

How do I improve what I am doing in the context of 'Forest Friday'?

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Writings for a CPD Module on Active Learning and Knowledge-creating Research at

http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/huxtable/LLCCPD/Active_learning_module.html

{Jack's responses drawing on Michael's initial draft and offering ideas to give a 'framing' for the writing that clarifies the organization of the writing with a professional and academic context, discussion of methods and values and the generation of Michael's living educational theory that explains his educational influence in his own learning, in the learning of others (pupils) and in the learning of the social formation in which he lives and works.}

Professional Context

In this enquiry into how I improve my practice and contribute to educational knowledge I am working with stage 2 pupils who are able to use play and story to grow and learn. I teach in a very small federated primary school with one other class and a small pre school. We have 27 children in the school. I have a class of 16 children. In Reception we have 9 boys and 1 girl. Year 1 contains 3 girls and 2 boys.

Year 2 contains 1 boy. The school is on the outskirts of a small city. It has above-average levels of pupil mobility and a declining number of pupils on its roll. The school has Early Years Foundation Stage provision in the Reception class and a privately run nursery shares the school site. It has slightly more boys than girls on its roll and all pupils are White British. It has well-above-average proportions of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and of those who are entitled to a free school meal. The school changed to two mixed-age classes from September 2009. The school holds the Gold Children's Rights Charter, National Healthy School status and the Activemark, and is working towards the Inclusion Quality Mark. (OFSTED report Dec 2009)

Academic Context

In her 2001 Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association Catherine Snow pointed out that the challenge for educational researchers is to enhance the value of personal knowledge and personal experience for practice. She pointed out that good teachers possess a wealth of knowledge about teaching that cannot currently be drawn upon effectively in improving practice. She explained that systematizing the knowledge would require procedures for accumulating such knowledge and making it public, for connecting it to bodies of knowledge established through other methods, and for vetting it for correctness and consistency. We need agreed-upon procedures for doing this (p.9).

Both the British and American Educational Research Associations stress the importance of educational research that improves educational practice for the public benefit (BERA, 2010) and serves the public good (Ball and Tyson, 2011). According to Ball and Tyson, educational researchers need to more vigilant and effective in promoting *"the use of research to improve education and serve the public good."*

By focusing on a question of the form, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' I intend to contribute to both improving practice in relation to my values and to serve the public good by living these values as fully as I can. I will relate my values to the values that distinguish co-operative enquiries (Breeze, 2011) in the year that the United Nations has designated the International Year of Cooperatives. I have also been influenced by the way in which McDonagh, Roche, Sullivan and Glenn (2012) have generated their own living theories in improving practice through their classroom research:

"We adopt Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) ideas around putting 'I' at the centre of the research. We seek to develop a theory from practice, and in that process we show with evidence collated in various data collection strategies how we can offer descriptions and explanations that support the validity of our theory." (p.3)

In my educational relationships with my pupils I use stories to help their learning. I am also using a storied form of presentation in my practitioner-researcher to clarify and develop my contribution to educational knowledge:

"... attraction to stories has evolved into an explicit attempt to use the literatures on 'story' or 'narrative' to define both the method and the object of inquiry in teaching and teacher education. Story has become, in other words, more than simply a rhetorical device for expressing sentiments about teachers or candidates for the teaching profession. It is now, rather a central focus for conducting research in the field." (Carter, 1993, p. 5.)

I like Connelly's and Clandinin's (1999) emphasis on 'stories to live by' as in sharing such stories I can be in touch with the values I express in education that give meaning and purpose to my productive life:

"As we listened to practitioners and conducted the work on which this book is based, we realized that the theoretical puzzle was to link knowledge, context, and identity. We developed a further term to begin to make this link, namely, 'stories to live by'. This term is the intellectual thread that holds this book together. This thread helps us to understand how knowledge, context, and identity are linked and can be understood narratively.

Stories to live by, the phrase used throughout this book to refer to identity, is given meaning by the narrative understandings of knowledge and context. Stories to live by are shared by such matters as secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling, and teachers' cover stories." (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p.4)

I share McNiff's view that 'My Story is My Living Educational Theory' (2007):

I position myself as an educational action researcher, part of whose work is to tell stories of educational action research. The stories I tell are those of myself in company with others who are also telling their stories. My main theme is about how I offer explanations for my educational practices, my personal theories of practice. I show how and why I do what I do and justify my practice as good practice, including the form and content of my research report as an integral part of that practice. (p.315).

I have organized my writing below into the sections 'Forest Schools and Forest Fridays and 'My action research and explaining my educational influence'

Forest Schools and Forest Friday

I hope that in providing regular outdoor learning experience we will give the children a rich context for their stories and play that they will be able to draw on even when they are elsewhere and later in life:

“To provide the children with the freedom to explore using all their senses allowing them to develop their language. In Phase 2 of the work, eight themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Six were related to the impacts on children in terms of confidence, social skills, language and communication, motivation and concentration, physical skills, and knowledge and understanding. The other two themes were related to wider impacts: practitioners gaining a new perspective on the children, and a ripple effect as children took home their experiences and told family and friends about what they had learnt.” (A marvellous opportunity for children to learn, O'Brien and Murray 2006)

In the above report they have identified that some children displayed immediate positive behaviour changes while in others it took some time for them to adjust and gain confidence within the context.

