

How do I sustain a loving, *receptively responsive* educational relationship with my pupils which will motivate them in their learning and encourage me in my teaching?

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Where do I begin?

We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually: we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves. (Lewis, 1960, p.7)

The question that stimulates this writing is as much about me as it is about the children I teach, because when I reflect on what the children will take with them when they leave my class, I will ask myself what I have done that will influence them for better after they have gone. I will not therefore be as concerned with what they have learned, rather with how they have learned and how I may have supported and encouraged that learning and that child.

Those words are easy for me to write; however the reality of living them is tough, as I consider the constraints that sometimes suppress and depress me, preventing me somehow from living my values in the classroom. At times I feel under such pressure to meet targets, deadlines and to cover the curriculum that I almost forget my relationship with the children. Yet when I am freed from or cope well with these constraints it is central once more.

Recently I have experienced this strongly in the build up to SATs with my Year 2 class. I felt my stress levels rising and I became very focused on the job in hand. The children responded by working really hard and on the surface everything was fine. Looking back however, what strikes me is that what might be described as the affection in our relationship had gone and I felt sad because:

Affection opens our eyes to goodness we could not have seen, or should not have appreciated without it. (p.38)

Once SATs and assessments were finished, I became aware of my affection for the children returning once more and I realized how much I/we value and need that mutual affection. Lewis describes it as "*...warm comfortableness...*" (p.34) and says that it exists in an atmosphere of familiarity. I think that the feeling I experience is more than just warm comfortableness. I recognize that my feelings for the children are much stronger at the end of the academic year than at the beginning, by which time of course I know the

children much better, but what is special about my feeling for each child is that somehow it enables me to glimpse the real person within, in whatever circumstance that child finds themselves and relate to them with respect and compassion. So I wonder whether *Affection* is a sufficient word to describe this feeling and if what I am talking about is:

... *A far higher sort of love than Affection, in itself, can ever be.* (p.53).

What do I mean by being *receptively responsive*?

For me, receptive responsiveness is about relationship, specifically the relationship I try to create and nurture with each child in my class but also in the relationships I have in other areas of my life. The fact that I am even able to write about receptively responsive relationships amazes me. Up until two years ago I did not spend long thinking about or reflecting on the importance of my relationships in or out of the classroom. Although I had a vague awareness of my values and how I wanted my class to "be", I did not talk about this with anyone. If I'm honest I have always doubted that people would want to listen to what I had to say. For as long as I can remember I have struggled with feelings of inadequacy and this has continued in the nine years of my teaching career. However since starting my MA course with its weekly discussion groups I have experienced receptive responsiveness first hand myself in educational conversations and have been ... *energized by the educational processes of learning.* (Whitehead, 2007)

What I have experienced in the safe space of the Tuesday MA group is a forum where it is possible for each of us to try out our developing ideas, listen to one another's responses and possibly adjust our own thinking. We support and encourage, challenge, look at the writings and work of others, sometimes disagree, often laugh and ultimately consider our educational influence in the learning of our pupils. During a recent meeting, one of the group, Louise, expressed her feeling*that it was often through understanding someone else better that she came to a better understanding of herself.* (Whitehead, 2007). That thought has stayed with me, both in relation to me and also to the children in my class. As much as possible I try to recreate that safe space in my classroom where each person feels able to take part in those educational conversations because

We feel an energizing flow of pleasure in living productive lives as we support others in enhancing their own learning as they develop their own

values, skills and understandings and as we improve our own. (Whitehead, 2007)

I want each child to begin to understand themselves and one another better and develop their thinking and learning. To help them do that I have begun to use Philosophy for Children and first introduced last year's class to this in the summer term. The children responded well to it, initially enjoying sitting on chairs in a circle - previously we had sat on the floor for Circle Time type activities, and they also liked the more grown up form of discussion, including "I agree/disagree with X because....." The feeling of community was strong - the children decided on their rules of conduct and they reminded one another of these as we progressed. I found it easy to facilitate their discussion, (apart from drawing conclusions which was quite tricky!) and it was fascinating listening to their original ideas, many of which had not occurred to me. Some children were more confident from the start and quickly joined in but I noticed that even the quieter class members took part in the small group discussions and felt part of the community. The children began to ask me on Friday mornings if we were going to do P4C after lunch! Result!

