: "It is very difficult to not learn to read in our society."

28M: "I believe that in this information rich age every child WILL learn to read in their own way and at their own pace, regardless of methods used or actual 'teaching'."

35M: "It is part of what seems to be an internal motivation to master the world around them and because our culture uses the written word, it just happens."

78M: "If you are surrounded by things to read, you will learn to read."

10F: "People really do come to it in their own time."

If reading is not a separable, identifiable part of the environment then any attempt to continue to pin it down as definable by either its own internal characteristics or by its relationship to a reader seems to be untenable. Indeed, whilst such definitions may be necessary for formal education it may equally be that in seeking such a definition

an attempt to understand how children learn to read away from formal schooling would be concerned with the wrong thing. It may be more helpful to consider reading not as a system in itself but as a relational element in other systems such as culture, communication or personal interaction.

If the question of 'learning to read' is regarded not as a valid question in itself but part of a much bigger sweep of the matter of how we inhabit our culture and how our culture inhabits us, it can then be argued that in breaking away reading as a separate matter we are actually making understanding this question harder by severing its links to matters that are intrinsically part of it. Seeing reading as a purely cultural matter may help explain why some parents seemed to see learning to read, not as an accomplishment, but as an inexorable certainty.

17F: "A belief that all children are capable of learning to read."

75M: "Mostly we just read and had faith that he would learn, which he did."

The rhizomatic structure here seems to be leading us again to the nature of the child and the idea of learning as natural. If reading is not a thing in itself that can be separated out and distinguished on its own internal terms then 'learning to read' is not possible. On the other hand growing up in a culture is not just possible but inevitable. In struggling to address, from this point of view, the idea of 'learning to read' the 'learning is natural' metaphor acts as an explanatory bridge. It bridges together the incompatible ideas of reading as a 'thing' that has to be learned and the idea of culture as being not an environment in which different elements can be

isolated but actually what it is to be a person; there being no such thing as a person without their culture. 'Learning is natural' acknowledges both the learning argument and the cultural given argument. Learning to read is natural because it is cultural.

In the next chapter I turn to how parents connected their ideas about reading and about children into an explanation of how learning to read might take place.

CHAPTER SIX

Subjectivity and Knowledge – What Happens Between ‘the Child’ and ‘Reading’

Parents have thus far expressed a range of views on the nature of children as learners and on the nature of what it means to read. The next part of the analysis looks at understanding learning as the connection of these two concepts.

Beyond Cause and Effect

Within the complex and multifaceted whole of social life, any single event may be traced forwards or backwards for its connection with any number of other events in either the past or the future. To a large extent intention focuses our attention on particular threads of meaning traced through all the possibilities that exist. Such intention allows us to ignore some possibilities whilst endowing others with meaning; even though, as discussed earlier, it is not possible to do more than intimate a causal effect between them. Without the intentions that bind events together history would become a meaningless enterprise; logic, amongst other forms of thought, would cease to exist as there would be no reason by which the patterns of life could be established. An abyss of inconsequential jumble would ensue in which cause and effect, purpose and accident would become meaningless distinctions (Olsen 2008) and survival itself would be nothing but a game of chance or destiny. Nevertheless, selecting from and tracing these connections in particular ways does not reflect a

“chronology of reason” (Foucault 1972 quoted by Olssen, 2008, p 96) despite its leading so readily to the idea of self-evidence in social practice; such as the ‘self-evident’ ideas that criminals should be locked up or that the cause of illness can be found through examination of the patient’s body.

Without the cognitive flexibility to bind events together the practices of education could not be legitimated, for it is the creation of these perceived connections which ultimately allow us to say that education has or has not taken place. (An example of this was given in Chapter One where lawyers quoted by Badman declared certain home education practices to be little more than child minding precisely because they did not involve the perceived causal relationships of the dominant educational discourse.) Caught in the act of creating causal connections, Wells observes, “there are many activities that have the potential for helping the child to learn about literacy, but they are so specific and occur, relatively speaking, so rarely that we could not expect to capture them in our short and infrequent observations” (Wells, 1986, p 149). Thereafter such events are dismissed from his study in preference for other, more convenient ones. The selection of what will be considered relevant is, in Wells’ case, a practical one and at least an acknowledgement of this selection is made. Far more insidious must be the ‘self-evident’ selection of matters and experiences connected with children learning to read – a self-evidence that turns us again and again to look only at certain things.

Intentions such as Wells’ to bind certain events together in cause and effect linkage appear to be essential in the making of possibilities but they are also a means of

limitation. Without the intention of education, what would learning look like? What would happen if the events of a child's life were not bound through intention to the demonstrable performances required by schooling? What if no one intended that children should learn to read?

Turning her back on the intentional conventions of a schooled society, one parent wrote:

35M: "Learning to read is easy when children can do so in their own time, at their own pace and without it being called anything in particular."

Others explained the reasons for their lack of intention in a point of view that seems rarely considered in education – that literacy changes the world for children and that they may lose other things as they gain it:

18M: "There are a lot of things that can be lost when you learn to read, like the ability to memorise, storytelling, and your own imagination so it should not be rushed."

30M: Don't force reading on a child, it is a very special time to NOT be able to read as a child, when their world is not intruded on by advertisements and headlines etc. The child will soon make it clear when they want to know more."

37Fam: "My second son is very eloquent on the difference learning to read made to him. He felt that reading somehow 'closed down' a part of his brain associated with imaginative play. He tried to retain his imaginative world for as long as possible and so finally read approaching adolescence – 12/13"

Removing the intention of learning to read breaks the possibility of a chain of causal events and their effects; it puts 'learning to read' beyond logical explanation. A small number of parents referred to this lack of cause and effect in metaphors of magic and mystery:

34Fam: "As if by magic, it happens!"

7Fam: "It is magical."

7Fam: "It is a mystery."

51M: "I must be honest and say I don't know HOW he learnt to read – it just happened!"

And one to divine intervention:

30Fam: "Lots of prayer and trust in God to help."

Magic, mystery, God and even nature are metaphors of not knowing and, as such for researchers and theorists are clearly unsatisfactory as endpoints. Such metaphors are only tenable in particular circumstances. At home it is not necessary for a parent to hold an understanding of what reading is or how reading happens in the way that it is necessary for teachers and school policy makers. At home the freedom exists to be without intention; to not know and to be happy not to know. This is not to say that parents do not ultimately want or expect their children to read but rather that their expectations may be of quite a different order to the intentions of schooling. A

technological view of reading lays out a path to be progressed along to an end goal; it can tell us either in advance or by looking back how learning to read takes place through a particular sequence of events. Intention is expressed by following or tracing this path. If such a path however does not form part of educational understanding; the expectation of learning to read is cut adrift from the means of action by which such a goal could be reached. To abandon this kind of understanding may appear to be entirely reckless and without logical foundation yet Foucault's uncovering of the 'self-evident' assumptions that riddle our lives shows that it is far from unique in our understanding of the world to simply assume that children are a certain way and will become certain things. Although we are not used to them, there is no reason, a priori, as to why these expectations should not apply in the field we call education; expectations that children will become certain kinds of adults who will know certain things, among them how to read.

In considering the difference between the intentions of those who plan formal educational programmes and the intentions of a home educating family who believe that their child will learn to read without any form of deliberate or systematic intervention, a consideration of focus and distance may help. The intention of the educational programme is a very fine focus that attempts to hone in very precisely and very closely to the things that constitute cause and effect in learning to read. Hence the certainty in how learning to read takes place, although the risk is obviously run that in taking this fine concentration things from the bigger picture may be overlooked. The focus of the home educating family however is the opposite to this; their focus is very broad, able to take in a lot more in scope but a lot less detail, thus

their cause and effect links lack precision because there are so many more possibilities involved. They have a general expectation rather than a series of specific expectations. In both cases the ultimate prospect of reading is similar but the viewing point taken quite different.

In the circumstances of home education it is also possible to explore theories of mind other than those inherent in the cause and effect ideas of teaching. Interaction between parents and children (or masters and apprentices as Rogoff 2003 puts it) is, in educational terms, commonly interpreted as an opportunity to transfer the knowledge and understanding of the more experienced to the less experienced. Parents here however are questioning the self-evidence of this idea and therefore also of the idea that children's learning can be externally controlled. Without cause and effect the social interaction that might be thought of as constituting teaching opens up in possibilities to become the context for other ways of thinking about the human mind. Away from cause and effect interpretations such interactions could be seen as meaningful not for some deeper structure such as teaching and learning but in the immediate terms of their meanings for personal relationships, emotions and practicalities. Or as Gorrard (2000) suggests they may be noted for associations other than cause and effect such as mutual determination, concomitance or in terms of chaos and complexity theories.

Theories of Chaos and Complexity

During the 1970s what Gleick names as a "new science" (Gleick, 1987, p5) began to take shape; chaos theory. A scattering of intellectual pioneers across the range of

the natural sciences found themselves increasingly pushing against the limits of classically ordered science; the kind of organized regularity that had been being built on since Newton. Newtonian physics works on the principle of “ceteris paribus”, usually translated as ‘hold everything constant’; an ideal based on pristine and enclosed laboratory conditions but clearly unobtainable in the ‘real’ world and a constant stumbling block in transferring theory to practice in fields from economics to meteorology. Chaos theory is based on the alternative foundation that insufficiency of information always means that starting conditions can never be fully established and therefore, even in theory, never held constant. Taylor (2001) cites two reasons for this inability. Firstly, that systems are not bounded wholes but are necessarily open and therefore can never be considered complete. Secondly that systems involve “recursive relations” (Taylor, 2001, p 24) which generate feed-back and feed forward loops, introducing instability, confounding linearity and therefore prediction in anything other than the extremely short term. As Gleick puts it, “the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules” (Gleick, 1987, p24). Chaos is about indeterminacy and unpredictability, recursion and infinity.

The world of technology described by Heidegger is precisely the deterministic world of Newtonian physics in which “a closed universe with a small number of invariable, universal laws” can explain and predict with certainty (Olssen, 2008, p101). By contrast Foucault theorises “an infinitely open, complex whole, characterised by unpredictability, uncertainty and change” (Olssen, 2008, p 101). In such an environment, events are the outcome of complex causation and cannot be predicted in advance. Rather than being governed by common threads of causation that can

become the laws of predictability, Foucault (2000) introduces the notion of 'eventalisation' to understand such environments. In this idea Foucault is seeking out the historical uniqueness of what might otherwise be taken to be constants of the natural or social order. Events cannot be isolated and then understood in terms of laws which create a grid of universality through which life at any given moment can be viewed. Instead, happenings must be understood in terms of their own histories. Parents' theories, of the child, of reading and of learning, constitute an 'eventalisation' in Foucault's word and contributors to this research, including myself, are engaged in the socio-historical construction of a particular understanding of learning.

Eventalisation, unlike the laws of technology, recognises life as "an always open, relatively borderless system of infinite interconnections, possibilities and developments" (Olssen, 2008, p 93). Similarly, chaotic systems are not just open and non-linear but also are unstable, constantly shifting, moving and adapting. Change is an on-going feature but the consequences of change are unpredictable; "in science as in life, it is well known that a chain of events can have a point of crisis that could magnify small changes. But chaos meant that such points were everywhere. They were pervasive" (Gleick, 1987, p23). The result is the so called butterfly effect; "a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York" (Gleick, 1987, p 8). Neither predication nor equilibrium are part of the system; indeed Cilliers argues "equilibrium is another word for death" (Cilliers, 1998, p 4).

The ideas of eventalisation and chaos theory exclude the possibility of understanding situations or systems by examining what appear to be their components. The system is based not on its discrete constituents but on the interrelationships between these such that “the collectivity possesses properties and energies not possessed by the parts, but through which change can take place, new forms and patterns can develop” (Olssen, 2008, p 103). There is a constant and dynamic interaction between the elements of such a system and between the system and the environment in which it is located. This interaction cannot be understood by unpicking parts within it in the manner of Wells’ deficit model because parts cannot be meaningfully extracted from the whole. Indeed such a method of analysis, argues Cilliers, (1998, p 2), “destroys what it seeks to understand.”

Complexity theory, emerged from chaos theory founded on the same premise that “in a system there are more possibilities than can be actualised” (Cilliers, 1998, p2), however complexity theory focuses on the borderlands between order and disorder. Complexity aims to acknowledge the dynamics of interaction and the non-linear nature of network systems both in terms of the “constituents of the system, and the interaction between the system and its environment” (Cilliers, 1998, pviii).

Describing complexity, the theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman quoted by Taylor uses the same metaphor as many of the parents used to describe literacy; the liquid metaphor:

“Borrowing a metaphor from physics, life may exist near a kind of phase transition. Water exists in three phases: solid ice, liquid water, and gaseous

steam. It now begins to appear that similar ideas might apply to complex adapting systems. For, we will see that the genomic networks that control development from zygote to adult can exist in three major regimes: a frozen ordered regime, a gaseous chaotic regime, and a kind of liquid regime located in the region between order and chaos” (Kauffman quoted by Taylor, 2001, p 25).

