

Introduction

Within this section I aim to introduce the reader to my initial arguments within this thesis, mainly of my desire to produce a text that is engaging and inspiring both to myself through the account that I create and for others to want to engage with it and learn from it. Furthermore, the reader will be introduced to the two schools that are the geographical sites of this research. The reader will also read a break down of each of the sections of this thesis and a summary of the content of those sections.

The research question that guides this thesis is *'How do I contribute to the education of myself and others through improving the quality of living educational space? The story of living myself through others as a practitioner-researcher'* This question has emerged through the experiences that I have had through my career. This question encapsulates the passion, drive and desire that I live by each day. I believe that it summarises my own value base and drives me on day after day. This question incorporates the key elements of my own ontological being.

My present research programme into the above question has evolved from research for my Masters dissertation on *'Living myself through others. How can I account for my claims and understanding of a teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas School?'* (Riding, 2003) The major transformation in my question from my master's dissertation enquiry is in the relationship between my understanding of the social and environmental influences that open and limit possibilities for action and my understanding of the epistemological significance of the relationally dynamic awareness in *living myself through others*.

In constructing the story of *living myself through others as a practitioner researcher in education*, I intend to make an original contribution to educational knowledge through expressing, clarifying and communicating the meanings of a relationally dynamic, ontological value of living myself through others. The originality of the contribution lies in the narrative process of forming the living epistemological standard of judgment of *living myself through others*, from the exploration of the implications of asking, researching and answering the question, *'How do I contribute to the education of myself and others through improving the quality of living educational space?'* This original contribution is demonstrated through my exploration of my practice, and in particular considering the transitions that have provided opportunities

for educational growth. This standard of judgement is fluid in nature and has grown with me.

As a starting point within this thesis I want to clarify for the reader my basic desires to:

- creatively engage with the ideas of others
- communicate my ideas within a creative form
- demonstrate my personal engagement with this work through my passionate account.

As evidence to support and exemplify my ideas, I refer to Evans (1995) and feel the passion she feels when she comments in her action research Ph.D. thesis:

‘My excitement at the possibility of using story in a creative way was related to my strong feeling that I would like teacher knowledge to be more widely shared in schools, to be accessible in its language, and to be captivating for its audience.’ (Evans, 1995)

I sense that more personalised and passionate accounts are required that reflect the nature of the profession, being a personalised and passionate profession. In 100 years time, if a spaceman looked over our library shelves at the writing on education will they summarise from it that education was about people? That it was about improving people? That it was about emotions and values? Or will they think that it was about experiments, and objects and other things that don't cry when you poke them? I agree with Bassey (1992) in his Presidential Address to the British Education Research Association (BERA) in his claims that:

‘...too many research papers are expressed in clumsy English, overloaded with terminology that is familiar to few people, poorly structured, long-winded, and in general written from the perspective of the writer without concern for the audience.’ (Bassey, 1992, p. 10)

In this respect I also wonder who these traditional educational reports are written for. Who is the audience? Who is the readership? Do these reports really engage potential leaders and managers to improve their practice? Will these studies provide a sound research base to support the work of schools as they strive for improvement? Will the mere existence of a *National College for School Leadership* (N.C.S.L.) research database promote the development of community and promote the creation of new knowledge? By traditional, I am referring to a social science perspective of research that is ‘done to’ subjects. Perhaps what I am looking for is

something that has a little more bite: something that can engage the reader within the text and demand that they take note of the content. I am arguing that more of an impassioned response is needed, in the sense of Michael Polanyi's (1958) passionate participation of the knower within the production of the known. I am arguing for practitioners to engage in accounting for their own practice through creating their own living educational theories (Whitehead, 1989) as a way of improving practice. This thesis is my response to these concerns. This thesis is from an Assistant Headteacher writing about being an Assistant Headteacher; it is a teacher-researcher writing about being a teacher-researcher. It is a text that supports Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (a Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association) research as a way of positively influencing the practice of education.

The Schools

I would like to offer my understanding of the two schools that will feature within this text. I want to now outline for you my impression of the two Schools that have dominated my career to date and will further dominate this text. Some of these comments may seem to be a little 'direct', but I want to establish from the start my intention to create a narrative that is not afraid to communicate a truth, no matter how harsh it may seem. By 'truth' I mean the ability to say when things don't go well alongside when they do: the giving of the 'hard' message. I am reflecting on Kemmis (2006) and his arguments for:

'...the need for action researchers and practitioner researchers to be willing to tell unwelcome truths.' (Kemmis, 2006, p. 474)

Westwood St Thomas (1998 – 2004)

I will always remember the journey to School, to Westwood St Thomas. It was a very stop-start journey, that took me through a great deal of traffic. Whilst it was relatively short in distance, it took some time being stuck in traffic. I didn't seem to get time to think.