.... All learners require the development of a range of comprehensive and universally applicable cognitive tools which the learner can use to focus and direct his/her learning in any context; whether that be within an informal cultural context or a relevant formal school context. (Wallace, & Adams, 1993, p.1)

Another way in which I am currently trying to create educational conversations which motivate the children is through involving them more creatively in planning the curriculum. At the Tuesday MA group I have listened to teachers reflecting positively on their use of the TASC wheel (Appendix 2) with their children and at my school I have tried to share my belief with colleagues that this would be an exciting development for us at a time when personalizing learning is at the forefront of thinking and debate. In their paper about the TASC project in KwaZulu Natal, Wallace and Adams wrote about the teaching principles thus:

.... classroom teachers and the pupils themselves should play a major role in the development of any course purporting to meet their needs;

the TASC framework could form a base for curriculum development in and across all cultures. (p.7)

When I realized that Foundation Stage and KS1 colleagues were feeling frustrated in their attempts to instigate a more child led approach to planning, I suggested that as an Infant Department we try TASC. It was agreed and we have just begun to plan and teach/learn Science and Foundation Subjects/Topics in this way. So far I have introduced my class to the TASC wheel and we had a very interesting discussion to find out what they already knew about Light and Dark, the difference being perhaps that the children led the direction of the discussion, not me, so we talked a lot about what they were interested in finding out:

... where the sun goes when it goes down, with a range of suggestions including

... to another planet, ... through the ground, ... around the world and ... perhaps the earth moves.

I found it strangely liberating not to have to answer any questions but instead to join in the questioning process with the children. This week we look forward to planning how to find out some answers together.

What has helped to develop my understanding of what motivates the children?

In my last module *Understanding Learners and Learning*, (Formby, 2007) I reflected on an incident that had occurred during a maths test when, following a question about dice, a child was bursting to tell me that all pairs of sides on a dice added up to 7, (see Appendix 1 for transcript of incident). Although in itself perhaps a minor incident, its impact on me was huge in terms of the way I now plan and teach numeracy, trying to put the children at the centre of my thinking, giving them ownership, activity, fun and enjoyment as much as possible. The incident also reinforced my understanding of how a *receptively responsive* relationship between child/teacher led me to this sort of development. If I had not had that kind of relationship with O I could have told him to put his hand down, (we were in the middle of an NFER test) or I could have replied blandly "how interesting, now onto question 8..." Probably the worst scenario is that he might not have wanted to share his knowledge with me at all if he had thought that I might not be interested in what he had to say! Luckily for me and for him, as Goleman says:

Our relationships offer us the very context in which we understand our progress and realize the usefulness of what we're learning. (2002, p. 209)

I hope that O shot his hand up because he knew I valued him and therefore would value what he wanted to share. As I wrote earlier, I feel able to be a learner in the safe space of my Tuesday group and for the children in my class:

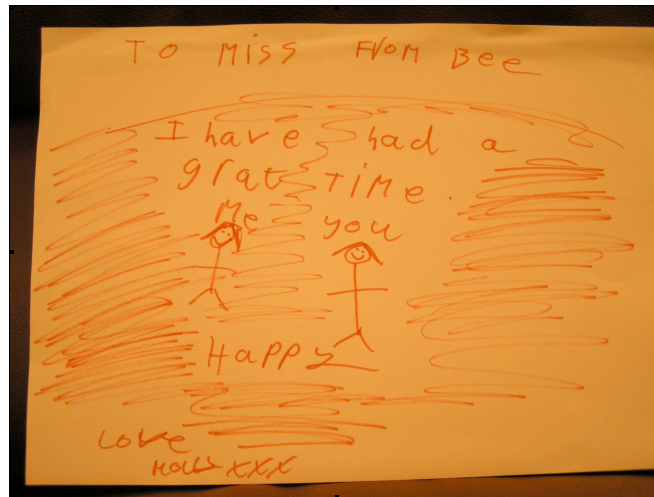
Experimenting and practicing new habits require finding safe places and relationships. (p. 209)

If I'm honest I was not expecting to learn something new from Oscar in the middle of a test so he also reminded me once again of the need for me to expect to learn from the children in many different circumstances.

What encourages me in my teaching?

When I mull over this question I realize that thankfully I am easily encouraged by the children and that when I feel tired or discouraged they can swiftly restore me. Recently when I returned to the classroom after lunch, having been out of school for an afternoon then the following morning, I was touched by the children's welcome, little hugs from some, one child full of news about a first visit to Beavers, another bursting to tell me about her birthday party at the weekend.