For Kauffman, the liquid state lies between the order of the solid state and the chaos of the gaseous state. It is a state of possibilities. Similarly, parents described literacy as a fluid: endlessly adaptive, flexible, shapeless, yet also having the potential to be ordered in flows and held in containers; not organised but organisable.

Self-Organising Systems

What makes this space between order and chaos a system, rather than a jumble of myriad and unpredictable factors is self-organisation. In the border land between “too much and too little order ...self-organizing systems emerge to create new patterns of coherence and structures of relation” (Taylor, 2001, p 24/25). Self-organising systems are not the result of prior design but are a dynamic which emerge and adapt across a whole, depending neither on “the intervention of an external designer or the presence of some centralised form of internal control” (Cilliers, 1998, p 89). Self-organisation emerges from within the system as a result of “complex interaction between the environment, the present state of the system and the history of the system” (Cilliers, 1998, p 89).

Such systems are not simply reactive or sensitive to their environment but are active, increasing in complexity over time and screening information as Taylor puts it “like a

permeable membrane ... it does not simply divide but also joins by simultaneously keeping out and letting through" (Taylor, 2003, p 199). Again in this metaphor is an echo of parents who spoke of learning by osmosis; a filtering system through a membrane, a sorting and selecting that appears to happen unconsciously and which may be interpreted as a self-organising system. Self-organising systems tend towards "a critical point between rigid order and chaos" (Cilliers, 1998, p 97). At this point, flexibility is at its optimum with the system being neither too rigid nor too disorganised to respond to change appropriately whether that change is an influence outside the system or a reorganisation within the system.

Complex systems Cilliers argues are, for the most part, living systems with "the human brain [being] considered by many to be the most complex object known" (Cilliers, 1998, p5). Like all complex systems, it has the capacity "to develop or change internal structure spontaneously and adaptively in order to cope with or manipulate the environment" (Cilliers, 1998, p 90). Each human brain forms a complex, self-organising system so that even for those living in the same environment organisation is idiosyncratic and varied and not dependant on the inclusion of particular parts. Rather than a structure which can be seen as shared or as a constant across similar systems there are myriad, variable systems which do not necessarily contain the same elements, let alone the same elements in the same order. As Foucault puts it, there exists "a plethora of intelligibilities, a deficit of necessities" (Foucault, 2000, p 78). Information is related to other information in "relationships [that] are not fixed, but shift and change, often as a result of self-organisation. This can result in novel features, usually referred to in terms of

emergent properties” (Cilliers, 1998, pviii - ix). The idea of properties emerging as a result of a transforming, modifying system of variable constituents finds also an echo in the metaphors of coalescence, emergence and coming together used by some parents.

Applying the insights of complexity theory to an understanding of children learning to read autonomously appears to be not only suitable in terms of the theory’s own remit but gives the opportunity to preserve the individuality stressed by parents and inherent in the idea of eventalisation. Reading can be considered as a property emerging through the dynamic self-organisation of the relationships between the environment, the history of the child in question and the on-going organisation of the system itself.

The idea of a self-organising ability may be discernible in some of the things parents said:

31M: “I have decided not to pursue a formal approach because my son appears to learn more happily and more concretely by pursuing his own interests and timetable. I have no doubt that he will learn to read.”

21F: “They will learn to read in the way that best fits them.”

44Fam: “It was only after the younger child was reading fluently that I realized that I’d neglected to first teach her the alphabet song ... she did eventually learn the alphabet song (although not very well) ... “knowing the alphabet” is clearly not an essential “pre-reading skill”!”

Or more powerfully:

26M: “The idea of a reductionist approach to reading (eg you must learn the alphabet etc) does not hold much weight with us ... The development of reading skills may turn out to be a chaotic (in the physics sense of the word) process... child development is a dynamic, creative process and requires support rather than control.”

Other parents pondered over the inexplicable way in which learning sometimes seemed to leap forward even during periods when, to an observer, nothing discernible had happened:

32 Fam: “The process was not continuous. There was a week or some weeks when reading and writing or the interest on the subject was very intense and then there was no interest for weeks or months. But when they started to be interested again I always noticed that there has been something happening in between. Like a dough with yeast which is going up and you don't have to do anything than mixing the right ingredients. It was a bit like mixing the right ingredients (but not myself has been the one who knew those) and then after a while they made connections which they didn't do before or there was just more knowledge than before.”

That a self-organising system could be at work would help to explain how such an apparently fallow period might be followed by an unexpected leap forward. The

system of understanding is not reliant on more and more input in the way that a transmission of skills theory is; instead it is the on-going organisation of what is already in the system that makes the difference.

The phenomenon of self-organisation could also be a means of explaining why in some cases, learning seems to have happened so rapidly. This parent explains how she perceived a change that heralded her daughter beginning to read:

44F: “One day she could recognise letters and their sounds but couldn't sound out words and the next she was reading road signs to me and reading quite complicated words by herself. She learned very quickly after that and was very fluent almost at once. I was amazed by her ability and by how quickly it developed. ... I really feel that something seemed to change within her - one day she couldn't read and then she could, it was really that sudden.”

Again, self-organisation means that it is not the acquisition of elements, presumably a long term process, but rather the organisation of those elements, a process not subject to a predictable time scale that would enable reading. As the self-organising system is not under conscious or central control, it would not be recognisable to the learner him or herself or presumably to any observer as a form of effort.

Complexity theory does not necessarily deny cause and effect but it does change its terms. To pursue the idea of learning to read through the ideas of complexity theory is an attempt to go about “lightening the weight of causality” (Foucault, 2000, quoted

in Olssen, 2008, p 97) found in deterministic and deficit models of learning to read. Rather than an exercise in positivity this is a quest “to regain the space of ... unfolding” (Foucault, 1990, in Olssen, 2008, p 98) in which children learn to read.

Constructing Ideas about Learning

Method based understandings of reading such as Stainthorp and Hughes’ and socio cultural understandings such as Wells’ both rely on identifying structural features which relate to reading. Wells, for example, discusses the fate of Rosie, a child in his study who is not read to at home. Rosie’s’ family life, he argues, is marred by the “serious deficiency”, of a “complete absence of stories” (Wells, 1986, p169).

Unfortunately, Wells continues, no special efforts were made in school to atone for this deficit. The direct result of this, he goes on, is that Rosie’s schooling becomes a sad tale of minimal progress and the prospect of a grim future ahead of her. Wells’ argument here appears to be a technological one. Reading is an effect which results from causes, a major one of which is being read to. Where this cause is missing, the desired effect cannot be achieved. This positivistic argument of faulty or absent input leading to faulty outcome transmutes the socio-cultural context of Rosie’s family life and experiences into a list of inputs, one of which happens to be missing.

In such analysis an important stage is the establishment of the structural features which contribute to reading and which can be identified and developed across data to create analytical patterns and meaning (Haggis, 2008). These themes are not self-

evident, they have to be named and established and in doing so categorised as to their meaning. For example reading aloud to children is cited by both Wells (1986) and Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) as a factor in children learning to read although its significance for their respective theories is different. For Wells, as discussed above, being read to is a critical element in learning to read. For Stainthorp and Hughes, however, the desirable socio-cultural context (including being read to) is separate from the technological skills necessary for the mastering of reading and, of itself is not “usually sufficient to enable children to become readers” (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p165).

Identifying themes means that certain ideas come to be privileged over others and connections reified by the analytical acknowledgement of their existence. For instance, Wells, following analysis of parental answers to his questionnaire, writes “it was obvious that the parents’ own interest in literacy was important ... This was particularly clearly shown with respect to the development of their [the children’s] writing” (Wells, 1986, p149). Thus a causal link is created and built on although the basis of the privilege is not self-evident at all. Analysis “becomes the choice of distinction” (Born, Frankel and Thygesen, 2006, p 136) as Wells selects the data that he will make meaningful.

The creation of a link in this way between children’s writing and parents’ behaviour has a twofold effect: it subsumes the individuality of experience that might exist under this categorisation and it breaks up the flow of experience such that an event will either be in or out of this category; its meaning established through the strength of

the category itself. Bundling data together in this way, argues Haggis (2008), masks important information including the differences between experiences, the contexts of experiences and the relevance of both time and process as well as other aspects of the phenomena which have not been used as the organising principle. Yet despite Nodding's argument that "one does not have to seek general principles in central tendencies, nor does one have to engage in reductionism to investigate complex phenomena" (Noddings, 1998, p 185) there seems in analysis, regardless of theoretical stance, to be an inherent pull towards "a kind of empiricist realism" which Law and Urry (quoted by Haggis, 2008, p152) warn against. In the end such a pull endangers rather than enhances understanding; Foucault argues that the apparent propensity of thought to seek order can readily result in "spontaneous fictions of the mind; to which are added – as effects and sometimes as causes – the confusions of language: one and the same name being applied indifferently to things that are not of the same nature" (Foucault, 1977, p 52).

Complexity theory and the ideas behind eventalisation caution against the drawing of themes from data in the search for common threads of meaning. That particular ideas appear to emerge from this data does not confirm in any positivistic way the importance of their link with reading. I am well aware of the risk that any kind of categorisation may come full circle back to 'the top 10 things home educators do' – in other words back to the idea of a technological approach to reading. Whilst in their responses parents often talked about the same things it would be an enormous assumption to go on from there to consider these described experiences as the 'same'. Given that parents providing this data were so insistent on the uniqueness of

the learning experience, it would seem both morally and analytically wrong not to be mindful of the uniqueness of individual experience that may lie beneath the common label. The methodological aim here is not to construct an argument for regularity but rather to oppose the idea of a technology of learning to read based on ideas of universal experiences and understandings. The aim is to deconstruct with always a mindful eye that what really matters may not be themes or objects at all but the relationships that pertain between these things; relationships which cannot be made subject to universalities.

Things Parents Did

Reading Aloud

When parents were asked what they felt had contributed to their child learning to read the most often cited factor was reading aloud to the child. The vast majority of parents said that they did or had read aloud to their child. They are certainly not alone in considering reading aloud to be important, if not critical, in children's reading lives. Whilst Well's might take an extreme view of the consequences of not reading aloud to children the advice to do so is widespread and common (eg BBC, 2012).

Parental Intentions

In a technological understanding of learning to read, why any particular practice, such as reading to children, is undertaken is immaterial to the consequences it may have. In this case however, the wide range of intentions and beliefs with which parents undertook reading aloud can be seen as having an inevitable, albeit sometimes subtle, effect on the type of experiences children must have had.

Reading Aloud as a Cause

Some parents talked about reading aloud along the lines of a cause and effect argument based on ideas of transmission and acquisition of the connections between written and spoken words. Pointing out words or running a finger under the text whilst reading were most often cited as ways of creating and highlighting the connections between speaking and reading.

24Fam: "We read some words together, I pointed at the words. She made the connections between the sounds I made and the shapes on the page."

14Fam: "I think it was important that we read to them a lot, and ran our finger along the line as we read."

7F: "We'd always read to [our daughter] and I usually ensured I tracked the words with my fingertip as I read them aloud."

19F: "When reading to her I would always move my finger along the text as I read."

For others, reading aloud seemed to offer opportunities for memorising, developing familiarity with different aspects of reading and experimenting for themselves by looking ahead:

16Fam: “My son was picking up some basic words like his brother did by being read to”

6F: “I pointed out common words or she decided to sound out some straight-forward words. She learnt to recognise more and more words as we read together.”

33F: “Also reading to her directly as compared to listening to an audio book, although time consuming they watch the words and read ahead at times.”

36Fam: [he] figured out how to read at about 4 from looking at the words as we read the same stories over and over ...”

62F: “The reading of many, many books to her when she could not speak and the fact that she took everything in while watching the pages.”

All of these comments suggest a close proximity between children and the text being read to them and a concentration on the visual aspect of being read to. For parents who put the emphasis on the transmission of other things from reading aloud, the physical situation might have been quite different. Some parents concentrated on the transmission of aspects associated with the secondary meaning of literacy; the acquaintance with certain types and works of literacy and the knowledge and communicative practices that are associated with such acquaintance. These parents talked about reading aloud as part of the development of knowledge, vocabulary, expression and comprehension and encouraging a love of literature:

32Fam: “Read TO THEM and let them continue to grow in knowledge by listening to stories on CD etc. Their comprehension will be great, and their language sophisticated by the time they start reading themselves.”

19Fam: “My children [have been able] to listen to books they would not yet be able to read, thus improving their vocabulary and I think, increasing their later ability to figure out words as they read.”

7Fam: “reading to kids helps develop a love of literature and vocabulary but doesn’t speed reading along.”

6F: “My part in her learning to read was reading with her FOR THE STORY.”

4Fam “A love of books is the most important step. It doesn’t matter if a child reads at 4 or 9, if they learn early that books are fascinating and love the experience of curling up and being read to, they will become passionate readers in their own good time.”

These parents echo the view of Wells (1986, p156) that “what is so important about listening to stories, then, is that through this experience, the child is beginning to discover the symbolic potential of language; its power to create possible or imaginary worlds through words”. In turn this type of belief about reading aloud is likely to affect the nature of the material being read and the expected responses from the children being read to.

