

Chapter eight

How I understood that my educational knowledge was a living educational theory whose validity could be judged by living standards of judgment.

Introduction

I wrote in the introduction that the research I undertook did not represent a journey for me. I think I felt it was a journey when I did the work described in chapters three to six, in the sense that I felt I was getting somewhere: that I felt I'd progressed, if you like. But then the journey stopped. I didn't feel I was moving on. The imposition of certain practices in school meant that I couldn't always act as I wanted. The politics of oppression that "*disable us from participating as fully as we might in our own educational values and practices*" (Lomax and Whitehead 1996) were again at work.

Once I'd accepted the idea that I was not progressing in a journey to a place where everything would be as I wanted, but that I was trying to make sense of my working life as it was, I felt less bogged down and restricted. This process of coming to know my own educational development is not as easy as it sounds. That's why I like the image of the kaleidoscope rather than the journey. It conjures up better pictures of shadows and light; ideas understood and not

understood; doubt and uncertainty; clarity and thought. And in the centre, me, working, acting, reflecting and getting on with life. It is that sense of my life being fragmented with some segments better understood than others and yet all the parts together being my life, that I am delighted with.

In chapter eight I want to show how trying to make sense of what I was involved in at school and at home enabled me to ask questions about educational knowledge and to understand the importance of using ' I ' in accounts of my learning.

Chapter eight

How I understood that my educational knowledge was a living educational theory whose validity could be judged by living standards of judgment.

In January and February 1996 a number of things happened in my school and education some of which touched me directly. Here's some of them, in no particular order:

- I was asked to attend and to take part in the current Greendown Quality Council which is to investigate homework
- I attended a course on "Improving the Quality of Learning from a Middle Management Perspective" run by Wiltshire and Bath University
- Harriet Harman, who serves on Labour's front bench, decided that a selective grammar school would provide the best education for her son
- Results of national curriculum tests published 25. 1. 96 showed that more than half of all 11 year olds failed to reach the expected standard for their age in English and Maths
- I attended my daughter's parents evening, the last before her GCSEs and received an invitation to my son's year 9 option evening.
- Universities were reported to be trying to come to terms with a £500 million funding cut over the next three academic years.
- The Labour party released news of new policies on streaming in schools and using a 'fast track' for the most able.

- I received a request that novice teachers could be in my department in the next academic year.

What significance had all this mixture of education, school, life and educational research to me and to this thesis? As a teacher, action researcher, parent and citizen I recognise education to be a crucial social activity.

“ I think of education as something which is good, as something which helps you and me to live better lives than we would without it” (Whitehead 1993)

Education is a major part of my life. It isn't left at school at the end of a working day. Questions such as 'what advice can I offer my son about his option choices?

How can I continue my support for the Labour Party when H. Harman chooses a selective school? ' are important ones and my answers or the way I respond link to my values. Life and work for me are inextricably linked. This isn't rare. As

Kenneth Zeichner wrote:

“My work in teacher education has also been linked in my mind to other aspects of my life in which I have attempted to connect the way I live to the struggle for greater social justice (eg in what I eat, where I shop, how I try to raise my three sons, and so on). “ (Zeichner 1995)

At the same time of these events I've listed I also knew that it was time for this thesis to tackle certain questions that troubled me. If I couldn't resolve them to my satisfaction then the thesis would not be completed. Those events helped me to clarify my thinking.

The questions that troubled me were:

- What is this professional educational knowledge of teachers?
- What does it look like?
- Who needs it?
- What is it for?
- How is it constructed?
- Where do I fit in?

If the Labour Party was advocating policies of 'fast tracking' what educational knowledge were they using to inform that policy? If novice teachers were to come to my department what could I offer them in terms of educational knowledge? The course I attended offered me educational knowledge and I had to decide what to make of it. No- one in my staff room was surprised by the results of National Curriculum tests so why was the government?

I needed to clarify what educational knowledge was and its significance for me.

I tried to resolve some of those questions by writing this :

~ I understand that research is for many purposes ; a possible way to classify social research was made by Martin Bulmer in 1978 who proposed a five-fold classification: basic social science; strategic social science; specific problem orientated research, action research and intelligence and monitoring. Although Bulmer accepts the divisions are not clear cut he believed they could be thought of as a continuum in which all research could be classified.

