

## Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

*In this chapter I discuss my starting point by outlining my background in both personal and educational context. The intention here is to portray my educational values and stance. These are important because they strengthen my work in vocational academic education.*

### **Background - My starting point**

I am Daisy Louisa Walsh. In April 1986 aged 22, I arrived in the United Kingdom from the Seychelles, where I was born. Equipped with a Secondary School teaching qualification, which proved invalid in England, I embarked on several Information Technology (IT) courses in the North West of England. These IT courses were the stepping-stone and the foundation of what were to shape my life over a decade later.

My first IT job in England was as a Computer Support/Technician at the Avon and Somerset Constabulary Head Quarters in Bristol. During the five years with the Police, I studied for a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Computer Studies at the University of West of England. I graduated in 1992.

In the same year, after the birth of my first daughter, I decided to resurrect my teaching vocation. I embarked on several Further and Adult Education Teacher Training Courses, which qualified me to teach adults in further education establishments. With five years industrial experience, a HND in Computer Studies and a valid UK teaching qualification, I was ready to join the teaching profession again. I was very clear which age group to teach – Post 16 learners in colleges of further education.

Almost seven years ago, I joined an FE College as an IT tutor. Three years later I was appointed team leader for the Vocational 'A' level, GNVQ and GCSE ICT

programme. With no background knowledge or experience on leadership, I knew I had to do something about my new found leadership role. As part of my continuing professional development, I joined the Modular Advanced Courses, which lead to the Master of Arts in Education degree programme at the University of Bath. I had a clear aim in mind – to increase my theoretical knowledge about leadership in education, but most specifically, in FE. I wanted to improve my understanding of what constitutes effective leadership. I felt that developing an effective leadership would facilitate an effective team.

Now I have successfully completed six units. They are:

- Information Technology
- Curriculum Studies
- Managing Educational Organisation
- Managing Educational Innovations
- Managing Human Resources
- Methods of Educational Enquiry

The three management units would enable me to qualify and claim for the named degree of MA in Education (Educational Management). These units have afforded me the knowledge to gain a theoretical insight into the roles of the team leader in managing human resources and managing educational innovations. Assignments for these units enabled me to focus and reflect on my role and practice as a team leader.

I have learnt much from all the six units, and indeed, on reflection, each one has enlightened me on the different and varied roles of a team leader. They have enabled me to accumulate theoretical knowledge and the effectiveness of different types of leadership and management activities. The Methods of Educational

Enquiry module has afforded me the practical awareness of the various methods available for planning this educational research study. It makes sense to me that my dissertation should focus on improving my leadership practice as a team leader and to further support our students and our team in the creation of their own knowledge.

### **Values: Personal Values as grounding for my study**

*"Action research begins with values. As a self-reflective practitioner you need to be aware of what drives your life and work, so you can be clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it." (McNiff, 2002).*

As one of four children, I grew up on the family farm in the tropical islands of The Seychelles. My parents are hardworking farmers who believe strongly in family values, respect for elders and for all living things. Our family was strengthened by our Roman Catholic faith and fiercely proud, hard-working mother and father who had a life of relentless toil but never lost the ability to feel blessed. My mother is a clever, intelligent and strong woman, who was pulled out of school because her father did not see the point of academic education. Despite having no academic qualifications, she taught me the value of good education. She instilled and imbued in us the ethos of hard work and lifelong learning, knowledge and self-belief. At times one has to try that little bit harder, she used to say. As children, my two brothers, sister and I were encouraged to help considerably on the farm. We had a happy, caring, trusting and loving family environment. These were the very same values and beliefs that I was brought up with. In her own ways my mother is a caring person despite being a strong and independent woman. Through her and my father's hard work, they are now proud owners of a substantial amount of land on

the main island of Mahe. Most crucial, my parents, who are incredibly delighted and proud of my achievements, taught me that each and every one of us has something to offer this world and that no matter who you are, through hard work one can achieve one's goal in life.

Through my work with post-16 GNVQ ICT students, who are mostly non-academics, I believe I have been greatly influenced by the caring nature of my mother. Our personal histories have a powerful influence over our professional practice (Cole and Knowles, 2000).