Reading Aloud as Participation

Rather than transmitting information about reading through reading aloud some parents' views echoed participation theory in which children come to participate gradually more fully in the literate life around them. In such thoughts the linear association of cause and effect seems to be replaced by something more akin to a cycle of mutually determining and re-enforcing events in which the parent reads, the child enjoys listening, so the parent reads more.

35Fam: "We read to them. They started reading eventually."

13M: "He loved to listen and eventually wanted to do it himself."

12F: "Reading aloud, parent reading to child, parents reading to one another and parents reading things aloud to themselves in the child's presence and later, child reading to parent or other child."

Again, seeing reading aloud in terms of such a cycle would affect the nature of reading aloud, the texts being read, the relationship between reading aloud and the child's own developing reading.

Age

Parents talked about reading aloud to very young children all the way up to teenagers. For most children being read to was a long term activity that is likely to

have changed in character over the years. For those families in which there was more than one child at home, reading aloud changes again into a situation in which participation, engagement, interest may well vary between children. Children growing up in the 'same' family and in the 'same' environment will still have unique experiences because of their unique positions within that configuration.

Whether or not Child is Reading

Reading aloud could be different depending on whether or not the listener was an independent reader themselves. The argument of Wells (1986) and the educational advisors who urge parents to read to their children usually limit their persuasion to the parents of non-readers. Several families here however talked about how they continued to read aloud to children who were already reading for themselves. At this point, reading aloud to children can no longer be seen logically as connecting to children themselves learning to read. Cause and effect need to lie in a temporal relationship to one another in which cause precedes effect. Where reading aloud continues after children are reading for themselves this relationship no longer exists without re-examining its terms. It is of course possible that reading aloud to children continues to aid children's own efforts to read where reading is not considered a finite skill that is accomplished at a given level of competence. There is some hint of that in some of the comments:

28Fam: [I] "read to him, which I still try and do occasionally today. I just read him and his sister Animal Farm because I wanted us to discuss the book together."

80M: "We still listen to many books on CD together and discuss what is happening."

(11 year old boy reading for past 3 years.)

Some comments suggested that where parents are reading to children who can already read for themselves motives, purposes and gains are not connected to educational intent, and maybe never were.

19Fam "Reading out loud is still a major part of our family entertainment." (Two children both reading for several years)

15Fam: "The children are read to every night until the teen years or so."

5Fam: "I read regularly to my children from an early age until they were about 11 and 13."

5F: [I] "enjoyed reading to both children for years after they figured it out."

3M: "We also still read to him – usually for 30 mins at night time." (son reading independently for several years.)

36M: "He is still being read to. He enjoys that very much." (12 year old boy reading for past two – three years.)

72M: "I still try to read to him on a daily basis, but he does a lot of independent reading during the day."

39Fam: "He was about 6 by the time he was reading by himself, though still loved being read to till about 16 when life for us all just got too busy."

How Often Children are Read to

For some being read to was a way of life:

34Fam: "We just read to him what he wanted us to read to him."

36Fam: "We read several hours every day."

22Fam: "We just read aloud all the time everywhere: in bed, before breakfast, at meals, on the beach , in bed."

7Fam: "we read to the kids constantly."

3F: "Read and read and read to them."

For others it was a rare occurrence:

23Fam: "He has never let me read to him, and still does not want me to – he would rather read for himself!"

20Fam: "the youngest one ... never loved to be read stories to. He just loved to watch pictures with me and look for special things in the picture, but as soon as I started to read to him he was not interested."

16Fam: "I think the issues he had at school with reading did a lot of damage to his enjoyment of books. He loved to sit and listen to stories and now won't do that."

66M: "He loved having stories read to him until he went to school, then he began to hate reading. Now he has gained a lot of interest back."

1F: "[I] very rarely read to her ... she's never been into that, but lots of time just hanging out with her, laughing, playing etc.... the pressure to read to your child for 10

minutes every night is aimed more at time-poor parents whose children have been away from them all day.”

13F: “[she] never wanted to be read to as a child.”

This last small group is especially interesting; bucking as they do the reading aloud trend without discernible consequence and thus giving weight to an understanding based on complexity theory; that the specific nature of experience is not what is important, rather the organisation of the experience that is available.

What do Children Get Out of Being Read to?

Although being read to as a technological input is seen as a means of bringing children to read for themselves, this did not always seem to be a straightforward or discernible effect. Indeed it might have the opposite effect:

43Fam: “I do not think they have been disadvantaged by not being able to read, because I have been there to facilitate their interaction with life and learning and to assist them by reading information for them as necessary.”

4Fam: “Until then he was happy to be read to and couldn’t see the point in learning to read.”

That being read to might lessen motivation to read for oneself was born out by instances in which a parent’s non-compliance with reading requests seems to have influenced a child into reading:

41Fam: "At 6 she discovered 'Bratz'. I refused to read the books to her so she had to learn."

31Fam: "Well pretty soon he would want to read more so after the chapter when I was tired of reading or had something else to do, he would try to continue on his own."

2M: "He really took off with Tintin, which he used to pour over excessively and try to read, as I didn't like reading it much, so would only do a few pages at a time."

In some of these comments there are further clues about an aspect of reading aloud; the choice of reading material and the nature of choices about what is read and when it is read. How and by whom these decisions are taken or negotiated is a further aspect of reading aloud that must impact on the whole experience. On the other hand, reading aloud was not enough for these children who then took matters into their own hands.

43F: "She had just barely enough skill to read Harry Potter so we read it together as above (as we had many times other books) and lo and behold, mom didn't read fast enough so my daughter started reading (voraciously) on her own."

53F: "My mother ... read to [me] every night, up to the age of about 8, when my reading skills overtook her reading speed."

Emotional Context

33F: “snuggling together also helps.”

26M: “Reading was associated with parental attention, and hence had a positive impact on his development ... helping our boys to read through bedtime stories has only cemented our relationship.”

33M: “If there were a particular genre [of preference] it would be funny books: ones that make him (and me his dad) laugh out loud.”

Not many parents mentioned an emotional context, but there must have been one for every parent and for every child and in each case this must have made some kind of immeasurable impact on the experience.

Dynamical Situations

There are enough apparent differences emerging from accounts of reading aloud to children to question that the children being read to are all subject to the same experience all, or indeed any, of the time. Reading to children can take many forms and equally takes place in physical, intellectual and emotional contexts which may vary to such extents between families, between children and over time that to call them the same thing may be very misleading. If a technological view continues to be taken then ‘reading aloud’ cannot be assumed monolithically to mean the same thing to everyone, all of the time. This poses a problem for the deficit arguments of those

like Wells; it is not adequate to simply say that being read to is missing in any particular case, where being read to has not been more carefully defined.

On the other hand, reading aloud to children can be treated not in terms of an input being added to a process but rather as a highly flexible, changeable, individual practice subject to all manner of variations, which is itself entering a relationship with a highly varied and changeable, individual subject; the child who is being read to.

As this parent put it:

22F: “How they see the world, how they think, what they deem important at any particular time, their personality, their stages of development etc, etc all have a distinct bearing on how the written word impacts on their consciousness and a change in any of these things alters their relationship with words, not just as a whole but at any moment in time.”

What matters most about the reading aloud experience and its influence on children may, in the light of complexity theory, be interpreted as temporally and individually dynamic. Being read to enters the self-organising systems of human learning not as a named and categorised component that fits into a technological structure of reading but as a dynamic itself the significance of which may be related more to individual meanings located in context, emotions, practicalities and relationships. How these things do or might relate to the practice of independent reading cannot be determined by universal laws or general principles.

Talking

The second most frequently mentioned 'theme' considered to be important in children's learning to read was talk. Like reading aloud, talk is also considered a major influencing factor on reading in mainstream literature and the intertwining of language and literacy is commonplace in discussions of learning to read (Stainthorp and Hughes 1999, Wells 1986). The view of Britton that "reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (Britton, 1983, p. 11) is often expressed, although Sugata Mitra's experiments; placing a computer with internet connection into a wall in a Delhi slum district and watching the local children become acquainted with its functioning, is an interesting antidote to this assumption. Mitra found that children who could not read or write in any language and who spoke no English became functionally literate on the computer unaided and "very fast" (Dhillon, 2013, p91).

If reading aloud is a theme too large and differentiated to be treated as a whole, then talk certainly presents this problem. As with reading aloud, differing intentions as well as differing physical, intellectual and emotional contexts confounded by temporal and individual factors, as well as, of course, the varying nature of the talk itself, mean that it cannot possibly be satisfactorily subsumed under a general heading.

Talk as a cause

Talk was sometimes referred to as a direct contributor to reading in the sense that talk was used as a vehicle for transmitting information about reading:

16F: “talking about letter sounds occasionally.”

24F: “I would also chat about words eg If you substitute B for the C you get BAT. But it was all conversational.”

33M: “We employ conversational learning on an ad hoc basis eg. Driving past an Asda store we will point out and say ‘A for Asda’.”

72M: “We also talked about the sounds that the letters make, and he seemed to grasp this concept easily.”

In these instances, talk is seen simply as the transfer medium of information about reading. Such comments embody a particular view of reading, as discussed earlier, as a body of knowledge which can be transmitted from the experienced to the beginner reader. However recognition that this is a view point can again alter the terms in which reading is considered a subject for discussion:

76M: “it is always worth framing one’s theories as an offering that may be taken or left by the child as it is not worth trying to force unwanted theories upon anyone as this is a very inefficient way to learn. ... We offered meta-theories about reading ie about how and why reading might be helpful”

Talk as Participation

Talk which concentrated on reading could, alternatively, be about what was read; an activity that might be thought of as participatory rather than concerned with transmission:

15Fam: "We talk about books."

45Fam: "She enjoys being able to discuss books with the family too."

Talk was also viewed much more generally as contributory to reading, perhaps in the sense of enhancing vocabulary, expression, experiencing different types of communication, using words in ways that would eventually cross over into reading although not necessarily in any purposeful or direct way:

44Fam: "Responsive, interactive parenting: lots of conversation"

22Fam: "lots of conversation"

2F: "Communication. Talking, laughing, listening, singing. We did not use 'baby talk' but always spoke to her normally and respectfully and we accepted her communication no matter how unintelligible it was."

45M: "In our daily errands he would ask questions. We would talk about the signs we saw. How the Target store has a target for a bull's-eye, how the STOP signs are red hexagons, etc. Just regular conversations."

53M: "[we] have long discussions about a range of topics."

43Fam: “Always being available (as much as possible, that is!) to answer questions, play a game, talk, speculate, read a book ...”

Talk as an on-going feature of life; the long discussions and conversations, as the idea of hours and hours spent reading aloud, speak of the wider home education relationship in which parents and children are each other’s constant and intimate companions; a relationship which stands in contrast to the formal and restricted teacher/pupil relationships in school:

T8M: “Teachers in school inevitably are kind of autistic, with very formalized communication structures without empathy, you can only talk in a normal human understanding way with very few persons, maybe sometimes even only one person at a time. Our child didn’t even understand the rules and ends of this communication imitating game in his first years of school.”

Talk at home can be quite different from talk in school as Tizard and Hughes’ comparative study of young girls’ conversations at home and at nursery school shows (Tizard and Hughes, 1984). One of the main features that distinguish what they describe as the quality of talk in the different settings is that the mothers at home share the child’s world and can thus extend the conversation from the immediate back into the past and forward into the future. In other words, it is the individual nature of the talk at home that distinguishes it from the more generalised talk of school and again it may be that the individual and variable features of such talk are the greatest component in its impact.

Answering Children's Questions

One particular kind of talk which parents referred to was answering children's questions; a factor cited by Clark (1976) as critical in children learning to read without teaching. As with the other ideas pursued here, answering questions is subject to enormous variation.

44Fam: "The majority of this conveyance was in response to their questions or by way of follow up comment."

31Fam: "Answering their questions was the factor that helped them the most."

23Fam: "We are available to answer any questions AS THEY HAPPEN!"

21Fam: "We always encourage questions and never fob them off when we answer."

20Fam: "Of course we answered their questions."

12Fam: "We ALWAYS answered our daughters when they asked what something said and how/why."

The importance placed on answering questions connects to the perception of children as motivated and individual learners. Children will be motivated by their own interest to ask questions and because they are all individual learners, likely to be learning in their own idiosyncratic ways, following their questions will lead to more effective learning than attempting to lead them in any particular direction.

50M: "I don't need to teach him, just be there to answer his questions and be guided by him."

65M: "Answer their questions even if they appear strange."

33M: "What I think really works is that any instruction that we give is always at his request."

Some questions appear to be driven by children's own meta theories on what reading is:

4M: "Told him what the letters sounded like when he asked."

58F: "just answering questions about letters and their sound."

30M: "Following his lead when he wanted to know the NAMES and sounds of letters and sounds of groups of letters."

However, the self-organising systems suggested by complexity theory are not centrally managed systems thus, according to this theory; the asking of questions cannot be seen as a self-planned strategy to fill in 'gaps'. Self-organisation does not rely on an overarching understanding of a finite system (in this case what reading is) instead it is an organisation of available information. Perhaps for this reason the emphasis in many of children's questions is not how to read but the more immediate 'what does this say?'

