

## Passionate Opinions on Teaching Learning and Living

### **Radical Reflections**

by Mem Fox (pg 110-112)

The Power of words, *the heat of meaning*, depends to a great extent on where words are placed. The heat of meaning cools if the rhythm doesn't feel right. So where do our students acquire the sense of rhythm they need as communicators if not through explicit teaching?

Both these problems how to "teach" vocabulary and how to "teach" a sense of rhythm, have the same solutions: by reading aloud as telling stories often said and expression. My passionate belief in the benefit of reading aloud will be perhaps best illustrated by a few stories.

I asked a school principal once if he could provide a group of children whose literacy seemed shaky and who might therefore benefit from what I had to offer. I also wanted to know privately whether anything I did could make a difference or whether I was just a hot-air educator. I wanted to test my own credibility. I was joined by my colleague, Barbara Comber. Together we taught seven children, aged 9-12, twice a week.

Our assumption, backed up later by evidence in their writing, was that these children would need words to write with and that we would provide as many words as we could. We told them that we would do this, and why. "How can you write or talk without words?" we said. "The more words we have to choose from the easier it is to make people understand us."

We decided on our Tuesday visit of forty-five minutes to

read aloud or story-tell for ten minutes and then to focus on writing, and on our Thursday visit of thirty five minutes to do nothing except read aloud a novel: *The Indian in the Cupboard*, by Lynne Reid Banks.

The long and the short of it is that we ended up spending the entire seventy-five minutes each week reading aloud *The Indian in the Cupboard*. I mention the minutes in detail because each minute was precious. These kids were at risk, after all, and we had very little time with them. Shouldn't we have demonstrated different forms of writing? Taught spelling? Engaged in so-called process writing? Assisted in the development of reading strategies? Drawn story-maps? Asked for retellings? Wasn't our credibility on the line? Weren't the principal, the teachers, the children, their parents, and we ourselves looking for results?

We made the decision to read the novel and abandon everything else because the plot was magnetic and the children were totally rapt in the outcome of each new development. I was watching little Stefan, one week, as Barbara was reading his mouth was slightly open in an unconscious half-smile, and above his cheeks his black eyes were so full of happiness that I saw for the first time exactly what it meant by "His eye's were shining." Until that moment I'd thought it was a cliché, but no, Stefan's eyes were alive with shine.

Reading *The Indian in the Cupboard* did more for our group, we believe, than any itty-bitty activities we might

have dreamed up, week by week. The plot was gripping, the writing style highly sophisticated, the vocabulary advanced and diverse, the sense of rhythm superb, and the characterization subtle. The book, as a satisfying whole, taught much more in out seventy-five minutes than we could possible have taught without it. Reading it aloud means that sentences were heard rhythmically and, as such, would become part of the marrow of their understanding of how writing works. Reading it aloud meant new words were constantly being heard and learned in context, making it easier to guess their meaning.

So, when the principal, the teachers, the children, and their parents asked what we'd achieved, Barb and I replied with confident pride, amazed at our own courage, "We read a whole novel aloud. That is all" And when they looked at us aghast and said, "Is that all?" we didn't even blush. And when they said, "You mean you didn't teach them anything?" we said, "No, we didn't. But don't worry: *The Indian in the Cupboard* did!"