On another occasion recently I was given a scribbled picture by a little girl who was new to the school and had been very tearful in the mornings, finding it tough to leave friends in her previous school in London and move here. I had done my best to help, wiping her eyes, beginning to encourage friendships, praising her as much as possible, introducing her mum to other mums etc. and when she rather shyly thrust the picture below into my hand I knew she was over the worst. The picture shows me with her, both of us smiling, with the word "Happy" underneath. I think she will be fine and that encourages me.



Earlier in this writing I touched on the fact that I have struggled with feelings of inadequacy all my life and that this has continued through the nine years of my teaching career. I have often wondered if there will ever be a time when I do not become disproportionately anxious about a lesson observation or leading part of a staff meeting and even though I am told how calm I appear or how helpful something has been, I rarely feel it, I barely believe it. Recently, when I was reading some of Rayner's writing for the first time, I felt hugely encouraged, both as a person and as a teacher/learner when I glimpsed that maybe my perceived frailty could be seen almost as a strength in terms of how I try to get alongside the children and work with them as they are. I was profoundly moved to read Rayner's account of his own feelings of inadequacy, feelings that combined exceptional fallibility and prowess at the same time (Rayner, 2007) As I read his story I felt his distress but also shared his excitement when I read that:

...our vulnerability and proneness to "error" is the source of our creative spirit. It is an aspect of our nature that enables us to love and feel love and so work co-creatively in dynamic relational neighbourhood, celebrating and respecting rather than decrying our diversity of competencies and appearances. (p.6)

It made me think of two children in my Yr 2 class who, if only judged by academic standards and statutory assessments, would not rate highly. One girl for example shows wonderful patience and gentleness when playing with a boy in Yr R with Down's Syndrome and the other, from a single parent

family and difficult home life, draws lovely pictures for the dinner ladies every day, which they love to receive.

I am also reminded of the story of the Hath family in *The Wind Singer* (Nicholson, 2000) in which people have a tested "rating" from the age of two until they die. If a man does well in the annual national exam his family receives a higher rating and they live in superior, colour-coded accommodation, yet no account is taken of their skills - they are all given the same test. The Hath family rebel, Hanno Hath is arrested and forced to study yet again for the exam he will fail, along with other men who have failed too. He muses of a fellow exam failure, Miko:

Miko's knowledge of fabrics is his special expertise, and his passion. Why is he tested on other subjects, at which he will only fail? Each of us should be tested on what we do best. (Nicholson, 2000, p.225)

So Hanno Hath encourages the other men to write about what they know, including a character called Scooch who has such low self belief that he can only write about his tea-break and his skill at dipping his biscuit into his tea and raising it to his mouth without it breaking! (p.229). Somehow, Scooch: *...with a mounting eagerness, inspired by Hanno Hath's gentle leadership...*(p.229)

begins to plan and start to believe that he might become an inventor of biscuits, to make the perfect biscuit that goes soggy when dipped in tea but doesn't break!

Although a work of fiction, the protagonist's desire to make the world a better place in *The Wind Singer* resonates with many of my own values . The children, Kestrel and Bowman know that they must make the wind singer sing again, and the book tells the story of their quest to find and put back the wind singer's voice. Alongside, runs the story of Mumpo, who is a smelly, runny nosed, bottom of the class boy, perceived to be good at nothing but who finally discovers a talent for climbing, *agile as a monkey* (p.337) which enables him to be the hero at the end of the book as he slips the silver voice into its slot in the wind singer, which begins to make beautiful music as:

The families ... began to intermingle and there was a great mixing of colours, as maroon flowed into grey, and orange embraced scarlet. (p.338/339)

Mumpo's very vulnerability makes his triumph all the more poignant.

What helps and what hinders the development of loving *receptively responsive* relationships?

As part of my course I have on occasions reluctantly agreed to be on video, both with the children in my class and also in conversation with others in the Tuesday group. Recently Marie Huxtable, Senior Educational Psychologist and member of the Tuesday group, filmed me with my class to help me reflect on the tension I was feeling about preparing for SATs and then to consider how that might be affecting my relationships with the children. I was aware that I had become anxious about the forthcoming assessments and my desire for each child to "prove" through testing what in fact I felt sure I already knew about where they were academically. I had embarked on a sort of whole class revision programme in literacy and numeracy lessons which was geared towards the majority of children. This was boring for the most and least able and went against all my principles of meeting children's individual needs. As MacBeath says:

Personalised learning is not something that can be 'done' by teachers to pupils, (2006, p.12)

I felt uneasy about what I was doing but had to do it nonetheless.