21F: "When she started reading on her own she would ask us when she didn't know a word."

36F: "Answering the 'does that say?' type questions."

40M: "When reading on his own if he doesn't know a word he asks what it was, and I tell him."

59F: "Willingness to answer 'what's this word?' very, very frequently."

62F: "We also used to go into town and she would ask the name of every shop and what things said."

Knowing what things say, rather than receiving information about learning theories, may be more helpful in children organising their own understanding. Similarly some parents pointed out that for them it was not just a case of answering questions but also in thinking about how questions were answered:

24F: "[I]only answered questions truthfully.. So if she asked "how do I spell cat?" I would tell her immediately. I didn't ask her to work it out for herself."

46M: "[we] always directly answered his questions. We NEVER said "look it up" unless it was in the sentence "I don't know, I'll have to look it up and get back to you"."

81M: "Sometimes it means asking mom and dad 'What does xyz spell?' (just answer him! Don't turn it into a lesson)"

By simply giving the requested information rather than offering a theory of reading based on a particular theory of learning, these parents are allowing the kind of mental space in which self-organisation may be able to take place. The following parent also seemed to see such a space as an important component in his son's learning:

38M: "I have no intention of teaching my son anything unless he asks for help with it in the hope that he learns he can learn whatever he wants with very little help."

Games/Toys/ Computers

A third influencing factor brought up by parents was that of games and recreational activities including the use of computers, electronic games and watching television. The type of games and activities mentioned ranged from simple oral word games like 'I spy' to sophisticated on line games such as World of Warcraft. And again the matter arises of why such a diverse range should be put together as a 'theme' that might help explain how children learn to read. One possible reason is that such games contain what can be considered as 'input' in terms of a technological view of learning to read. In other words these games contain information about phonics, words and letters which is transmitted and practiced through the playing of the games.

36Fam: "I also played many games with letters and sounds and words and shared how letters and sounds work"

32Fam: "Played games like BINGO for letters and word recognition, played "concentration" card game, matching words, saying them as we found them etc ... We also used Leap Frog where the child can point the electronic pencil at the word, and the book pronounced the word."

29Fam: “We ... played some games like writing letters and groups of letters on blocks and letting him match them together to make words. We also played matching games – I’d write words on index cards and draw pictures of the words on other cards and he’d match them up.”

8F: “We also have some flashcards and have played ‘word hide and seek’ with them as she learnt to recognise the words.”

62M: “Using foam letters in the bathtub to make words and learn the alphabet.”

77M: “Phonics games played on the computer.”

For some, the value of the game is that it makes transmission easy:

54F: “Best treated as just another game/daily experience ... I was astonished for instance, at how quickly my daughter learnt to recognise all the letters when she was interested and saw it as an exciting game.”

However, some parents added remarks that distanced them from the idea that these games should be seen in terms of an input into a learning process, whilst others did not mention this possible aspect at all. Instead they emphasised the immediate fun and voluntary nature of the activities; a scenario more akin to a group of friends playing cards where an understanding of what is happening would be more likely to be based on enjoyment, shared activity and companionship rather than the nature of the game itself. Instead of the game being seen as a vehicle for the transmission of information about its content, it can be seen in socio-cultural terms for the

relationships such games forge between participants and the role of cultural artefacts in doing this.

68M: "He enjoys playing with letter fridge magnets, entirely if and when he chooses."

24F: "We would doodle on paper messing around with the letters to make new words."

2F: "We also play board games as a family.... We (as a family) love words, play around with them, love rhyme and nonsense words (and the sounds they make).

14Fam: "We played a lot of games such as I spy and letter jigsaws etc."

45F: "We had things like reading and spelling games around, but she's never really enjoyed them, except that it was a chance to hang out with the person playing the game with her."

The intention with which these activities are viewed becomes the crucial factor in deciding what is happening in the playing of these games. Inside the technological view of learning to read, these games are simply a vehicle for the transmission of information related to the structure of reading. Outside this view there is nothing to 'transmit'; instead it is the relationships involved, the temporal and physical locations of the game that give it meaning. Nevertheless parents were citing these activities as being influential in their children's learning and in response to a question asking for information on such influences. Here the heterotopian position (Foucault, 1967) of home education appears discernible. Parents themselves are caught balancing between the mainstream view that reading, defined as a method, can be transmitted through various pieces of information to children and their own convictions that

reading happens differently, a difference for which no expressive vocabulary or overarching theory exists. Some parents explicitly acknowledged that what they were seen to be doing and what they intended might be open to conflicting interpretation:

7F: "Sometimes after watching these programmes (Sesame Street) she'd like us to play games that echoed the songs and pictures she'd just been watching, so (very occasionally to be honest) we'd write and illustrate a word on her magic drawing board such as "sun" and then extend it to "sunny" or "sunshine". We'd read them out in silly voices which made her giggle. This is as close to a reading scheme as [she] ever undertook. Therefore it was unstructured and fundamentally play."

38F: "We did play a lot of games that involved recognising and matching words not with the intention of her learning anything from them."

Children themselves seem to play with words and reading for two reasons. The first could be said to be for the intrinsic interest of such things, for example:

48M: "Very early interest in playing with sounds (2 years old)."

39F: "At 18 months she taught herself the alphabet by pressing letters on the computer."

Or, for what reading and writing might be able to bring to a situation:

67M: "He chooses when he wants to write signs for his play games."

That reading could enhance the enjoyment of some games and play activities seems to have acted as a spur to reading for some children:

73M: "I feel ... the need to read even for such things as Play Station games did the job for me."

10M: "He learned ultimately by collecting and playing Yugioh and Pokemon cards."

64M: "His brothers and sister had several Pokemon games on their GBAs. He was a big Pokemon fan and soon realised that he needed to be able to read in order to play the games himself. He learnt very quickly."

81M: "He needed to find a reason to want to read. We started playing World of Warcraft and he found his reason."

20M: "He was very eager to find free online games on the computer. He would ask me how to spell "free" "online" "games" and it was through this interest that he started reading."

41Fam: "Playing on her DS Lite has also encouraged her to read by having many game instructions as text."

20Fam: "both read anything on the computer they love for example World of Warcraft and anything to do with the game."

6Fam: "For my daughter, she is in love with her texting cell phone and laptop. All her friends read, email and text. She wants to be part of that."

17M: "He wanted to read to play his Gameboy games."

28M: "wanting to read cheats for computer games."

32M: “He learnt a year or so later because of a Pokemon game on the Gameboy. There was quite a bit of reading on each screen and I think he got fed up of having to continually ask a member of the family to read it to him so worked it out himself.”

Both types of example could be seen in terms of the participation metaphor. A young child pressing computer keys or making noises for fun can be seen as imitating what he or she has heard and seen others doing. Children joining in family games or playing popular games such as World of Warcraft and Pokemon can also be seen as participating in community and cultural activities. The motivation that spurs on this participation however, is not a motivation to read but to pursue other activities of which reading may happen to be a part. Rogoff et al’s explanation of learning as participation concentrates on learning an activity as children join in that activity (Rogoff et al 2003). These examples here offer a different possibility; as children join in an activity they incidentally learn other things pertinent to the activity but without them being the focus of what they are doing (Thomas and Pattison 2007).

As in the previous discussion of motivation, the socio-cultural idea of children being motivated to learn may miss the mark when it comes to reading. Motivation may influence reading and learning in more convoluted and complicated ways than the ‘on task’ model suggests. In these examples children are not learning to read as an activity, instead they are engaging with other things, the desired game, and through this they are learning to read. The Deweyan description of learners actively pursuing their own ends is a fitting one here. The subject matter (if this is seen as reading) is similarly Deweyan in that it is “material used in resolving a problematic situation”

(Nodding, 1998, p 37). However, it is not a subject matter that needs to be actively sought or pursued; it may not even come under consideration as a body of knowledge by the learner at all.

Television

Some parents mentioned the influence of television, particularly that with sub-titles:

11M: “closed captioning on the TV (or telly to you folks in the UK).”

17M: “We watched ‘Between the Lions’ together, had closed captioning on the television all the time.”

41F: “She chose to put on the subtitles whenever she watched TV.”

24M: “He learned to read from playing video games where the characters’ speech was subtitled.”

35M: “He watched some “educational” TV that used phonics. (We consider all TV to be educational.) ... in addition he is playing video games where reading is helpful and he is motivated.”

63M: “He worked it out for himself by watching words as we read to him and reading the subtitles on the TV.”

For some however, the influence of the screen was not seen as positive:

13Fam: “They didn’t watch screens.”

33F: “I’ve a feeling that restricting media has helped the focus on reading as entertainment and fascination for what’s in books and wanted to read for themselves.”

39F: “We don’t have a TV so we all read a lot.”

9M: “He did not watch TV – reading was the main entertainment in our house.”

The mixed views on television, as was the case with the children who did not enjoy being read to, illustrates again the difficulties of constructing a deficit argument in which certain criteria may be considered as essential ‘inputs’ which can then be identified as missing. These differing views suggest that what may be considered helpful to one child should not be extended to be considered missing for another child.

Deconstructing themes

As themes reading aloud, talk, the playing of games and ‘leisure’ activities such as watching television are very broad and cover a wide range of possibilities and practical situations as well as intentions and understandings. It may be that rather than trying to hold them together as themes by seeking out some internal characteristic that can be seen as common, it is worth considering whether it is their broadness and variability that has led to parents focusing on them in the first place. The difficulties in pinning down what reading is and the expressed nature of the learner as an individual who will naturally follow an individual path, means that what parents and/or the environment in general are able to contribute must be something

that reflects these understandings and is itself amorphous, adaptable and malleable to the interests and needs of individuals.

Complementing the child who is a natural, individual and motivated learner is the parent who offers flexible and individual companionship; common manifestations of which are reading aloud, talking and playing. Rather than seeing these things as being connected with reading in terms of a cause and effect technology they may be more easily linked to home education relationships in which parents and children are each other's more or less continuous companions expressed in such remarks as:

1F: "people like us who have constant interaction with our young ones".

Literacy, rather than being a subject to be approached via particular inputs into a method, is a possibility within this relationship in which enjoyment, closeness, companionship and the accessing of information or experience are the things of most importance. This physical and emotional set up is part of what allows reading to lose its structural identity and to become amorphously fluid to the point of disappearing as a separable and definable category of learning altogether.

Complexity Theory, the Natural Learner and Reading without Structure

Constructing the child as an individual, natural and motivated learner and reading as a structureless part of the environment without a definable identity makes the idea of deterministic causality in learning to read as expressed both in theories of phonemic

awareness (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999) and of social constructivism (Wells, 1987) unworkable. Inputs into learning to read, such as the ascribed role of listening to stories need some kind of definition (indeed the greater, the better) to fulfil the cause and effect argument of “why the early experience of listening to stories is such good preparation for learning to read and write” (Wells, 1987, p 200). Such determinism needs definition and regularity; it simply does not fit with the views expressed in this data about the nature of individuality and the inexactitude of what is to be called reading. Moving away from understanding reading as a technology on the other hand, demands that contributions to reading are seen in other looser terms; flexible to both the individuality of the learner and the varying ideas of what it actually means to be able to read. The ideas of complexity theory in which an open environment containing myriad possibilities capable of connecting in infinite and developing ways is a theory better able to link to the ideas of individualism and natural learning on the one hand and reading as a hard to define yet prevalent element of the social environment on the other.

Cilliers’ model of complexity (Cilliers, 1998) is based on the existence of ‘elements’ in a ‘system’. In terms of learning to read such ‘elements’ might be conceived of as a person deemed capable of but not yet reading, an environment seen as diverse and conducive, nameable and recognisable attainments such that ‘reading’ can be recognised, whilst the ‘system’ is the self-organising process that orders these elements into what would, on its successful accomplishment, be designated as learning itself. However the distinction between the system and its elements is not a clear one when “‘the world’ and our ‘knowledge’ of it are part of *the same complex*

system” (Osberg, Biesta and Cilliers, p 213, italics original). Rather than reading being a separable structure located within an environment and existing in some absolute way regardless of who is performing the reading, reading, what is read and who is reading are an inextricable part of each other. The ‘system’ and its ‘elements’ are only recognisable in relation to each other; they cannot stand alone as separate entities. An example helps to illustrate:

47M: “He wanted to learn the lyrics to his favourite CD. He sat with the lyrics and played the songs over and over, following the words on the page and singing along.”

For this boy, his favourite CD and his interest in singing are retrospectively recognisable influences in his learning to read. But they are not elements in a system which can be recognised as such away from the child who has used them in a particular way to satisfy his own particular ends. In such a view of reading “knowledge accumulates in unpredictable ways and its practical consequences are unforeseeable” (Brown, 2002, p 27) and this may be as true for the knower as it is for observers. Thus, in the light of self-organisation, it would be more than possible for a child to learn to read, not through the pursuit of reading (either their own or an externally managed process) as would occur in a technological model, but through the dynamic interrelationship of any number of factors individual and idiosyncratic to them, muddled together in no particular order and according to no linear idea of progress nor to any time scale.