The Oxfordshire case study chose to describe their propositions in the following way.

Forest School:

- increases self-esteem and self-confidence
- improves social skills
- contributes to the development of language and communication skills
- improves physical motor skills
- improves motivation and encourages concentration
- contributes to children's knowledge and understanding of the environment

Worcestershire identified similar propositions with some small differences.

This group sought:

- changes in self-esteem and self-confidence
- changes in ability to work co-operatively and in awareness of others
- changes in levels of motivation and attitudes towards learning
- changes in language skills (speech, listening and mark-making1)
- demonstration of an improved relationship with and understanding of the outdoors
- changes in levels of skills and knowledge (numeracy, information communication and physical development)

The above is taken from the work done in Phase 2 of implementing Forest Schools and it is 6 propositions put forward by the two participating local authorities describing how forest school has had an impact on children's lives. I suppose that I too hope that the work that we do together will have a similar impact.

Also though underpinning all the above is that I hope that Forest Friday is able to provide the children with moments that they will remember for the rest of their lives. I remember being at my Primary school spending much time down at our nature area I can remember the pleasure and enjoyment at being in the outdoors, I remember the words of a story washing over me while I sat on a hot summers day pulling at a piece of bark on a log. What I don't remember is the objectives, Learning Outcomes, WALTs and WILFS or the reason we were there, I have simply taken with me the fact that we were there.

There have been a number of changes since the last time I sat down to write some reflections. Our School is now without a KS2 class as our Assistant Head has moved to a new school this leaves us with a second stage/Year 1 class, working alongside our pre school. A Senior teacher has been appointed to work two days a week to develop good practice in the pre school and my classroom as well as overseeing some refurbishment of the buildings and development of the outside spaces. This is with the intention of creating an Early Years Centre of Excellence.

With much happening since Christmas 2011 the mist has become quite thick around my thinking or to use an analogy suited to forests we are in a dense area of trees and at times feeling a little unclear when I will find my next clearing!

My action research and explaining my educational influences

(Framing needed for this section – possibly outlining action reflection cycles with the expression of interest/concern, imagined possibilities, choice of action plan, action and gathering data to make a judgement about effectiveness/influence, evaluation in relation to realizing values and developing understandings. Explanatory principles could be offered in terms of the values of co-operative learning).

Over the Christmas break I sat down to write down some of the recent influences on me and my thinking. They are in no particular order.

- Middle leadership development programme
- Storymaking project
- Jabadeo training day

- Play in winter training

Although work has and is still feeling a little like stumbling through a thick, dense forest there have been at times some memorable moments in which I looked up and glimpsed sight of a brilliant, blue sky. Almost exclusively these have been moments working with the children.

We are now at a stage where we are establishing a routine in our Forest Friday mornings (soon to be renamed O.W.L – Outdoor and Woodland Learning). The children are improving in their ability to get ready and understand our safety rules as well as the need to care for the environment we are working in. We are still developing the awareness of parents that it is taking place every Friday and they will need to be dressed appropriately. To that end we are investing in warm clothes for all children as that has proved a major stumbling block for some childrens' enjoyment and engagement in the experience.

We have had some memorable experiences in the woods over the past months including....

Swords, bows and arrows

The children were able to select sticks which had fallen to the floor and then construct their own medieval swords and longbows. They were able to strip the bark using potato peelers then tie a hilt to it or add string to the bow. This was a wonderful experience with children sitting focussing on the activity for well over 30minutes. In a classroom setting some of these children find it challenging to maintain focus for more than 5 minutes. The feeling of oneness with nature was wonderful.

Den Building

We were lucky to have a parent volunteer. It was a father who up until then had not been involved in coming into the classroom. He enjoyed den building and worked alongside the children throughout the session creating a large den which by snack time was ready for them to use. What I particularly took from this was the enjoyment taken by the parent. It was the idea of "Sustained shared thinking" we weren't asking the children a question we already knew the answer to, we were working alongside the children learning, testing, investigating as we went along. While I had gone to the session thinking that we would have a session of teaching den building what actually transpired was far more real the children joined us (the adults) in the building of a shelter for our snack time not groups of children "doing" den building. It gave the children the opportunity to see values in action, those such as co operation, resilience, risk taking and encouragement as we all worked together to create a shared space. Some children went to gather leaves, others collected sticks while others drifted in and out of the session involved in their own play while checking back in on the process. We had a sense of joint pride at the end of the session in what we had done. I learnt about the importance of sessions being allowed to be organic creatures without constraints often placed upon classroom based learning.