Robert Burgess used these classifications for research in education

“ 1. Basic educational research which is principally concerned with advancing knowledge through testing, generating and developing theories.

2.Strategic educational research which is based on an academic discipline but is orientated towards an educational problem . The example given is that of studies on mixed ability teaching in comprehensive schools which have “ increased our

understanding of a school- based issue whilst simultaneously contributing to theoretical developments in the knowledge base of the sociology of education”

3. Specific problem- orientated research which is designed to deal with a practical problem. The example here is the teaching of reading or examination performance.

4. Action research

5. Intelligence and monitoring which involves the collection of statistical data on education.

(1985 Burgess)

This classification reminds me that in the broad range of research concerned with education there can be abstract theoretical work, basic fact finding, contributions to policy and practice. ~

It seemed a dry and predictable way to write in a thesis and I didn't like it.

I had reached a point in my work where I could not write. Some would call it a block. I was plain stuck. While out running or sitting in the bath I would compose passages in my head but when it came to writing them down they seemed irrelevant and badly constructed. I was trying to understand what this teachers'

professional knowledge was like; how was it constructed? And how could I write about my educational development in a way that contributed to this professional knowledge?

I was also too aware of the possible criticisms of teacher research. Some of these criticisms have been listed by Elliott and Sarland in their inquiry into teachers as researchers. They wrote:

“Questions have been raised about:

- the status of the claims to know in these accounts;*
- the validity of insider research methods and the possibility of ever being able to develop a methodology for insider research;*
- the dominance of description over analysis in many accounts;*
- the apparent inability of teacher researchers to use the conventional research and theoretical literature in their accounts.....”*

(Elliott and Sarland 1995)

It seemed to me that if I confined myself to answering questions like these then others would be defining my work for me. I wanted a different ‘ frame’ or perspective. I was delighted to realise that I was not the only person trying to write who had the same kind of blocks when I read the following passage by Judi Marshall who was researching into women and management.

“I realised that I was trying to ensure that my ideas were ‘right’ so that I could be sure when voicing them, and not expose myself to either undue praise or criticism. I despaired of achieving this, especially given some of the thorny, long-running questions in the area... and the many committed camps of theorists. I envied (those who did not have to take) the mincing steps of the academic debate. Happily I woke one morning with a revelatory insight - that I would never get it right, that seeking to do so was a futile waste of energy, that I should proceed with this truth in mind and allow myself to be more playful in my explorations. With this ‘permission I could appreciate theory and action ... as ever evolving. They need clear, forceful expressions at their appropriate times, not in order to stand as enduring truths but to become available to be explored and used as bases to move on.”

(Marshall 1995)

In many ways this passage took a load off my mind. I had set myself an impossible task as I wrote this thesis - to lay down the last word in what teacher action- research and teacher professional knowledge looked like. I felt I had to be authoritative. I’m not sure why I thought that, but Marshall was spot-on when she said *‘I would never get it right’*. I didn’t have to get it right. I just had to keep trying to open up the debate about teacher knowledge and make a contribution to it. If the knowledge produced by teachers is dialectical in form (Eames 1996) then my writing is part of the dialectic. In accepting this I stopped being stuck - but I still had to get to grips with these important questions: how do I describe and explain

the nature of my professional knowledge? what is it anyway, this professional knowledge? Is my professional knowledge different to the established, official professional knowledge I assume exists somewhere?

According to Lord Skidelsky

“There is no theoretically- based good practice which defines professional teaching... Education is an immature discipline and, because of the very strong element of politics, ideology and connection with wider social aims that are always part of the story of how to teach, that will remain the case and educational theory will always be highly disputable” (Skidelsky 1993)

It's because educational theory is so difficult to pin down and classify that makes it exciting for me. It gives educational theory a living quality of always changing, growing and adapting. I like Kevin Eames comment on Skidelsky:

“I think that Skidelsky's dismissal of educational knowledge gives us a way into defining what our educational knowledge might look like. Yes, education is highly value- laden. No, there is no ' theoretically- based good practice', defined within a scientific. propositional form of knowledge, which will give us recipes to transfer to our own educational practice. yes, educational theory is (and always will be) 'highly disputable'. What we want, though, is a concept of educational knowledge which accepts these features, and sees them as strengths, not weaknesses. We need to step outside the conventional. propositional, technical- rationalist view of knowledge represented by Skidelsky, and accept that a professional knowledge

for education can be constituted by an alternative form of knowledge, a dialectical form, which is just as logical, just as methodical, and has just as ancient an historical lineage, but which is more appropriate for educators.”