By its very nature, such a view of learning to read cannot be pre-arranged or organised; but only experienced. In such a model, both parents and children are agents whose behaviour is contingent on, and emergent from, the system as they experience it. The way in which parents talked about helping their children can be seen as emerging from such a system, dependent on and formed by their own and their children's changing ideas:

10F: "We helped when asked"

22F: "I did help when asked."

24F: "Anything she asked, I helped her with."

21M: "When he was 18 months he would sit in my lap and ask me to write letters for him."

55F: "I can't say I really taught her. She wanted my help, so I gave it."

71M: "[He asked] for help as and when needed."

51F: "When she needed to learn a concept for reading she asked for help. If she didn't know what form that would be, I would suggest some things."

Of course much that might be seen as 'help' from a transmission perspective would not be recognised as such by either parents or children. It would simply be interaction or elements which might or might not enter the self-organising system with significance. This is then the antithesis of a system in which inputs lead to outcomes. Indeed there is no 'outcome' as such, the system simply continues to evolve and emerge. Parents echoed this view when they talked about learning to read as a natural process following its own apparent course and about the feeling sometimes

that when they had intervened with intent they had actually disrupted some other unsuspected and unseen process. These views are expressed in the section on teaching in which parents questioned their own understanding of what teaching can achieve:

36Fam: “ultimately she learned at her own pace and on her own. I feel I interfered with her natural process.”

This is not to say that what might be seen as teaching, or some other form of mediation is not a possibility as a contributory factor in learning to read. According to the above it must be and must have, at least potentially, as many possibilities for inclusion and influence as any other available element, however its central characterisation as intentional and directional would no longer be possible.⁵

The Open Environment

The world of possibilities is characterised by Foucault as an “infinitely open” universe (Olssen, 2008, p 101) in which “matter, energy and information” can pass through the boundaries of open systems freely (Schueler 1997). In contrast, according to Wells (1987), the system of learning to read is closed; reliant on particular inputs being

⁵ The implications of this for formal education are vast; arguably impossibly vast. Doll’s description of bringing “a new and livelier sense of method” (Doll, 2008, p195) to the classroom in the light of his complexity theory studies shows to my mind, how deeply mired in the conventional educational discourse he remains. His triumphant account of overcoming a teacher’s horror to alter a kindergarten number task is still unquestioningly based on engaging the whole class in a set task, giving the children directions, formalising what they did in his own fashion, attempting to draw out of them an extension of the task which he had pre-decided and finally of being delighted with attaining his desired outcome.

available at critical times to ensure their correct interacting within the system. Such descriptions however function only as models; a distinction between the open environment and the closed system is not an easy one to make in practical terms. Even the most rigidly run school or learning programme cannot help but exist in a wider environment of possibilities, even the most channelled and hot housed child has, in terms of complexity theory, a brain capable of imaginative, diverse and limitless paths of development. On the other hand, even the most open environment must be ring fenced by the influences of culture and belief and no life can be without its circumstances. Indeed home education has been criticised for being a closed environment whilst champions of school maintain that schools open up the environment and offer children more diverse possibilities and opportunities than home can (Kunzman 2009). Once again, in looking at data, the crucial distinction between the open environment and the closed system seems to be the principles behind the ideas and the commitment made to these, rather than the characteristics of the environment itself.

An open environment links to the idea of the individual as free within that environment to make their own connections and find their own possibilities. Connections to the idea of the open environment were made by parents talking about two important and twin principles; those of child paced learning and child directed learning. In both these cases parents emphasised what they did not do, rather than what they did do.

Child Led and Child Paced Learning

Parents talked about school and social pressure and about norms of learning as forms of restraint. This restraint could be seen as operating at two levels – the structural one which inhibits the open environment and the individual one which inhibits the child as a natural and self-motivated learner. These two things were often talked about in the same breath.

6Fam: “They need a lot of support in a culture that is so focused on early reading and protection from criticism especially from fearful relatives etc. It is so lovely to just love your kids and sit back and watch them unfold at just the perfect time for them. I wish I could have had this same freedom.”

56F: “As her parent, getting flak from other family members and seeing her schooled contemporaries starting to read, the last few months since she turned 5 have been a bit difficult as I keep having to stop myself from pushing reading instruction on her – no matter what my philosophy or stubborn desire not to allow the rest of the world to dictate how I raise my children, the mores of society do encroach and make me doubt myself!”

2Fam: “Not listening to my mother-in-law’s concerns was another good idea 😊”

49M: “Go at their pace, don’t make comparisons with other children.”

62F: “Being really relaxed about her being able to read and being ready for it to take a long time with no pressure also had a big impact I believe.”

The idea that children would, without doubt, want to read and that this desire could be relied on was strongly felt by many parents and echoed their views of the child as a natural learner:

45Fam: "It should be something they love to do, at their own pace; not something compulsory at a certain age."

37M: "Pressing the 'need' to learn before the desire on the part of the child exists is futile and frustrating (which can potentially delay/eradicate the child's desire to learn and take away the joy of reading.)"

31F: "I honestly believe that all children benefit from being allowed to dictate their own pace."

44F: "I have learned that the process must not be rushed and that the child must want the skill for herself, not just to please someone else."

64M: "It is much better to let your child set the pace."

Believing in this natural desire meant that to channel or force a child towards reading is unnecessary and some parents considered that such forcing could be detrimental to the child's reading as well as to their feelings:

32F: "If the process is forced and /or the adult (parent or teacher) is anxious about the child's learning, the desire is usually removed from the equation. In those cases reading becomes a task that has to be done to please someone else. The joy is gone."

34F: "I think we force kids to read too early and make them anxious about themselves if they can't meet our schedule."

29M: "If people outside of the child try to rush the process, it only ends with the child feeling frustrated and like a failure. Which does nothing more than set the child up to hate reading."

34M: "Forcing someone to read can do lasting damage. If a child is allowed to learn at their own pace with no pressure, not only will they learn to read but they will enjoy it too."

52F: "Forcing the child to learn and later read every day or imposing a schedule is not the right method; we took this way at the beginning and learned that this was wrong."

26M: "It is important to neither pressurize nor cast judgement upon our boys as they are learning to read. We know it is only a matter of time and let them go at their own pace."

17M: "Fear (as in school children who are failing to learn) blocks learning."

74M: "Children will read when they are ready and pushing earlier can create unnecessary anxiety and reading stumbling blocks."

The variation in age at which the children in this study learn to read (18 months to 16 years) suggests such a principle to have been in widespread operation.

The open environment of possibilities is complemented by the idea of the natural learner who will engage with and explore their physical, mental and intellectual surroundings in non-linear and dynamic ways. Many parents saw at least part of

their role as being about allowing this to take place without attempting to order or control it. Allowing children space and time unstructured by educational intention can be seen as a critical part of maintaining the open environment. Such a strategy might be called positive non-interference in which parents followed their understanding of learning to read by adopting attitudes which spanned ideas of child led learning through to those who deliberately attempted not to influence the process at all.

39F: "Back off and let the child lead."

68M: "I think a child led approach is very important."

2Fam: "Stepping back from the process and giving them time was the best thing."

44Fam: "We have seen it happen years later in other children who had the good fortune to have parents who did not push them or freak out (much) when their children weren't reading at 7 or 9 or whatever."

46M: "We never pressured, quizzed or belittled."

18Fam: "Children do it themselves in their own time."

13Fam: "By not being labelled and just learning at their own pace when their brain is ready it's a smooth process. It just takes patience."

10F: "People really do come to it in their own time."

The idea that children need to be left alone to learn to read can be interpreted as parents' implicit recognition of self-organising systems; systems which emerge from a child's experiences of literacy rather than a method being imposed on them or the careful concoction of calculated inputs:

17F: "It is best when adults are in the background, only offering assistance when asked."

24F: "I purposely tried to stay out of it."

29F: "Leave them to it."

34F: "I believe a child needs to do it on their own."

36F: "Not interfering basically."

37F: "Not interfering"

38F: "Letting her do it in her own time and in her own way."

57M: "It worked better if I didn't interfere."

65M: "Get out of their way."

Certainty, Complexity and What it Means to Read

As discussed earlier, certainty and prediction are not features of complex systems and as such a problem for understanding learning to read in this way is that whilst the relationship of possibilities may lead to reading in different ways for different children, the possibility that it will not lead to reading at all cannot be ruled out from the chaotic mix. It would seem at least potentially possible that some children left to their own devices in the open environment will not, will never, learn to read because the elements that they connect into their own system simply do not lead in that direction. There is no research (on home educated children's reading) in existence that can shed any light on whether or not this is the case. One parent however, felt she had seen limits to 'natural' learning:

51M: “Many of my home-educating friends have had children who have not naturally started to read of their own accord however, so I do not think it is a given that natural learning will equal proficient reading, unassisted.”

Exploring this statement and its implications is beyond the limits of this study although in a purely theoretical sense the possibility begs the relationship between any given self-organising system of learning and the perception of what reading is. Chaos theory postulates that a “continuous spectrum would be associated with a few degrees of freedom “(Gleick, 1987, p 139). Trajectories of chaotic systems never cross themselves and never repeat themselves for to do so would imply that the system returns to a state it has already occupied and would therefore proceed from there on a trajectory it had already followed thus setting up a pattern. Applying this to the learning of reading must begin from the premise that all people are individuals and all self-organising systems are individual therefore no one’s learning follows the same path. At the very least everyone does things slightly differently from each other and everyone therefore comes to occupy slightly different places on the “continuous spectrum”.

The suggestion this makes is that, contrary to the conventional picture, everyone who is reading is not doing the same thing. The uniqueness of the learning process which parents describe does not end in a convergence with others at some end of the line moment. Instead the processes of emergence and self-organisation continue in the practice of reading as long as such a practice lasts. ‘Reading’ could not therefore be

described as a once and for all skill that is held in common by all who practice it. Instead it would need to be seen as a continuous, evolving and individually distinct exercise. This in turn, has implications for the definition of reading as a method or as a particular structure of understanding. The discussion in Chapter Five showed the difficulties apparently inherent in defining reading, and an acceptance of complexity theory confirms this. If reading is the emergent process of a unique self-organising system then it cannot be defined in any centralised way and any attempt to do so is to deny the foundations of understanding complexity.

Applying complexity theory to parents' views on reading provides an interesting theoretical base for many of the things which parents are describing but which prove very difficult to place in current method based and deficit theories of learning to read. In particular complexity theory gives us new ways to consider the role of motivation and learner led paths of learning. The ideas of self-motivation and self-managed learning take on a different slant when placed into complexity's ideas about self-organising systems. Applying complexity theory to autonomous education is a new idea but one which proponents of complexity theory would surely argue is pertinent.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beginnings, Endings and the Place of Conclusions

“Our gaze is turned to the stream of time – or rather to that small stretch of its flow by which we sit and which we call the present. This contemplation is science itself.”

Ivar Ekeland - Mathematics and the Unexpected

In this piece of research I set out to discover what it means when a child learns to read without being taught. Much investigating of this question has been an act of deconstruction; it has been about reconsidering the divisions of conventional education and finding ways to think about learning to read without the usual categories that enframe its teaching in schools. The educational order is so embedded that most of the time it seems natural: terms and holidays, teacher and taught, foundations and progress, working and playing, reading and not reading. This research has been about what happens when this order is played with; when the usual boundaries of subject fields, the bench marks of age related targets, linear progressions and goal driven structures of acquisition are questioned and, as they often have been here, abandoned altogether.

The attempt to research has itself become an act of deconstruction; of deconstructing the technological discourse of education characteristic of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In this technological view education is seen in terms of an input that, through a process of cause and effect, leads to an outcome. When learning does not look like this we tend, as in the example of Stainthorp and Hughes' study, to consider

that something exceptional, something not normal, is going on. In this sense, the discourse of education has set out not just the lines of expectation but also the limits of the possible and the thinkable. Thus Stainthorp and Hughes are able to conclude that “the overwhelming majority of children need direct tuition” (Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999, p 165) over a number of years in reading and writing although their study reveals no evidence to support this claim. Their statement surely emanates from a regime of truth that has established such a statement as a reasonable one in its delineation of the normal, the possible and the impossible. This research has been an order of challenge to the current spectrum of possibilities by considering that children who appear to learn to read differently to the step by step taught process, are not so much exceptions to the normal but in need of a different explanation.

This thesis has been about dismantling many of the ideas that give education its structure; ideas that have helped us make sense of learning and teaching; ideas that have been used to set out and justify the order of the educational world. Yet this world that it has set about deconstructing is the world to which it belongs and to which it must turn to establish its own legitimacy, for the PhD is a construct of the world of education that can only be justified by that world. And at this point the subject of my research and the conditions of my research seem to collapse into one another. Reading and research it seems to me now, are only two examples of the same thing and what bedevils the understanding of the one folds back in to haunt the existence of the other.