At the age of eight I was awarded the 'prestigious' first prize of the 'Rapunzel' storybook for coming top of the class. My quest for lifelong learning had started. After attending the local primary school, I received a scholarship through my hard work to continue my pre-16 schooling at the island's only convent grammar school, which was run by Roman Catholic nuns. As committed Roman Catholics, this did my parents proud. Although the nuns were strict, the standard of education was second to none. My quest for lifelong learning continued.

As individuals, our unique experiences and different environments impart a system of values to us. I believe that my upbringing and my past had and will continue to shape and inform my leadership as a team leader. As Cole and Knowles (2000, p.29) acknowledge,

*"Years from now, my actions of today will be the past and from them I will continue to learn. It is like a cycle that continues to spiral, developing us personally and professionally if we let it."*

My experiences of growing up in a caring family and my experience of learning in formal and informal settings all contribute to who I am today and will be tomorrow as an educator (Cole and Knowles, 2000).

In a recent meeting my College Principal described leadership, as part of personality and that personality is a part of leadership. Later, reflecting on the dialogue that took place during the meeting<sup>1</sup>, the power of this phrase became more apparent and important to me, in both my personal and professional life. Several colleagues have previously commented on my positive outlook and approachable and friendly personality. In a 'Myers-Briggs Type Indicator'<sup>2</sup> test, my reported type was warm-hearted and conscientious. It has also been said that I have compromising skills and positive influence<sup>3</sup>. I believe these personality traits and skills help gain the trust and support of my team members. In my view, they are vital skills for effective team working. As a leader, I strive to carry people with me and inspire them. I would like to discover more about my personality and the part it plays on how I lead my team.

### **Spiritual Values**

*"Don't shy away from your spiritual values. They energise your practice and bring a sense of commitment, a sense of spiritual commitment to your practice. This commitment brings authenticity/uniqueness to your practice", (Walsh, 2003)*

The spiritual aspect of my life is an important value that was instilled by my Roman Catholic parents and by my early years school teachers. My spiritual values therefore stems from my family and childhood experiences. Kuczarski and

---

<sup>1</sup> Walsh, 2003 - MEE assignment

<sup>2</sup> Walsh, 2003 - MEE assignment

<sup>3</sup> Walsh, 2003 - MEE assignment

Kuczarski (1995) believe that our family members, parents, siblings, teachers, peers and religious affiliations shape our values. Each of these influential people and associations shared their own beliefs with us and transferred their values to us as children. As Covey (1990) states, the spiritual dimension is responsible for providing leadership to our life. My spiritual dimension is my core, my centre, and my commitment to my value system. I also believe that my spiritual affiliation is a private area of my life and a very important one too. Several of my team members are atheist but the respect we have for each other and our individual beliefs allow us to learn together and work together in what I regard as one of the best team and programme areas in my FE College. Indeed, this was acknowledged in our recent January 2004 OFSTED Inspection. Understanding spirituality and the power of the spirit in a world of modern science technology is daunting and improbable for most atheists. It is not my intention to change other people's beliefs or be judgmental of their lives but together we learn from each other's expertise and embodied educational values and enrich each other as team members through our mutual shared belief - of maximising our students' potential.

### **Context**

When I was appointed team leader, I remember asking myself: 'As a team leader, what is the most important thing that matters to me in my job?' The answer was easy to find - *the learners - their achievement and their educational welfare*. To date, the answer to this question remains unchanged. My students, their achievement and their educational welfare are my central focus. My leadership as a team leader should facilitate an environment that is conducive to a high percentage rate of student achievement. Student achievement to me does not just mean the acquisition of high grades. For a GNVQ student who left school with very low GCSE grades, the

achievement of a pass at the end of his or her course represents a huge achievement in terms of self-worth and self esteem. Of course critics of GNVQs are quick to categorise GNVQs as the 'soft-option GCSEs' and thus not as worthy as the traditional academic GCSEs (Clover, 2004). Making GNVQs equivalent to four GCSEs has been controversial (Smithers, 2001). The qualification has become increasingly popular leading to criticisms that schools are using it to boost their league-table position and contributing to the dumbing down of public examinations and the education of the future generation (Smithers, 2001, Clover, 2004). It is not within the remit of this dissertation to comment further on this issue. But the GNVQs have a well-deserved and worthy place on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and like most qualifications, its suits the target audience it is aimed at.