Westwood St Thomas School is a 13-19 Upper School on the west side of Salisbury. Salisbury has a number of different types of schools within it, and Westwood is the only truly comprehensive school, drawing students from all backgrounds and abilities. The most recent Ofsted report, from my time at the School, commented:

‘Both the key stage 2 performance of the contributory middle schools and the school’s own standardised test data indicates that the student cohort, though having a full range of ability, is significantly biased to the less able band. Far more students than usual, in a comprehensive school, are significantly behind their age expectation in attainment at entry and many have a range of literacy and numeracy difficulties. The overall capability of the student cohort is well below that of a typical comprehensive school. Whilst all students are well cared for, many experience a variety of social and economic disadvantage in their backgrounds...’ (Westwood St Thomas’ OfSted Report, 1998)

Whilst this OfSted report is a number of years old, in terms of being a school, it has struggled significantly with sustaining improvement in its performance over time. The School never seemed to be able to move forward in a coherent way and secure year on year improvement. I always found this frustrating, as I was somebody who wanted things to improve to give the students that walked through the door the best possible chances in life. The School seemed to have an inbuilt culture that placed a ceiling on the limits and potential: it seemed to live down to expectation through both staff and students.

Through my M.A. dissertation (Riding, 2003) I explored in great detail the early part of my own career and how I felt the culture of Westwood St Thomas helped me to grow and supported me to reflect on and improve my own practice. I commented:

‘I joined Westwood St Thomas Upper School in September 1998 as a Newly Qualified Teacher just as the previous Head announced her retirement after many years of service to the school. I attached little significance to the timing of the two events, although some would argue that greatness must follow! However, the arrival of a new Headteacher from Bristol at the start of my second year was of such significance and direct influence over my career that I would only fully realise this four years later’

With this new Head came change. Even from my own inexperienced outlook on education at that time it was clear to see that staff seemed to have been crying out for a change of leadership that would be strong and creative: somebody who could take the school into the 21st century. With the new Headteacher came that required change: a focus on teaching and learning; a coherent School Development Plan; a fresh approach to placing faith in staff to do their jobs; and ultimately, a desire to try things out.’ (Riding, 2003, p.11)

And:

‘Significantly the shift was more direct, asking practitioners to move towards being reflective on their own practice and being responsible for this reflection. A sense of self development seemed to be implied through this with staff asked to initiate a process of change.’ (Riding, 2003, p.13)

Within the School, the mentioned Headteacher was tremendously significant in implementing change processes and also in opening the door of possibilities in terms of how to improve individual practice. With him came support and understanding of how teachers can actively reflect on their practice and improve it and the power of this.

Westwood was a School that struggled to allow its students to achieve their potential. Many of the basic systems were not in place to support student achievement and the lack of these meant that the School was a very tough School to work in. My impression was that staff were very often chasing their tails and very often gave up because the job became too vast to try and overcome. On an individual level staff were trying to create these systems that should have existed at a whole school level. Alongside this, on a daily basis there was a great deal of confrontation and challenge from students.

As a middle leader when I left this school, I was firmly at the heart of the school. It is very often that challenging schools bond staff together and this was certainly the case at Westwood. I felt part of a strong team in terms of the closeness of staff.

Bitterne Park (2004 – 2006)

The journey to and from School was always an enjoyable part of the day. It was a longer journey than my previous one mainly travelling down the A36, yet I didn't get stuck in traffic. The longer, freer journey meant that I had time to think and understand the day. I had time to regenerate. By the time I arrived home I had dealt with many issues that I had to deal with and I could embrace my home life with some certainty and clarity. In some ways this journey reflected the freedom that the School gave me in unlocking my own creativity and sense of freedom. I drove past the edge of the New Forest and saw the wildlife and nature present within it. I saw the ponies of the New Forest eating their hay. I saw the changing seasons as they occurred. Admittedly, it was usually very dark when I was driving during the very early morning

or late at night, but I still managed to catch glimpses at times of the natural world. This helped to inspire me.

Bitterne Park can easily be described as a constantly improving School. It is a School that doesn't stand still and that wants to keep moving and improving. The School has grand plans and works hard to fulfil them. It is a very successful School.

Ofsted commented during the 2006 Inspection:

'Bitterne Park is an outstanding school in which students flourish: almost all fulfil their potential. It is a mature, well run community in which relations between staff and students are founded on respect, care and aspiration and all share a sense of purpose.' (Bitterne Park School Ofsted Report, 2006)

Perhaps one of the things that drew me to it was the friendliness of the School. In particular, the senior team works very hard but creates a very good atmosphere to be a part of. This is certainly down to the leadership of the Headteacher who promotes responsibility and accountability within the team that is then spread throughout the school. The Senior Team is a very strong and cohesive team that works well together: it is very much a model of how a team should work together, allowing strengths to emerge within it. This School was able to give me the drive that I was searching for: the chance to creatively make improvements at a whole school level. A culture existed of success: that staff and students recognised the value of education and improvement and placed this high on the agenda. This was still, however, an inner-city School with inner-city issues. However, it seemed to be getting things right. In the 2006 Ofsted, the School was classed as 'outstanding'.