The Thesis in and out of Parenthesis

There is, argues Peim “no species of text without a context” (Peim, 2010, p232). For the PhD thesis this context is the archive of academia; a context that confers status and legitimacy whilst simultaneously disciplining and ensuring conformity. The context endows the text with a justification of itself through the establishment of its difference. A thesis is a piece of work defined by particular characteristics; that it is carried out over a measured period of time by a single person, follows a convention of practice and presentation (including the number of words it must contain thus embodying an answer to the bizarre question ‘how long is the truth?’), is overseen by a university and held to be a ‘contribution to knowledge’. Such a separate and defined identity is embodied in the words of Thomas (2009, p v) when he exhorts his research students to “begin at the beginning”, to follow the pre-set, sequenced stages through to the end and there come to a conclusion.

This beginning is, according to Thomas (2009), the research question and this ending the conclusion to the thesis and these two are further held into a whole within the formalities of the acceptance of the initial proposal at one end and the satisfactory completion of the viva at the other. A PhD thesis held between the parenthesis of the beginning and the end, contains a meaning that appears to lie only within itself; detached from the world in which it arose and self-explanatory in its status. This is what the context demands and certainly to the PhD student the parenthesis marks a certain and special period of time devoted to the production of this exceptional text and so there seems a naturalness to both beginning and ending.

Yet such a feeling argues Geertz, is an illusion, “a form coincident less with the inner discretion of things than with one’s parenthetical experience of them” (Geertz, 1995, p 11). The parenthetical experience of being that PhD student is something that should not become confused with the place of the text that has been produced. For Foucault establishing the discontinuities of beginnings and endings in the history of thought maybe “no more than an arbitrary division made in a constantly mobile whole. We may wish to mark off a period; but have we the right to establish symmetrical breaks at two points in time in order to give an appearance of continuity and unity to the system we place between them? Where, in that case would the cause of its existence lie?” (Foucault, 1970, p50). The ideas that a PhD embodies of research turned into knowledge through a process of intellectual thoroughness seem to have broken free from the history of thought that brought such a thing into being. The causes of its existence appear to hold no relevance, although their shadow continues to outline what we understand of knowledge.

The imperative to begin at a named point and to conclude at one also comes not from some deep epistemological necessity but from an institutional one; the completion of the parenthesis; the objectification of thought into the academic archive. The quest for beginnings and endings is not a universal, self-evident necessity but an historical and cultural contingency, although one so powerful that it is described by Deleuze and Guattari as a “regrettable characteristic of the Western mind” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p22). Geertz cautions against the conclusion as a dangerous enticement; “the temptation to take this state of affairs as a terminus point, the completion of a phase, a process, a development, now to be but secured

and extended is great and must be resisted” (Geertz, 1995, p 11). Yet to turn away from such conventions is tantamount to an act of self-destruction for where is our understanding of education without accomplishment or outcome, without the closing of the argument or the conclusion of the PhD?

The epistemology of the conclusion

A conclusion is no mere ending. Thomas stresses its function as the part of the thesis “that will be read most thoroughly” in order for the reader to gain a “sense of cohesion and integrity” (Thomas, 2009, p 235) of the whole project. More than this, according to Peim the final part of a thesis must present its implications for practice; “in order to achieve the identity of the proper, it has to be performative” (Peim, 2010, p231). Cohesive, integrated and performative –criteria that have profound implications not just for what a conclusion is but for what a thesis is, for what education is and for what it means to know.

The integrity of the thesis expressed in the conclusion marks out a double point of self-completion; self-completion of the work as an entity that stands by itself, completed by an individual self. Such a feat would be untenable in Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic world of continual connections where ends and beginnings are ideas that have been dispensed with and where paths of progress do not exist. Their view holds important consequences for the research enterprise; it can no longer provide a metaphorical pathway of progress towards some concluding point of truth; instead everywhere is a middle in an endless network of interconnected meaning.

Accordingly there can be no integrity to the thesis; it cannot be separated from the context that has given rise to it nor from the world that will endow it with meaning. The ideal of integrity also stands at odds with complexity theory in which the making of what we know lies in a tangle of endless feedback and feed forward loops, where thought carries its history within itself; and the world can be seen in a grain of sand. And as this applies to ideas so it does to people, yet the PhD is the promotion of the ego; denying, as it does, any recognition of authorship as a gathering of voices in which the self of the author only exists through its subjugation to the presence of the others.

The sense of conclusive cohesion which Thomas refers to suggests an overarching internal consistency; a marshalling of what has gone before, a means of unification. The conclusion, as Thomas puts it is a place for “tidying up” (Thomas, 2009, p235). As such it presents a strange task for a deconstructionist; a putting together again of what has just been taken apart; a re-assembly of what has been dismantled. A conclusion, by its unifying nature, cannot preserve uniqueness. There will always be more than can be said and in order to unify and contain, a conclusion must also let go. Let go of the least substantial, let go of the least articulated, let go of the least questioned. In the act of concluding we have to destroy, not just part of what we do know but also the possibilities of what we do not know. There is no space for that which we are not able to articulate or for that whose existence is frail. These things, repressed or amalgamated, as the conclusion propels us forward to the next

beginning will surely become the pillars of the next regime of truth; the assumed, the unnoticed, the glossed over.

The imperative of performativity cited by Peim (2010) as a necessary characteristic of a proper conclusion provides us with a clue to the cause of existence, or at least the current rationale, of educational research. We must know what we have found out, we must know what we know so that it can be made use of, put into practice. The conclusion is therefore the point at which we stop thinking and start acting. And of all the regime of truth this is maybe the point beyond which we cannot pass.

Education is a practice. There are profound implications in suggesting anything otherwise. Indeed the criterion of performativity disallows even such a suggestion; the conclusion is perforce the point at which we must accede the 'truth' that education is a practice.

Education as practice is an institutionalised given. Equally in a legal sense but also very strongly in a cultural sense, home education is considered almost by definition to be a practice and where it does not appear to be, its status as education is threatened. Yet through this research floats the idea that once again this is not a self-evident truth. Where the linear progress of cause and effect through to desired outcome is called into question so too must be the extent to which education can be considered a practice. For how would such a continuing claim to practice define itself if it no longer can be said to be playing a role in linking these three concepts? Some proponents of complexity theory have seen no difficulty in continuing to view education, in the form of schooling, as a practice, "We must begin to imagine schooling as a practice which makes possible a dynamic, self-renewing and creative

engagement with ‘content’ or ‘curriculum’ by means of which school-goers are able to respond, and hence bring forth new worlds” (Osberg, Biesta and Cilliers, 2008, p215). However, if as Scott Kelso (quoted by Taylor, 2001, p 226 italics original) argues the “human brain is *fundamentally* a pattern-forming, self-organised system governed by nonlinear dynamical laws” involved in the constant screening of environmental information, it is difficult to see exactly what the practice of schooling is doing by way of creating possibilities. Once the emergentist properties of complexity theory are incorporated into the epistemology of education, it becomes increasingly difficult to name the performance that we want to create. When we can no longer do this, or can only do this in the most nebulous of terms, then what is, and what is not, the ‘practice’ of education must become also increasingly insubstantial.

An acknowledgement of this difficulty is expressed by contributors here who have gone to lengths to distance themselves from the role of practitioner in their children’s learning. It has been suggested, for instance, that children are better left alone, that the outcome of intervention is unclear, and expressions such as ‘as if by magic’ have been used. Such a distancing from whatever happens when a child learns to read calls the notion of practice into need of consideration. Yet, the criterion of performativity demanded of the conclusion stands in grave danger of closing this question before it has even been properly asked.

The Question of the Question and the Maze of Chronology

To consider conclusions, we need to think about beginnings and in attempting to understand where this research began, I returned, as Thomas (2009) says, to my question. I watched my five year old daughter begin reading, apparently spontaneously, and I did not understand what I saw. I was eaten up with curiosity and I asked a question – how did she do that? (And how could I not have asked it?) In this spirit I began my PhD, seeming, in those days, to be asking a simple question, and believing that its simplicity would stand in my favour, no matter how complicated the answer might turn out to be. And yet, before long, I had to begin to consider how I had ever come to ask such a question.

Why are some things questions and other things not? Why do some people ask them and other people don't? And why do some ideas work as answers whereas others do not? I have come to see the fount of questions as being neither in the nature of the things they are about nor in the attributes of those who do the asking, but in the configuration of events and ideas that form the space of the asking. Thus it is impossible to ask how children learn to read away from the understandings that we already have about children, reading, learning and the nature of reality. Nor can we ask it away from the political and social ways in which we act out these understandings every day of our lives. But even more significantly; without particular views on these things there would be nothing to ask.

“Origin, for man, is much more the way in which man in general, any man, articulates himself upon the already-begun labour, life, and language” argues Foucault (1970, p 330). We begin, not from some clean and fresh starting point but from well-worn places. Foucault goes on, man “can uncover his own beginning only against the background of a life which itself began long before him” (Foucault, 1970, p 330). So my beginning turns out not to be a beginning at all but the expression of far off things that I do not myself understand even though I seem to know them. If there ever was ‘a beginning’, it lies long before my question was ever asked, before the events that prompted the question had ever taken place. This question, which I thought was simple and as spontaneous as my daughter’s reading, turned out to be a complicated maze of meaning, a maze that trapped me in and kept on leading me backwards; backwards until it has felt at times that I have been excavating the ground from beneath my own feet. The idea of going forwards towards an answer seemed to become ever more distant.

The search for origins locates the question outside the parenthesis, inevitably disturbing the symmetry and cohesion of what seemed to be a whole and the loss brings with it questions on the imperative to conclude. If we cannot start simply with a question but only with a tangle of inherited meaning, in what sense can we make a claim to have answered a question? Indeed my question as I see it now was not really about reading, but about the way I saw the world; about my understanding of other things. In fact it might be generous to call it a question at all – really rather a position statement on my point of view. Whatever I was going to find out, whatever I *could* find out, was already there in the things that I already knew. In the same way

that it is not possible to read something that we do not already in some sense understand (Smith, 1997) I wonder if it is possible to research a question to which we do not already, in some sense, have the answer.

On The Origins of Originality

Knowledge is not self-complete; its origins recede further and further the more we try to chase and pin them down. But without origins what is the “original contribution to knowledge” (Ecclestone, 2003, p1) demanded of the PhD? “Aim to find new knowledge” urges Thomas (2009, p 21). His outline of the research process goes on to suggest, at least implicitly, that new knowledge is the product of procedure. Indeed the genre of the thesis reaffirms this production. The standard layout of “literature review, methodology, empirical data, interpretation of data, recontextualization of data in the form of ‘findings’ and implications for practice” (Peim, 2010, p 231) is the outline of a procedure in which format dictates content and tells us what an original contribution to knowledge should look like. The PhD researcher working within these parameters is a kind of technologist involved in putting certain things, in a certain order, to obtain a certain outcome. Thus old knowledge, of production, of subject matter, the appropriate discourse, lays out from the outset the limits of the thinkable; what is acceptable in the form and the substance of ‘new’ knowledge. So the body of what we know continually expands as old dictates new, dressed in the trappings of progress. Yet in the world proposed by complexity, knowledge is not a linear progression where new growth can be measured forward from old growth. Instead it is a complicated network of feedback

and feed forward loops, confounding the ideas of originality and denying that knowledge can have a chronology at all.

Complexity theory, itself a newly named subject field and an approach of only very recent practice⁶, illustrates its own thesis. In tracing the history of complexity, Taylor (2001) returns to the eighteenth century, to the work of Hegel and continues to find its antecedents until its formal entry into the world of intellectual thought, some 200 years later, as a named and recognised body of ideas. Olssen (2008) seems to be similarly arguing that Foucault was thinking about complexity before complexity had been invented and named and this in a field intellectually far away from the physics and meteorology that Gleick (1987) puts forward as the site of its emergence. At the same time it is only possible to look back, over decades and centuries, to trace the emergence of complexity theory from the vantage point at which its ideas have been named and solidified in thought. Where is the origin now? It seems to be everywhere and nowhere. Rather than adhering to a point of origin from which an idea can be traced the appearance of complexity theory seems to have more in common with the Nietzschean idea of *Herkunft*; “the beginning of things are not, in brief, in some identity, some whole, some “truth”, but in numerous accidents, events, oppositions; origins are dispersals, not unities” (Rabinow, 1984, p 81).

In the course of this research I have found similar echoes in the struggle to express and understand ideas and events that appear as scatterings; dispersals rather than

⁶ Taylor places “the moment of complexity in the context of events occurring in the last half of the twentieth century” (Taylor 2001 p 15). Gleick (1987) more specifically dates the emergence of chaos theory to the 1970s.

wholes unified by a history or a theory. Researchers and contributors talking about and writing about, reaching after, ideas that are not yet complete, not yet unified:

“She needs to put her own construction on the new knowledge which confronts her, as if she is putting into practice her own theory of learning.” (Thomas, 1998, p 97)

“Some parents came to realise their children learned a great deal in apparently unrelated bits and pieces” (Thomas, 1998, p70)

50M: “I need to place trust in my son and let him do it in his time (because it has been like that with everything with him.)”