Snow leopard hunt

Following a session during January that proved very cold and for some children unenjoyable due to that I planned a more movement based session in which we would track a snow leopard. Part of our focus this term is Geography and I wanted us to think about maps. We took a number of cameras out and the children divided into partners they were to record a visual map of our journey between the School and our successful finding of the Leopard. What ensued was again the organic nature of outdoor learning. We lined up in the playground ready to depart when a little voice piped up, "How can we know where to go? We need a compass?" Our HLTA duly departed into the classroom to find compasses and luckily on our playground we have a compass marked out and correctly aligned. We had 5 minutes discussing what we knew as well as seeing the actual directions of N E S W then looked at the compass to check the playground was correctly marked. We set off on our hunt, stopping to check our direction with the compass and photograph significant points with our cameras.

Having photographed two points we arrived in the fields in which we found feathers from the remains of a Pidgeon. The excitement of the children was instant as they began wondering about the direction the snow leopard had taken. They collected feathers and set off in hot pursuit. We headed past a stream and then found a bonfire burning which led us to discuss how the innuits would stay warm and what they would cook. Following photographs of that we arrived at a small copse which was very muddy. There we also found footprints, the Snow Leopards! (or dog). The children then discussed animal footprints before we realised we could hear the children from pre school in the woods up ahead. We then noticed it was very windy and worked out the direction of the wind by throwing grass into the air and using our compasses to see the direction. When we arrived at the woods to finally locate the Snow Leopard (a soft toy) the children had experienced the planned learning journey but also a myriad of other experiences which without the benefits of the outdoors and a degree of flexibility we would not have seen.

What I learnt from the session is that it is fine to have a learning intention and plan but this is not where it ends while we are on our journey we must be always willing to allow the children to look at the landscape of learning we are passing through. Do not simply look to the destination as in doing so the journey will pass us by. We want active learners in control not passive helpless learners waiting to be given the next steps to success.

Afternoons

The sessions had been successful however I felt it was important to build in time for us to reflect as a group. After a couple of sessions I asked the children if they wished to bring something interesting back with them. Following lunchtime we then chose one of the interesting things to be our memory item. We all sat in a circle on the floor, including myself and any other adults, and shared one special memory from the morning outdoor session. The intentions of this were three-fold, Firstly and most importantly it allowed us to value each others experiences and share what had happened to us during the morning. Two it helped us to increase speaking and listening, which is needed in the cohort and finally I was being asked to show outcomes and evidence from the morning sessions.

During our sharing time the quality of listening is significantly higher from the group than at other times and I am interested as to why this is?

Three separate memories stick in my head from our time to share. A girl from year 1 who is working during the week in the Fnd stage had been climbing a tree. She was so proud of her achievements in climbing and was excited to tell everybody. I had been with a different group of children at the time and therefore asked her to take a camera to photograph her achievement so I could still share in it. It was not until Friday after school that I downloaded the photo, it was wonderful, her face was a picture of pride and achievement, she was perhaps 30cm off the floor clinging on as if she was atop a mighty oak tree. It made me think about achievement and what we value and what truly is achievement.

The second incident again I did not have the pleasure of seeing but 4 different members of the group shared it as their special moment. In the woods there is a steep bank with a fence which marks the perimeter running along the bottom. The children enjoy moving along there as it offers a secret area. On this particular day one child had been able to climb up the steep bank however the others were unable to. What followed was a perfect example of collaboration. The first person passed down a long stick for the others to grab onto then with one pushing from the bottom and the one at the top pulling them up they were able to all make their way up the previously unconquerable bank. They then enjoyed working as a team to go up the and down the bank for the rest of the session.

The third incident is more of a collection of small incidents, a boy who entered Fnd stage speaking very little, is now able to share his memories of Friday mornings to the whole group. It has again outlined to me how often it is the case that it is not the child's ability which should be called into question but the practitioner's ability to extract it from them. Having provided a situation which had real meaning to the boy he was then willing to share his thoughts, feeling and experiences.

As well as these great experiences we have had it is not to say that there are not areas to work on. I have seen how important it is to have children correctly cared for in terms of shelter and clothing as without these things we do not function. Also especially in the winter months it is important to have planned activities which support the children in their play and learning. While there is far greater scope for flexibility outside as one can not plan for the spontaneous learning that often occurs a scaffold is required to hang the children's learning onto.

During December I went on a course called play in Winter which addressed some of the issues I had been finding brought on by the cold weather. During this course we were shown footage of a pre school setting in Norway. It struck how resilient the children seemed compared to some of those we have in our setting however it struck me that this is only due to the child's experiences. If we want our children to be resilient then we have to provide them with challenging situations both mentally and physically. How often do we give the objective and how we want them to achieve success? We rarely present the child with the opportunity for truly openended learning which requires far greater resilience and physically the challenges presented by the outdoors and winter are far greater than that of any P E session. During the Norwegian video we were shown one pre school that were attempting a local

mountain challenge to climb a certain group of hills in their area. One girl on the last hill was filmed crying and wanting to turn back. The practitioners response was “Grit your teeth Erica and wipe your tears. Think of the prize when you get to the top.” Erica duly did grit her teeth and was satisfied when she reached the top. It made me think about how we challenge our children. It also got me thinking about the parents of those children and their resilience or lack of it and how attitudes from parents can rub off on their children and how we can tackle this issue.

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