(Eames 1993)

I think that Kevin Eames is right: education is highly value- laden; educational theory is highly disputable; there is no theoretically- based good practice but this is a strength and a professional knowledge for education can be constituted by an alternative form of knowledge appropriate for educators. My accounts of my practice can contribute to this alternative form of knowledge. I went back to my question ‘ How do I fit into this business of educational research? ‘

The ‘I’ is the most significant word in that last sentence and I want to explain why.

As I wrote in my account of Poppy, writing with the personal pronoun ‘I’ was difficult for me who was schooled in a way that demanded the distant, impersonal, detached role of author. But using ‘I’ in writing isn’t that difficult especially if the ‘I’ is still used at a distance. It’s a bit like being at a party, talking, laughing, engaging with others and then seeing a photograph a week later of yourself at that party. The person at the party is a different person to the quiet, sober you looking at the picture. ‘I’ can be as distant as I allow. What was

important to me in understanding the nature of teacher knowledge was to move from the impersonal 'I' to the personally significant 'I'.

Moyra Evans' research was significant in my understanding of this. She wrote of the long struggle she had to understand the concept of living educational theory and the importance of changing her PhDs title to one which involved 'I' in the title. *"The title of my enquiry has developed alongside the enquiry itself... ' how can I reflect in action as part of my role as a deputy headteacher...' I can create this title now that I have completed the research as I can see clearly what I have done. Why does Whitehead say, 'You need to put the 'I' in the title'? Why does he not say 'You need to include yourself in the title'. What makes the 'I' special, whereas ' yourself' is ordinary? The concept of the 'I' is a difficult one - both in terms of revealing the 'I' and in talking about 'I'. In schools we do not engage in metaphysical introspection, and the suggestion that the 'I' lives both outside of me in the sense that it can be put in the title of my research project, and also is me in the sense that I am prepared to expose myself as a living contradiction. is an alien idea.'* (Evans M. 1995)

I identified immediately with the way that Moyra Evans saw accepting 'I' as an acceptance of making herself vulnerable. It's easier to hide among the 'we' ,the 'they' and the 'you'. as she wrote later on *" It is hard to talk in terms of 'I', because I have to own what I am saying".*

I eventually found my acceptance of 'I' as liberating, a relief and a challenge. It took time. As Moyra Evans said:

" I can now stand side by side with the rest of the words and I am looking out from them. I am part of the meaning. if I were not there, I could evade my past in the enquiry. I could look at others. I could make a theoretical study. I could avoid the study touching me. I could avoid changing my ways. "

That is why the acceptance of 'I' is challenging because it means facing up to the challenge of acting and participating in the action. 'I' means involvement.

'I could avoid changing my ways'. Yes, I can avoid changing my ways and sometimes do. I know the art of nodding, smiling and doing absolutely nothing; I sometimes find the energy expended on disagreement which still result in me doing nothing could be better spent elsewhere. For me, embracing the 'I' demands personal responsibility and commitment to improve the quality of education 'here'.

At the end of the book " Teachers who Teach Teachers" the editors, Tom Russell and Fred Korthagen write *"One day each teacher educator must confront Jack Whitehead's question: "How do I help my teacher education students, and finally*

their students in schools, to improve the quality of their learning". (Russell and Korthagen 1995).

For me, the question " how do I improve the quality of education here ?" had to be *confronted* at the beginning of my research but as my research progressed I found that the *acceptance* of the question was the most difficult process. To accept the 'I' means that I cannot avoid the question. Such a question demands acceptance of responsibility and an account of what I did. My words became tied up to my actions.

It was my attendance at two of the meetings I mentioned at the beginning of the piece that gave me a better understanding of the significance of what 'I' was doing. First, the meeting of the Quality Council. It's a body set up by the management team to investigate aspects of the school. The membership of the Quality council changes for each investigation except for the deputy head who organises it. Staff are asked to ' research' an issue, write up their findings and then these are condensed into a school document so that the whole school can act on its recommendations. The whole process takes four weeks: a week to set

up; a week to research; a week to write up and another week for the final document.