“The apparent disadvantage of informal learning; that it is not structured, sequenced and ordered with the learner in mind, may well be one of its strengths.” (Thomas and Pattison, 2007, p 145)

The tentative language; ‘as if’, ‘apparently’, ‘may well’, suggest a groping after something yet to be fully formulated. Notions of ‘trust’ imply a faith rather than knowledge. Some of these ideas may come, one day, to sit under the heading of complexity theory, others perhaps be joined eventually to other means of understanding. For the moment however, they seem to be a dispersal of suggestions and hints, fragments without a whole. Yet their existence at all stands at odds with the understanding of knowledge as the wilful outcome of production. If the ideas of complexity can stay so long germinating, dispersed across thought without

any centre and awaiting their moment of recognition then who can say what else is here, in this work, in any work, as yet unnamed and unrecognised yet adding silently to the body we may one day call knowledge?

The search for academic knowledge is the search for articulation; knowledge as defined in the ideas of the conclusion; a gathering together and the expressing of a body, a conferring of identity on a set of ideas. We have no means of thinking about knowledge that cannot respond to articulation, “the inert density of the *unthought* is always inhabited in a certain manner by a *cogito*, and this thought, dormant within what is not thought, must be brought to life again and stretched out in the sovereignty of the ‘I think’” (Foucault, 1970, p 336, italics original). The dilemma of the conscious and the unconscious and the relationship between the two is an immediate concern for the epistemological basis of this research. Long before the parenthesis of the PhD, I lived a certain life, made choices, sought experiences, accepted on faith, felt right about certain things, was drawn to certain ideas to do with education and reading. I knew what I lived; just as the parents who have contributed to this research know what they have lived. It is in these things that seem, as Foucault puts it, to be “without history - in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts” (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p 76) that “discreet and apparently insignificant truths” are constructed (Foucault quoting Nietzsche in Rabinow, 1984, p 77). This seems to be a kind of knowledge without understanding. Without a theory, without an explanation, beliefs, fears, doubts and hopes became choices and actions; they become who we are before they become the things we know.

In all this the sense of order in which knowledge is obtained, the extrapolation from experience, is confounded – there could have been no such experiences unless and until the embracing of such experience became allowed by thought. The question posed by Foucault, “how can man think what he does not think?” (1970, p 323) is echoed here in action; how can people who do not know how children learn to read make choices (and strong, distinctive choices at that) about the education of their children and act as if they do know? How can people know what they cannot articulate in thought? This is not knowledge as in the order of research findings that have been created by following a procedure. This ‘knowledge’ has not been deliberately produced at a particular point in time; it is of a different calibre altogether. Its recognition seems irrelevant to its meaning; a meaning that is linked to being rather than to knowing; being a parent, a reader and now a researcher. Taylor (2001), echoing Foucault, argues that information relates not so much to what is said but to what can be said. It is not the articulation of the theory or the explanation that matters here so much as the possibilities that exist for ways of thinking. In these possibilities lie things that we know even as we do not know them. The Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard suggests that “writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows” (Knausgaard, 2013, p 172). I align the ideals of my research with his writing; in this piece of work I have been drawing out of the shadows things that I, and many besides me, already knew. As such I make no claim to the construction of original knowledge; I strive instead for authenticity – the reflection of a meaningful moment; not knowledge created but knowledge acknowledged.

Without Conclusion

A conclusion in the words of Derrida is the place which allows the author, “to close the question, to close his expectations or his concern in an option, a decision, a solution” (Derrida, p1978, 193/4). For my part I do not believe that this research can be satisfactorily closed with these criteria of conclusion: the acceptance of education as a practice, the self-completion of the thesis nor with an epistemological view of knowledge as a forward going linear progression. This view is not the expression of adherence to any particular philosophy; it is itself, and the irony is far from lost, a ‘conclusion’ brought about by, arising from, the research undertaken here.

This research has discussed some of the contingencies of thought which allow for a re-configuring of experience; ideas about children, about nature and culture, about identity in a world governed by technology. But these things are the laying out of a field of possibilities; they are not the detail nor are they an abstraction from a whole. I return here to the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari which suggest understanding couched in terms of “*a map and not a tracing* ... which is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real.” Such a map, they continue, is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p 12, italics original). The map remains a dispersal in the manner of origins. It is able to exist without the rejection, reformation, unification or consistency required of a conclusion. Furthermore it can continue to hold within itself the state of inarticulation and of the unthought. The idea of the map keeps open the possibilities that the parenthesis denies, it allows us to

remain incomplete, to think in the moment and to live in and alongside the states of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Eventalising Research

To think in the moment seems, like Barthes' suggestion (Barthes, 1967), to traverse rather than penetrate the plane of ideas. It is to cease the search for underlying structures of truth and to wonder instead why things are the way that they are in the moment of their occurrence. This means to set aside the question of the truth of how children learn to read and to consider instead the existence of such understanding as we have and the possibilities which that understanding both closes off and opens up.

According to Foucault (1970), no structure of thought can offer a universal grid that forms a bottom line for knowing the world, instead, we live in the historical moment and base our thinking on a temporary and shifting raft of codes and categories. The possibilities for education lie in the discourse of the moment and are subject to the historical, political and social limiting of what can be said (McHoul and Grace, 1993). We are bound to a particular vision, but only on a temporary basis. Whatever 'education' is thought to be at any given moment, it can never hold that form for long. This research shows that powerful though the current 'regime of truth' may be it is not strong and in our time it is certainly not immutable. Foucault (quoted by Olssen, 2008, p 105) ponders "how it was possible for men, within the same discursive practice, to speak of different objects, to have contrary opinions ...". Yet this research suggests that such an equilibrium of common sense may only be a way to

understand our own understanding. Rather than revealing the common sense, this research illustrates the shifting ground: small cracks and fissures in the discourse of education opening up into big possibilities of change.

This research involves people who, as individuals, as parents to particular children, have taken actions and thought thoughts which challenge the mainstream discourse over the educational 'self-evidences'. The difference for instance between 'the child' and 'my child' is enough to open up questions and in opening up the question the dynamic nature of such concepts and the consequences any particular embodiment must have for our understanding of learning becomes clear. The child considered by, for instance, Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) is a particular entity, an adjunct to their theory of what reading is and how it is to be learned, and only to be noticed when an individual does not fit the expected form. Rethinking the concept as contributors here have done, leads to a vista of new possibilities and more than that to an understanding of how and in what terms change to the way we think about education is possible.

On the face of it, it would seem that the cracks and fissures appearing in the discourse of education are being brought about by human agency but Foucault argues against the power of individualism suggesting instead that new ideas emerge through the social construction of understanding as it exists at a given time. Thus "no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice" (Foucault quoted by Taylor, 2001, p 57). This interstice is a gap opening up in what seems to be the secure structure of order; the technology of

education, the meaning of childhood, the idea of being a parent in the modern age. These things which are taken for granted and seem so secure that they are “anterior to words” (Taylor citing Foucault, 2001, p 57), have begun to de-stabilise, to form a place of new possibilities. Opportunities are emerging that are not available in the current coding, opportunities to think about learning to read in new ways, ways still to be explored.

The Difficulties of Talking

But first we need to talk. My own experience and the tales of others have made me very aware of the weight of academic, cultural, professional and political interests that hold the regime of truth in place; the Badman review is just one example. Yet alternative forms of education are on the rise globally (GHEC 2012). There may be some poetic licence in calling this the era of home education – we may not be there yet – but whether home education continues to grow and develop or whether it peaks and peters out in the next few decades it nevertheless offers the opportunity and the means to rethink and reassess the ‘self-evident’ givens of education. There are many of these and they are difficult to talk about.

The first difficulty lies in the structure of discourse that creates the objects of which it speaks – the material things and the conceptual ideas that ‘are’ education; that both define and perpetuate the political, cultural, institutional and personal interests in being the way we are and doing things the way that we do. The notion of education as practice stands firmly in this structure; it is a defining feature of education so that

we can barely contemplate education away from the idea of 'practice'. Other and immense challenges have been made by contributors here to the meaning of 'teaching'; challenges which constitute a confrontation of the cause and effect ideals and the theory of mind that give teaching its rationale. Similarly in considering what reading is and what it means to read or to be a reader brought forward ideas that went far beyond the usual method based definitions.

The second, although not entirely separate, difficulty lies in words themselves. Through this research has run a struggle to find the right vocabulary, means of expression, appropriate concepts to think away from the mainstream and enter new realms of understanding. Trying to discuss alternatives has highlighted the hegemonic nature of the current discourse and the difficulties this poses for describing learning away from the settings, technology and measurements of mass formal education. Those of us who wish to think and talk about educational alternatives find our discourse restricted to pickings from the mainstream – pickings that bring with them inherent limitations to moving thought forward on any level in this area.

Thirdly, different ideas pose not just the immediate problem of language but also a problem for theory. Where research does not act to confirm or extend the current regime of truth, its place at the margins is an uncertain one. It is not possible that a new piece of understanding, perhaps about the nature of childhood, can be taken and inserted into the old arguments. Where the understanding of a key idea changes, the whole theory into which it fits changes also. Meaning cannot be

brought in piecemeal until the truth is built because meaning belongs to the whole and not to the parts. Thus Deleuze and Guattari turn away from the ideal of finding reality through a gradual progression towards a final conclusion to considering understanding as a far reaching network of connections “composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p21). In this view, to come somehow more fully to grips with an aspect of life is not to uncover a new piece of truth but to enter “a continuous self-vibrating region” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p21) in which meaning reverberates through the whole. In this research, such reverberating lines are clearly visible running through and back again between the concepts of the child, of reading and the understanding of what learning is and how it happens. Ideas about the ‘naturalness’ of children and their capacity to learn for themselves, are met by ideas of reading as a fluid, non-structure; not describable as a method but amorphous and therefore to be found in myriad places and reacted to in myriad ways. These are ideas in perpetual motion, holding each other in place, resonating with notions about, not just education, but also about life in a general sense. And out of these ideas an understanding of learning ‘falls’ with a quiet inevitability; it does not need to be noticed or articulated; it is simply there.

Contemplating the Here and the Now

Foucault (1970) suggests that we find the reason for events through their location in their own historical uniqueness. Inevitably this idea must be turned back onto his own philosophy; the history and the uniqueness of which he talks are also products of the moment. History itself has a history by which we must come to see why it

should be that we endow the past with explanatory meaning in the way that we do. Eventalisation is no universal of understanding but an idea of its time which has found its appeal in a transient moment. It is not alone. Echoing similar ideas are the arguments of Deleuze and Guattari and of Taylor and Cilliers in their discussions of complexity theory. All resist the explanation of situations, events and ideas through structural grids of universal meanings.

Why should such ideas of the uniqueness of history, of the individuality of events, of complex causation from conditions we can never fully grasp, have arisen over the previous few decades and why are they finding appeal as some of the latest ways of seeking understanding? What is it that resonates about the rhizomatic structure of endless connections and the feedback and feed forward loops of complexity? Where is the appeal in the abandonment of linearity and the mechanisms of cause and effect for the tangle of endless possibilities and the confusion of multiple paths? Why should these notions now appear to hold explanatory power over all sorts of things, including, perhaps, how children learn to read?

“From the beginnings of scientific psychology to the present day, understanding of human thinking has rested in metaphor and analogy, and it is notable how this analogy has always depended for its credibility on association with fashionable scientific and technological innovation” writes Thomas (2002, p159). In recent times this insight has taken a sharper turn as technology itself turns to the business of knowledge. What it means to acquire and use knowledge, what it means to think, has, in a scant few decades, undergone a massive technological upheaval.

Since the release of the World Wide Web to the general public in 1993 the access of ordinary people to gargantuan amounts of information has become a commonplace reality. Charting the incredible and swift rise of this world transforming technology Frauenfelder (2005) writes “if the adage ‘information is power’ is true, then Google has given each of us the equivalent of a 100- megawatt nuclear reactor” (Frauenfelder, 2005, p 188). Only now do we find that information is not power if we do not first know how to filter through this vast data dump, to find what matters to us before we drown in what does not. It is no longer finding knowledge that is the problem but finding our way through knowledge. Information (at least of certain varieties: the written, the visual, the audible) is constantly there in what Taylor describes as “swelling rivers” (Taylor, 2001, p 203). But this information is not tidy, neat packages of what we need at any given time. Its constant accompaniment is what Taylor calls ‘noise’; the endless distraction of what is there but does not inform. The relationship between noise and information however, is no simple binary; we cannot just take out the rubbish and get rid of it. Noise and information constantly change place; what is noise in one situation will be information in another, what is information for one person will be noise for another, what is noise today will be information tomorrow and vice versa and endlessly on.

The rapid advancement of technology has no doubt turned our minds to the question of how to handle this vast and moving ocean but such questions must always have existed. How do we know what is important? How do we know what to notice and what to ignore? How do we decide what to remember and what to forget? The

answer Taylor argues, is the screening systems of the human mind, “knowledge and meaning assume form when the flux of information is effectively channelled through processes of multiple screenings” (Taylor, 2001, p203). And these screening patterns are themselves dynamic, complex and adaptive systems. So complex that they herald a major turn in thinking about thought: “the switch from understanding mental activity mechanically to analysing thinking as a dynamic adaptive process makes it possible to reinterpret mind and culture in terms of complex systems rather than simple and stable structures” (Taylor, 2001, p 205).