I approached the video with trepidation because in common with many other people, I find it difficult to watch myself on screen, but Jack encouraged me to look for moments when I was:-

.....receptively responding to your pupils and what you perceive as their needs. (Whitehead, 2007)

In spite of my concerns, there were some occasions on the video when I saw myself encouraging with a glance and a smile or speaking gently to a child who was struggling. It was a numeracy lesson into which I had packed several different revision activities. I noticed immediately that during the first two activities about filling in missing numbers on a vertical number line, then an odd and even number activity, the more able children worked out the answers quickly then became bored as I expected. I basically ignored them as I tried to teach the majority - preparing them for the test. The main activity was to turn data collected in a table about the children's preferred crisp flavours, into a bar chart. This activity enabled some learning for the children at their own level because the task allowed them more freedom to.....*take charge of their own goals and progress. (MacBeath, 2006, p.12).* It also allowed me to follow up with children who I knew found bar charts difficult. The video clip below shows me working with G, who had not realized

that her vertical axis counted in twos. I knew from working with her earlier in the week that she would probably need some support with this and I also knew from my relationship with her that difficult issues at home were very much on her mind. I wanted to be as sensitive as possible towards her to keep her confidence and self belief high. In the video I crouch beside her, our bodies bending towards one another as we share the work and talk about it. In spite of the noisy background (most other children are socializing!) you can hear the note of triumph in G's voice as the penny drops and she realizes what she needs to do. I say "That's a good idea!" and she is then able to get on with the work by herself.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL7k-z2iBz4>

The last part of the video shows me in conversation with Marie, reflecting on the lesson and my thoughts about how the forthcoming SATs impact on my teaching. I am thoughtful and quite serious, reflecting on the system I feel uncomfortable with, until I recall a brief discussion the previous week with Louise, teaching headteacher and member of the Tuesday group. I say to Marie:

... But it was interesting talking to Louise last week because she gave me a slightly different view on that. That was reassuring actually, very reassuring ... yeah - (chuckle), anyway do you want a cup of tea? (03/05/07)



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc8TIPPEpZw>

What Louise had said to me was simply that at her school they didn't feel that pressure. She said that SATs were not the most important thing and that they happened without the anxiety I was experiencing. I remember thinking that I wanted to feel like that too and wondering how I could use my own teacher assessments more fully and not feel so worried about the

SATs. Louise made me think that there might be another way and I suddenly felt more optimistic.

Interestingly, that shows on my face in the video. I am resting in the feeling of reassurance as I recall Louise's words and my response to them. I feel that the significance of what she said has suddenly hit me. Wordsworth said that powerful feelings evoke strong emotions. He wrote that*the emotion is recollected in tranquility*, (1798-1805)

I think that's how it felt. My face lights up in the video clip as I think about Louise and I want to share the moment with Marie - it's time for a cup of tea together!

When I doubt myself and my educational influence (often), a video such as the one above showing me talking to Marie about a specific lesson and being given time, some space by Marie to reflect on the wider issues evolving from it is invaluable. In the present educational climate I feel that "time" is at a premium for me as a teacher because of "change", often meaning more work, being introduced from the top down, from the LEA, from the DfES. For example Assessment For Learning, the new Primary Frameworks, mentoring and coaching as part of Personalized Learning to name but a few. Most of the new initiatives are good and worthwhile but because of the way in which they often seem to be imposed on me they can cause more stress and anxiety. Otero recognizes this when he writes:

...the more they, (teachers), are directed externally, the less energy they have for understanding who they are, what factors are effecting their performance and what they individually and collectively are willing and able to do professionally. (Otero, 2003)

I often complain about not having enough time to do my job as well as I would like. But when I feel anxious and pressured everything takes longer than necessary because I too need time to develop as a learner and a leader. (Otero, 2003). Otero also says that what determines whether teachers will try to invest time in new initiatives is *the quality of the relationships*. (Otero, 2003) I take that to mean a receptively responsive relationship with colleagues and senior management as we take time to learn, challenge, think, reflect on and "own" the new initiatives. Through my learning at the Tuesday group and through the videos that I have taken part in I have realized that most of all, the time teachers need is the time to:

...reflect on who they are, what they have become and what they want in the future for themselves and the youth they serve. (Otero, 2003)

The children in my class really enjoy those relaxed parts of the day when they can play with lego, draw, make cards and chat - usually squeezed into the last part of the afternoon if they are lucky! It is always interesting to watch the children socializing but I don't make enough time for this so a video clip can show an unexpected moment of delight as for example on the numeracy video mentioned earlier. After the lesson I started to show Marie a child's work and while we were talking S approached me from behind. She didn't interrupt us but gently started to pat my hip, saying nothing. When I turned round she quietly asked me if she could clean my stand-alone whiteboard and I said yes. I then started to move away, so without the video clip I would have missed her beaming smile and arms raised above her head in excitement at the simple pleasure of being allowed to clean my whiteboard!