For the sake of the type of students who opt to follow the vocational academic route at FE level, I firmly believe there is a need to develop a new understanding, perhaps even a different approach to the nature of leadership influence in vocational education in the FE context. There are numerous studies on leadership in schools and its effectiveness on student achievement (Halinger and Heck, 1998, Day, Harris and Hadfield, 2001), but very little published research on the impact of leadership on team effectiveness and student outcomes in FE. I particularly want to enquire and reflect on my professional practice, using my embodied educational and personal values, for the improvement of my understanding of how to be more effective in my leadership as a team leader.

Effective leadership has long been identified as crucial to good school management (Halinger and Heck, 1998, Day, Harris and Hadfield, 2001, to name a few). Extensive studies in school management saw a direct link between strong leadership and high standards of pupil achievement (Mortimer, Sammons et al, 1988). Although the educational environment in FE differs to that in school, I see no reason to believe that at core level, team leadership in FE should be any different.

I work with a close-knit team of eight staff. For the past three years I firmly believe I have, through my values, personality and professionalism influenced a friendly, highly motivated group of dedicated team members who are equally passionate about vocational education. I understand that people at all levels within a team or organisation can make a difference and influence student learning. In this action research enquiry, I examine different aspects of my leadership and analyse my influence on the team – how we perform as a team through coordinated or joint activity<sup>4</sup> in our efforts to raise achievement within our ICT programme area. I let the voices of others – the team members – come through to explain how their learning has enhanced as a result of my leadership influence.

I am aware that the intense focus on my leadership practice may reveal characteristics of myself that may not make pleasant reading to me. Am I ready for revelations or criticism about my leadership style? After all, one can only improve on one's practice when one is ready to admit that there is scope for improvement. This is how learning takes place – improving the work we do by learning to do things in new ways. McNiff (2002) defines this as part of professional learning and



reckons that this is true regardless of whether one's career is just beginning or is in full swing.

As a team leader, through this action research, I want to show that I am supporting the learning of Annia and Nita and my team members in my programme area. Annia and Nita are pseudonyms- fictitious names used to protect their identity in real life. Ethical issues are covered in greater details in Chapter 4. My journal recordings, questionnaires and team feedback contributions show why and how this is happening. They provide clear evidence that shows progress of my leadership as a team leader and growth of my educational knowledge. By engaging critically with educational leadership and self-study literature, I seek to understand my own educational influences on my team within the context of vocational education. Using challenging situations of my leadership practice as evidence, I reflect on the significance of my values and faith in relation to my leadership growth as well as their influence on the effectiveness of my team. One of these challenging situations provides evidence of engagement with 'living contradictions' (McNiff, 2002) between suppressing my racial identity and acknowledging my racial identity in my leadership practice while seeking to professionally and personally live more fully the values of my spiritual make-up.

I am hoping that my dissertation will inform my professional practice and further increase the effectiveness of my leadership in leading the Vocational 'A' level, GNVQ and GCSE ICT team. In addition, I am presenting the work of this dissertation, which is based on my personal experience of my leadership practice,

---

<sup>4</sup> Joint activities could be in the form of lesson observation feedback or performance review of individual team member

into 'public' knowledge (Snow, 2001). I hope to reach a wider audience of team leaders and as a 'knowledge-creator', be able to share good practice in terms of FE team leadership in similar vocational context, thus bringing my

*"...embodied knowledge as a professional educator into the public knowledge-base of the Academy." (Walsh, 2003).*

Being in the public domain, my work, presented within the chapters of this dissertation, would be subjected to further scrutiny and vetting from team leader practitioners in similar vocational settings or otherwise. As professionals, their feedback would provide further validation to the team leadership research in FE and thus add credibility [or not] to my claim to creating a living educational theory (see Chapter 4). In the words of Snow (2001),

*"...such knowledge might help us avoid drawing far-reaching conclusions about instructional practices from experimental studies carried out in rarefied settings."*