I was asked to attend this Quality Council to investigate homework. The others asked to attend were another deputy, four senior teachers, two heads of department and a newly qualified teacher.

The deputy leading the meeting talked for about 40 minutes outlining the issues concerned with homework and how he thought we should go about our 'research'. I had some difficulties with his descriptions and explanations. I didn't recognise my own practice in his descriptions of practice. He made it clear that his expectation was that the 'research' was to monitor the current situation of how staff planned, set and marked homework and to make recommendations for improvement. It was emphasised that we were not looking at our own practice but that of others. There was little discussion at the meeting. We were given deadlines for our reports, asked to briefly outline what we intended to do and went home. In due course the reports were written, condensed into a school report and distributed to all heads of department so that they could consider the recommendations.

The meeting made me think though. It's easy enough to criticise the way others go about their work and organise meetings but I realised something about personal responsibility and how my view of it differed from that of the organisers of the Quality Council. It stems from that question " How do I improve the quality of education here? " I believe each person needs to come to their own understanding of what is important to improve and must ask their own questions.

My own work as a teacher and a researcher must be central to any enquiry.

Members of the Quality Council could have begun by looking at the homework each of us set and whether it fulfilled what we wanted from it. We could have asked how could we improve our own practice in planning, setting and marking homework. But we didn't. The Quality Council was told that homework was problematic in the school and we were told to find out what current practice was.

I knew at that meeting what was personally significant and what was not. So, I did what was expected of me - I interviewed some students and looked at some homework tasks and wrote up what I found. The final report said that the quality of homework was variable; it was not well differentiated; there was a problem of resourcing homeworks and recommended that departments set up differentiated tasks and put them into schemes of work. The whole thing did not touch my work

at all. I have not changed the way I set homework and I feel no personal responsibility towards the issue at all. The school bureaucracy absorbed my responsibility and absolved me.

The second meeting was a course run by Wiltshire and Bath University called “Improving the Quality of Learning from a Middle Management Perspective”. The course began with a talk about what made an effective school with the key factors being:

- participatory leadership
- shared vision and goals
- a learning environment
- emphasis on teaching and learning
- high expectations
- positive reinforcement
- monitoring and enquiry
- pupil rights and responsibilities
- learning for all
- partnerships and support.

These were all qualified by other points under “ school effectiveness (the final picture) and school improvement (facilitating conditions)”. We were then split up into small groups to focus on some of these key elements. There was a temptation to just tick off these indicators one by one and feel something was being achieved but there was a ghost in the machine somewhere. The ‘how’ was missing and so the heart of the matter for me was not there. What did a statement like “ teachers as change agents” mean? What about “ teacher empowerment” or “ teachers as continuing learners”? How is that practice achieved? Stoll and Mortimore write:

“ Such factors provide a picture of what an effective school looks like. What they cannot explain, however, is how the school became effective. This is the domain of school improvement..... Recent school effectiveness studies... argue that most of the variation among pupils is due to classroom variation. It is clear that school and classroom development need to be linked. One key implication is that teachers need to take a ‘ classroom exceeding perspective’ (MacGilchrist et al 1995)... There is still inadequate theory to underpin our knowledge of what makes schools effective and how they improve. In particular the interconnection between school and classroom is not well described”

(Stoll L. and Mortimore. 1995.)

If the course was offering educational knowledge like that what was I to make of it? I knew from my experience that the monitoring of teachers the course leaders

recommended, alongside appraisal and action research which they also

recommended, was highly problematic and could cause deep conflict. The

knowledge offered by the course did not reflect my knowledge of experience.

Was this because those offering the course were detached researchers who were

not involved in the actual processes of living through improving schools ?

The course finished with teachers making 'action plans'. I wrote one about

assessment knowing that unless I wished to invest something in the 'I' of the plan

little would happen. I would be able to tick off the lists of things I had done but

there would be no real improvement unless the 'I' was engaged.

Kevin Eames argues that *'It's up to the individual teacher, though, to take responsibility for making improvements in his or her own work, and it's that acceptance of that moral responsibility within an action- research framework which makes the ensuing knowledge distinctively professional'* (Eames 1996)

This time of my work was a time of coming to know the importance of 'I' .