So complexity theory gives us a means of thinking about ourselves in relation to this startling new technology which has taken over the world in less than a generation. It gives us a means to understand ourselves as complex beings in a complex world, able to adapt dynamically and effectively to the on-going demands of the new information system. The metaphors of learning by which we do so are borrowed themselves from the new technology; we ‘process’ information, ‘screen’ and ‘scan’ and ‘network’. The only irony is that Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, took as inspiration for his far reaching vision “the human brain’s wonderful ability to make non-obvious relationships between different concepts, something computers couldn’t do” (Frauenfelder, 2005, p 188).

So new technology has both formed, and been formed by, a vision of the human brain’s adaptive, complex, dynamic ability to make sophisticated connections, to filter information and to self-organise its results. But to apply these new ideas to the ways in which children learn requires some degree of intellectual freedom from the older

and entrenched discourses of learning; discourses now embedded in the structures and institutions, the organisation and the objects of the field we call education. Educational theory, by concentrating so firmly on formal schooling has set up its parameters within a socially instituted value system which, whilst being in terms of eventalisation temporally and culturally specific, has sought universality. Home education which has resisted, at least at certain points, the technological enframing of the dominant discourse, offers a space to wonder differently about children's learning. Thus complexity theory may find a place amongst the ideas of home educators even as the experiences of learning to read at home offer an illustration of the ideas of complexity theory.

What's to be done?

Politics, culture and technology have all had much to say here and it is from these three that some very disparate ideas on education, and more specifically on learning to read, have flowed. Research cannot judge the validity of these differing views from some privileged position of understanding the true nature of learning. Such a 'reality' only exists within its discourse and is, therefore, unavailable for comparison under the terms of a different discourse (Foucault as discussed by McHoul and Grace, 1993). For all practical and epistemological purposes there is no truth about learning to read. There are only "differing theoretical frameworks, diverse ideological influences and ... varied aspirations" (Gray, 1995, p57). As a result we have no means by which we can draw a comparison between the efficacy of the dominant educational discourse and its emerging counterpart. In this sense, I have come no

closer to understanding my subject than have Stainthorp and Hughes; although our ideas appear diametrically opposed to each other it cannot be that one of us is right and the other therefore wrong.

The co-existence of such diverse narratives and frames of understanding is a hallmark of post-modern epistemologies that seek not to totalise but to encourage and embrace, even promote, diversity. It is tempting to see such ideals as providing the umbrella under which alternative views of education may find some degree of recognition and legitimacy. Usher and Edwards for example argue that post-modernism no longer validates the view of education as “a straitjacket of uniform provision, standardized curricular, technicised teaching methods and bearer of universal ‘messages’ of rationality and morality” (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p211). Indeed the alternative views revealed by contributors here also mirror the post-modern confrontation to the “epistemology and deeply embedded notions of foundations, disciplines and scientificity” (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p3) that form the basis of education in the modern mould. This may sound like a welcome endorsement of much that contributors here have raised and autonomous home education may provide a practical example of what can happen to learning away from such a framework. However and unfortunately, this does not mean that post-modernism is able to offer alternative education a haven. According to Usher and Edwards, “education is particularly resistant to the postmodern ‘message’” (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p1) and their own references to “compulsory schooling” (eg p 211) suggest a continuing, if default, marginalization of education away from the main stream.

In maintaining their post-modern stance, Usher and Edwards skirt the question of 'what is to be done?' on the grounds that a grand narrative for action is inappropriate for those of their epistemological bent. They acknowledge the difficulties of suggesting any kind of universalising position regarding the aims or practices of education in a post-modern framework which explicitly sets out to avoid such universals. However equally the understandings of post modernism deny any position that can be regarded as neutral or above and beyond the relationships of power which are instrumental in setting the bench marks of normality. The difficulty is that ostensibly refusing to take a stance is also a stance and ignores not only the power within scholarship but also deep seated questions about its ethical implications. In the postmodern view researchers can no longer be people simply in search of the truth; instead they are purveyors of points of view which are overwhelmingly laid out in the terms of modernity as approximations of 'reality'; the format of the PhD being a case in point. In the taking up of such a point of view therefore the endeavours of research and scholarship carry an unavoidable and heavy moral burden as they lay out their representations of the world, and set the parameters of the known and the knowable. As Cilliers puts it, "since a certain theory of representation implies a certain theory of meaning – and meaning is what we live by – our choice of such a theory has important ethical implications" (Cilliers, 1998, p 88). Whilst it is not the role of research to occupy the moral high ground, educational researchers need to be fully aware of the consequences that their particular versions of reality imply. The terms in which we establish what reading is and our ideas about how children might come by it have far reaching implications that impact on the lives

of children in almost every sense imaginable from the practical to the emotional and continue to carry consequences that stretch far beyond the school years.

The ethical implications of meaning have never been far from this research. But at this particular moment in time, it may be that the commitment to a certain view of reality has even greater ethical portent. Education is changing as a result of history but these changes are also part of history and their significance is yet to be decided in the historical order of their time. As home education rises on a global scale, the meaning that is made now will have far-reaching and long term consequences for unpredictably large numbers of children and their families.

The messages of such postmodernist movements as critical pedagogy (as discussed by Usher and Edwards, 1994) view education as a primary means of promoting emancipation over oppression and the championing of the ideals of justice and morality through educational inclusivity. The solution to the oppression of minority groups (whether these be identified by class, gender, ethnicity, religion, race) is always the same: inclusivity through the toleration and embracing of difference. They acknowledge themselves that any overall goal runs the risk of the totalising effect they explicitly wish to avoid yet the irony of their desire to include is that it is itself a totalisation. For those involved in alternative education the mission to include those who do not wish to be included has become their greatest threat.

Far from avoiding universality, the seemingly benign desire to include becomes itself a universality upon which other forms of universality ride piggy back. The invoking of

inclusion begs the question of inclusion in what; and the answer (as illustrated in the quote below) seems to be inclusion in mainstream society and mainstream ideas; exactly the totalising that the proponents of post-modern diversity have foresworn. But for some, totalisation is explicitly the reason behind the stance of inclusivity. Catherine Ross, professor of Law at George Washington University, argues:

Many liberal political theorists argue, however, that there are limits to tolerance. In order for the norm of tolerance to survive across generations, society need not and should not tolerate the inculcation of absolutist views that undermine toleration of difference. Respect for difference should not be confused with approval for approaches that would splinter us into countless warring groups. Hence an argument that tolerance for diverse views and values is a foundational principle does not conflict with the notion that the state can and should limit the ability of intolerant homeschoolers to inculcate hostility to difference in their children—at least during the portion of the day they claim to devote to satisfying the compulsory schooling requirement. (Ross quoted by Farris, 2012, p 14).

Such arguments pave the way from the old intolerances of the past to new intolerances, bringing with them new but equally pernicious justifications for such intolerance. These are the arguments echoed in the standpoints of nations who outlaw home education; a political rationale based on social fear rather than social justice:

“The decision of Germany, Sweden, Romania, and Greece to essentially ban homeschooling was not based upon the failure of any homeschooling family to meet basic academic standards. Rather, in the German instance which has been the most highly litigated, the concern of the government, according to both the court decisions and other official sources was based on the notion that the elimination of homeschooling was necessary to stop the introduction of a “parallel society” into the nation” (Farris, 2012, p11).

The intentions of the German government and the opinions of academics like Ross use state run education as the vehicle for the inculcation of a state sanctioned mass morality under the banner of tolerance. They have argues Farris, missed the meaning of freedom altogether. Michael Farris, a lawyer and founder and leader of the world's largest home education group, the Home School Legal Defence Association (HSLDA), a group which has itself caused some controversy over its roots in conservative Christianity, argues that to the contrary:

“A truly “tolerant” state cannot prohibit its citizens from holding beliefs which it views as objectionable, dangerous, or even intolerant, nor can it punish citizens for holding such beliefs. As Justice Holmes of the United States Supreme Court famously stated nearly a hundred years ago, freedom of thought is not truly “free” unless it also extends to “the thought that we hate.” (Farris, 2012, p 17/18).

There is, it would seem, a much finer line than at first appears between tolerance and intolerance; an intolerance which seeks to compel selective tolerance through the state education system is a playing out of political powers in which all that has changed is the identity of the oppressed. As Foucault writes: “humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare: humanity installs each of its violences, in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination” (Foucault, 1977, p 151, quoted in Irwin, 2001).

The first Global Home Education Conference (GHEC, 2012) held in Berlin in November 2012, in which home educators from all five continents gathered, pursued civil and indeed human rights, as a dominating theme. The intolerance of certain

nations, notably in Europe, to home education has led to fines, prison sentences and children being taken into long term care (Neubronner 2008). Many home educators go 'under cover' (personal communications), some go into exile (Pattison 2013, Francis-Pape, C. and Hall, A. 2008) and at least one family has sought political asylum (Nasaw 2010). England and Wales, once seen as countries in which families could exercise educational freedoms only dreamt of in many other countries and the destination of choice for many from Europe seeking educational refuge, have, since the Badman Review, joined the rest of Europe as countries in which such freedoms, where they exist, are fragile and must be considered as under constant potential threat. Four years after the Badman Review, little on the surface has altered. There have been no policy changes and there is no new political organisation of home educators in the UK. On the other hand, what Badman has done is to re shape the ideological landscape of home education in England. Of the Badman Review the Conservative Peer Lord Lucas told the House of Lords "Nothing in it secures their rights as home educators to look after their children in the way they see best" (Lucas, 2009). There is nothing in UK law that secures that right now; instead the battle is being played out on international ground under the varying colours of social justice.

If this is a post-modern fight over the toleration of diversity those who are or feel themselves to be oppressed by it have retreated with haste into modernity with the invoking of modernity's greatest unifying flagship – The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26(3) of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their

children” (United Nations, 1948). The distillation of this intention into the legally enforceable European Convention on Human Rights (Rendel, 1997) states:

“In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions.”
(European Convention on Human Rights, 1951, Article 2)

The Berlin Declaration drawn up over GHEC 2012 is a document explicitly expressing the concerns of home educators over the exercising of these non-derogable human rights and the restrictions which some countries, are placing on them. The message from home educators now is the need to recognize the limits of inclusion and to actively acknowledge that social justice, diversity and morality must also confer on people the realistic choice to opt out and/or create for themselves their own alternatives. As Farris argues, what is at stake is bigger than education:

“The right of parents to direct the education of their children is intrinsically important in its own right. But the right to be different from the majority is an even more fundamental right. Both rights are at stake in the battle for homeschooling liberty. And both must be preserved by any nation that seeks to honor both liberty and human rights.”
(Farris, 2012, p 19/20)

The legal and political future of home education is an uncertain one; and these uncertainties play out also the political dreams of a postmodern society. Cilliers puts forward the hopeful view that whilst different discourses appear as local narratives with limited spheres of influence they are all connected at varying points to the larger network of ideas. The interplay and connections between discourses is a result of self-organisation rather than relation to some governing meta narrative. The result is

a proliferation of voices and of knowledge, including that of marginalised voices, so that “different clusters are interconnected and since these connections are non-linear they can produce large effects, even if the interconnections are sparse” (Cilliers, 1998, p121). However the message that seems to be emerging from the ground is that if the aims of post-modernism are not somehow enframed within a totalising structure of universal rights then their mantra of freedom on the one hand and social justice on the other quickly begins to ring hollow.

Usher and Edwards non-committal stance and Cilliers faith in the self-organisation of political views seem in this context to be echoes of the enlightenment view of researcher neutrality. As argued earlier in this thesis, non-political involvement is not possible, indeed non-involvement is not possible. Those in educational research who espouse the agendas of democracy and social justice have a duty now to bring home education onto those agendas and to do so as a matter of priority and urgency. Failure now to react will make the academic community complicit in the next round of dominance and oppression, exactly as described by Foucault (1977).

The essence of research?

In choosing a political path, as it must at this juncture, the academic community reveals in Heideggerean fashion the essence of its own role. Research cannot tell us what is right and what is wrong, nor can it tell us how to educate children; it cannot even tell us what ‘education’ is. Instead I have come to see that the function of research must be the opposite of these things. Research is the means by which

we can keep open the possibilities, by which we can refuse conclusions. It can keep reminding us that the way we live is a choice, not the result of immutable laws that define the human condition. Rather than to busy itself in the closing of the argument, research is our possibility to think beyond the boundaries of our understanding. As Foucault argues “We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question : What can be played?” (Foucault, 1981, p 39 – 40).

Philosophy is described by Roberts as “a mode of reflective uncertainty” (2001, p132); to preserve such uncertainty is an important mission of research; to keep questions open, to pursue the endless search to find different ways of seeing the world and, above all, to ensure that we remain endlessly humble in the face of what we think we know.

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