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf3V55r0FwQ>

That little incident says so much to me. S is one of the sweetest-natured children I have ever taught and I learnt much from her about kindness, hard work and perseverance. It was easy to feel love for her and watching the clip gave me great encouragement to try to sustain *receptively responsive* relationships such as the one I enjoyed with her. S's touch might be described as *Need Love*, but it felt to me like *Gift love*. (Lewis, 1960)

In using video and digital camera in the classroom and including it in this assignment I have followed BERA guidelines and written to parents about my research. I have their full permission and cooperation.

What has love got to do with receptive responsiveness?

Earlier I wrote about the mutual affection that I enjoy with the children in my class, described by Lewis as *...warm comfortableness* (p.34). I wrote that I don't think those words adequately express what I feel for the children or what I mean by receptive responsiveness.

One consideration for me could be Lohr's (2006) understanding of an aspect of Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* :

She (Ruddick) defines preservative love as seeking to work with the child's personality, with the way the child sees the world. It is a way of thinking through feeling, which is focused on giving the child what it needs in terms of education, training and security. Thinking through feeling then develops in the process of carrying out, and then reflecting on, her mothering acts. (Lohr, 2006, p.5).

However for me a more relevant consideration is *Divine Gift-love*, which Lewis says can also inspire us to love not just that which is lovable but also that which is not. He relates *Divine Gift-love* to our *Need-love* of God in the following rather beautiful simile. He says it is:

...like a magic wine which in being poured out should simultaneously create the glass that was to hold it. (p.118)

I feel uneasy and unworthy claiming that I in am in any way able to reflect God's *Gift-love* to the children I teach. But I have to acknowledge that:

... we are mirrors whose brightness, if we are bright, is wholly derived from the sun that shines upon us. (p.120)

My values are influenced by Christian ideals and developing children's spirituality and ability to relate to ... *a Gift-love that comes by Grace...* (p.118), not by their own attraction is central. Yet I recognize that here is a link with Rayner's more secular consideration of *inclusionality* which:

.....can help by restoring loving receptive spirit to our lives. Hence we can work empathically - receptively and responsively rather than actively and reactively (Rayner, 2007, p.2)

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Appendix 1

Learning about dice

We are working under test conditions, children spread out between tables, hard back books forming screens between them. A small group of special needs children is working through the test with an LSA outside the classroom. It is very quiet as I read out each question to the children and they then think about it and write their answers in the test booklet. It is not exactly fun but we are making the best of it!

Then out of the blue comes an unexpected moment of creativity. The question in the test asks,

"The opposite sides on a dice add up to seven. The first picture shows one side of a dice (picture of one side of dice with 3 spots). The second picture shows the opposite side of a dice. Draw the missing dots on the second picture."

O's hand shoots up and I can see he is desperate for my attention. "Yes O?" I say. "All opposite sides on a dice add up to 7 Mrs Formby," he informs me confidently.

All sorts of thoughts flash through my mind, such as "I didn't know that and I'm 48, but then I never really bothered to look." And "I'm beginning to glimpse what makes you tick, O, and why you are so good at maths." Later, when O has shown the whole class that opposite sides on a dice do indeed add up to 7, I ask O how he discovered this. "Well" he said solemnly, "Sometimes I make dice out of blu tac with my brother (who is 10) and we put the spots on with the end of a pencil. Then we play with them."

I know I have hit on something really crucial here, something that is missing from much of my numeracy teaching - the fun and pleasure to be enjoyed when playing with numbers. The Year 2 curriculum is extensive, the pressure is great to push children to reach the next SATS level but the sacrifice is perhaps even greater. Isn't it better to know that opposite sides on a dice add up to 7? (reflective diary 19/11/06)

TASC: Thinking Actively in a Social Context

The TASC Problem-solving Wheel