Questions like "What does my practice tell me about these factors of school

improvement?" , " What happens when I put this idea into practice?" " How does

my practice reflect my values?" are fundamentally important to ask. In the

knowledge of my own practice, my problems and my plans is the main concern to

improve the quality of my own practice. It is the particularity of these kinds of

questions which lead me to place 'I' at the centre of my enquiry and to commit

myself to improving the quality of my work. My approach to justifying change and improvement in my work is to analyse my practice in relation to my own educational values as they emerge in practice. The justification for these values lies in my commitment to improving the quality of education. I do this as an individual within the context of my educational relationships.

The questions that troubled me at the beginning of this chapter were being slowly sorted out for me. I was beginning to understand where I fitted in. I was also more ready than before to accept that the professional knowledge of teachers was a living educational theory. Moyra Evans description of how she understood living educational theory is vivid:

“ I’d heard Jack Whitehead talk often about creating living educational theories. I originally thought these were something like a home spun version of the real thing, not having quite that professional finish that marked them out as desirable. Living educational theories were something lesser mortals had to make do with, whilst Piaget and Dewey and others were the quality versions that every serious student wanted to possess. They were also rather frightening entities when I contemplated trying to construct one. I feared getting it wrong, but I was also excited...”

She met with Jack Whitehead and discussed her understanding of epistemology:

“ Jack spelt it out. ‘It’s like this’ he said drawing on the table with his fingers. ‘ The Whitehead epistemology is grounded in Polyani’s work on personal knowledge; Elliott’s work is grounded in Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics; Kemmis and Carr’s work is grounded in Habermas and critical theory, but your work is grounded in your practice’.

...” But is that good enough?” I asked.

“ Yes,” he said “ it’s like this - all of us have been engaged in exploring propositional knowledge. We’ve been playing with words, but you have been working on your practice. You have been exploring your emergence as a confident ‘I’ in your role as a deputy head interested particularly in staff development’.

So what you’re saying is that my theories about my practice are grounded in my lived experiences? That I draw my explanations - my theories - of my practice not from propositional knowledge directly - from the writing of others, but from my actual experiences in my role as a deputy head?...

‘ Yes’ he said. We were both excited at the sudden clarity of this explanation.”

(Evans M. 1995)

The clarity of the explanation is just what I needed. In these weeks I had understood the importance of ‘I’ and why my explanations of how I attempt to improve my practice is my professional educational knowledge. Going back to those questions at the beginning:

- *what does it look like this educational knowledge of teachers? It looks like this.*

- *Who needs it?* I do. While I hope my writing will be read by others and that they will find it helpful in their own work I also know that the writing has been educational for me.
- *What is it for?* To improve the quality of education here.
- *How is it constructed?* By my descriptions and explanations of my work and my educational development.
- *How do I fit in?* By understanding the power of 'I' fitting in doesn't seem as important as when I first asked it.

I took a deep breath and paused when writing those questions and answering them. The patterns of the kaleidoscope were starting to make sense in this light of discovery: the power of 'I'.

Here I can go back to the qualities I said would be present if educational research was to be of good quality as I think I've not only fulfilled them but gone beyond them in my understanding of what they mean. I wrote that I would like to see a sense of the following:

- a. - confrontation: the sense that the researcher has confronted difficult questions about their enquiry and is willing to go on thinking and being critical

b. - liberation: that the researcher aims to understand their own life and work through their own point of view.

In answering my own questions I have confronted difficult questions and situations. In understanding that these attempts of mine to improve my understanding and practice is my professional educational knowledge I feel that sense of liberation. 'I' doesn't have to fit in.'I' transcends the imposition of others and, for me, creates an urgency to 'rename' teaching by writing about my experiences from my own point of view.

But there is something more here. I now recognise that these standards of judgment are themselves evolving, changing, and being transformed as I learn more and my understanding deepens. I did not understand the terms 'liberation' and 'confrontation' in Chapter two in the way I now use them. I used the word 'confrontation' without an understanding of what it meant as it was lived. Its meaning has changed for me as I lived through confusion and anger to confront what I found difficult . I see now that standards of judgment are neither static nor immutable but developmental and educational in themselves. My living educational theory can therefore be judged by living standards of judgment.

That is why I want you to read this thesis at least twice: once for the plot and the second time for the meanings that have emerged over time.