The content of the sequences

The following is a summary of the text that follows. I want to provide you with a brief outline of how I have structured the text.

Sequence 1 Values in Education

Within this section I want to explain to the reader what my own core values are that I attempt to live my life by both professionally and personally. Within this section I want

to explicate my own living educational theory and outline my approaches to action research. I also want to explain my understanding of living educational space.

Within this section I want to be able to show the nature of the living and creative methodology that I am constructing in order to support the claims that I am making. I want to essentially argue that I am using a creative and emerging methodology that is resulting from the text that I am writing, rather than following a more traditional approach to methodology that seeks to outline and plan in advance of the research what needs to be done to find the answer to the research questions. I want to argue that my methodology is refining itself and is responsive to the needs of the enquiry. I want to argue that this in itself is essentially mirroring my responsive and reflective approach to middle and senior leadership. I approach this section through reflecting on the significant others that I have been involved with through my educational life.

I want to give the reader a flavour of the people who have emerged as significant people within my career and to explain how they have influenced me. I also want to present examples of relationships that I have had that I feel have been influential in my own development. I also argue that I have influenced and been influenced by others and attempt to illustrate this.

I want to clearly argue that the values I hold are based on the relationships that I have with others and that it is through these relationships that my values qualify themselves and respond to the living environment I am part of.

I also want to be able to explore the nature of the Ph.D. criteria and be able to demonstrate what my evolving understanding of these criteria is and how I feel it applies to the work that I am undertaking. I will also explore my views on what constitutes educational knowledge and how I believe I have successfully met the criteria that would justify the award of a Ph.D. for this thesis. I also want to demonstrate how I am moving the debate forward on how to judge practitioner accounts within the Academy with my original contributions to knowledge.

Sequence 2 The Past

Within this section I want to be able to explain to the reader my own personal past and narrative that has helped to construct my value base. I want to explore the key

influences on my developing understanding of educative practice. I will look at two key aspects of my Past: my *self* and my time at Westwood St Thomas School.

I focus on the key personal issues that have helped to construct my *self*.

Through reflecting on these key issues I want to be able to present reflections on my time as a school refuser and also be able to present the reflections of those who also had involvement in this event. I want to argue that my own personal life narrative is massively crucial and important in determining the educator that I am and that my life history determines how I approach my life as an educator.

I show in detail my experiences as a teacher, manager and middle leader during my 6 years at Westwood St Thomas School, from 1998 – 2004, as I moved from being a *Newly Qualified Teacher* to being a Head of Faculty. I want to try and understand how this has helped prepare me for Assistant Headship.

I want to show and reflect on the range of different experiences that I have gained from my time at Westwood St Thomas School and be able to allow the reader to understand how these experiences have begun to prepare me for School leadership.

I want to also paint a picture of my classroom and approaches to teaching and learning that I have taken in my early career, particularly focusing on my belief that I create an open, honest, safe and democratic classroom. I also want to show my emerging approach to leadership as being an inclusive, democratic style within my middle leader role.

I want to argue that my experiences at Westwood St Thomas, through my clear developing understanding of action research and reflective practice, helped to prepare me for senior leadership. I further argue that the influence of the significant others that I came into contact with helped me to prepare for this.

Sequence 3 The Present

Within this section I want to be able to record the experiences of my first 18 months in post as Assistant Headteacher at Bitterne Park School. I want to be able to review my practice and focus on key issues that I have taken on within my role. I want to be

able to account for my learning over this time. I want to be able to come to some understanding of the role of what it means to be an Assistant Headteacher. I also want to be able to reflect on my own growing sense of educative practice in comparison to my understanding from sequence 1 and sequence 2 of this study. This section aims to reflect the difficulties associated with managing transition between roles and schools and account for how I tried to do this myself.

Within this section I want to argue that holding onto my own sense of values and beliefs is what helped me to deal with this transition. I argue that keeping in touch with significant others is crucial in order to support transition. I also want to argue that dealing with the sense of change is vastly under-valued and that there needs to be a heightened awareness of the impact of change on individuals.

Sequence 4 The Future

Throughout this section I want to look at the further implications of this thesis and argue that those who engage with the text can gain from it. I explore how my journey has identified some key issues which I believe need to be embraced through education. I return to the original contributions that I make to knowledge through this thesis and further clarify them. I explore the nature of teacher-research and support my claims through reference to teacher-researchers. I argue that practitioner accounts need to be valued and circumstances need to be established to support the work of teacher-researchers in order to improve the quality of educational research that is emerging.

You will now move into Sequence 1 where I will initially reflect on my own values that I hold as an educator and explain the key original contributions to knowledge that I offer through this thesis.