

Can I reconcile the tension I feel between living my values at the same time as exercising professional judgements and, in doing so, improve my practice?

Introduction

In my previous educational enquiry ‘Can I put the pupil’s voice at the heart of our request for support form?’ I included a video clip of myself talking about the way I would like to live my life. I had recently come across a description of a character in a book by Donna Leon which read as follows:

‘He was a man who gazed on everything he saw with approval and affection and who started each interchange with a deep and abiding regard for the person in front of him’

I was very excited about finding this quote as it seemed to put into words an approach to life and relationships which connected with my own values. I believe that everyone is worthy of respect and that everyone has innate, positive potential. As a trainee youth worker in the 1980s I was introduced to counselling and the work of Carl Rogers. I read about the counselling principle he introduced of the need to have ‘unconditional positive regard’ for the client. My boss at the time also used to talk about ‘non-possessive warmth’ in relation to the young people who came to our centre. I understood these ideas in theory but am pretty sure that in practice I was both critical and judgemental.

Over time, and particularly through the development of my Buddhist practice, I believe these values now underpin my daily life rather than just being theoretical and the Donna Leon quote is an embodiment of what ‘non-possessive warmth’ actually looks like.

However during the course of my second Masters writing on gifts and talents (‘How have I come to recognise and develop my talents which are my gift to my colleagues and pupils’) I became aware that to approach all parents, pupils, staff etc with ‘non-possessive warmth’ might be pleasant for them but was too simplistic in relation to doing my job well. In particular in relation to parents and the safety of their children the situation is more complex. As a professional my first responsibility is for the safety of the pupils in my care. How therefore do I hold my value of ‘deep and abiding regard’ for the parent whilst at the same time making judgements about their capacity to keep their children safe?

The way I have addressed this question is to first outline the method and methodology which I have chosen as being the most appropriate way in which to answer it. I then outline my context and explain the terms I use. I have included narratives to illustrate the tension I experience in my question and include visual examples of (what I think) ‘deep and abiding regard’ looks like. I then set out to try and answer the question 'Is it possible to resolve the tension?' with particular reference to the Buddhist concept of the Ten Worlds. Finally I consider what I have learnt during the course of this exploration.

Method and methodology

The method I used to produce this piece of writing was as follows. My starting point was the narrative, included later on, called ‘A visit to Mrs P’. It describes the moment I first became acutely aware of the tension I have described above. In writing about the visit and sharing the writing with colleagues I began an exploration, through dialogue, of this tension. I was interested to find out whether colleagues recognised it

as a tension, which some did, but more often the discussion prompted us to recognise other tensions between our values and the professional judgements we have to make. I also looked out for writings in newspapers and books which seemed pertinent to the subject. I could have continued like this-talking and collecting evidence but I have now decided to stop and take stock of where I have got to. This current piece of writing is therefore a stopping off point in the exploration of the tension; a layby where I've paused to consider where I've got to so far rather than the final destination. In this layby I can consider how my practice has or will be improved by my exploration of the tension I have described above.

In order to distinguish between method and methodology I remind myself of when I am following a recipe. Recipes usually have a part called method, which follows the list of ingredients, and tells you what to do and how to do it. The methodology, however, is the rationale behind why you need to make the recipe in this particular order in order to get the result that you want (you can't make an omelette without breaking the eggs first). Similarly in order to get the result I want-ie an improvement in my practice I need to choose an appropriate method. If I am to account for myself to myself- and to others-my methodology must take into account the fact that I am at the centre of my enquiry. I have therefore chosen to use a living theory methodology, as developed by Jack Whitehead.

'A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work'. Whitehead 2009 ejolts vol 1

Drawing on Huxtable's (2009) insights into the use of video and visual narratives I use visual and other forms of narrative to clarify and communicate my own living theory and the tensions I feel in asking, researching and answering the above question.

It is clear to me that the process of exploring this tension so far has been an educational one and has had an impact on my learning and my practice.

'Self-study is important not only for what it shows about the self but because of its potential to reveal knowledge of the educational landscape'
(Clandinin and Connelly, 2004, p.597)

I consider my writing to be a contribution to self-study research (Tidwell, Heston and Fitzgerald, 2009) not least because the more I have considered and discussed this question the more wide ranging my thoughts have been and have spilled over into a subsequent enquiry into learning environments. I have at the same time referred back on a regular basis to my Conversation Café colleagues to check that what I am describing is understandable and relevant. My working standard of judgement is George Orwell who said:

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

Orwell, Politics and the English Language 1946

I'm not sure I would stand up to George Orwell's rigour however these are standards I aspire to.

Context

Following Lord Laming's report into the death of Victoria Climbié there has been an increased emphasis for education professionals to work collaboratively with other professionals to safeguard children and young people. Child protection training is essential for all school personnel, not just for teachers but for anyone who comes into contact with pupils. CRB checks must be made prior to any appointment and regularly updated. The safety of pupils in a school is of paramount importance. In both the Climbié and the more recent Baby P case social workers were described as being 'overly optimistic and trusting'. Lord Laming himself said that social workers should take a position of 'respectful uncertainty' and have 'a more robust approach to guard against a culture of denial and false optimism'. There has been much debate in the press about the new measures for safe guarding children and concern that all those who work with them are potential paedophiles or child abusers. Rather than a culture of 'false optimism' it seems to me now that there is a culture of mistrust about any adult who wants to work with children.

My current job is as SENCo in a special school for children with behaviour difficulties. Well over half of the children in the school have social workers. Some pupils are subject to Children in Need plans, some on the child protection register. Some are in the care of the Local Authority, some are on orders with the youth offending team. Many come from extremely difficult and damaged backgrounds but all are entitled to the best quality education we can give them. Working with them requires a continual balancing act between establishing and maintaining a relationship but also establishing boundaries. Working with their parents/carers is a similar balancing act of establishing a working relationship whilst keeping the safety and well being of the pupil paramount.

Here are two different professionals' views of the relationships between professionals and parents:

'many of the parents we deal with have been abused and neglected themselves, so they are in some ways as needy as the two-year olds we've gone in to protect. It is hard to focus on 'the child' in situations where everyone exhibits childlike behaviour and the social worker is the only caring figure around.....this is the continual challenge in social work: trying to meet the needs of both parties through intervention with the ones who can talk. If hostages can learn to empathise with their captors how much more likely is it that social workers will empathise with the needy parents they see every week, even to the extent of taking on their anxieties and priorities' (to the detriment of the child?)

Gaynor Arnold (social worker and author) The Times May 8 2009

'.....listening is free and local authorities and schools need to do it better. Parents have told us that face-to-face communication is one of the most important things a school can do to build confidence.....Parents told us that one of their most heartfelt needs was simply to have someone who understands their child's needs. Teachers should be better equipped and supported to respond to those most in need..... We need a massive cultural change in schools and local authorities that puts the needs of children with disability and SEN and the voice of parents at the heart of the system'

Brian Lamb (chairman of the Special Education Consortium) The Observer December 20 2009

The recent case in Edlington ('Torture boys!' as the papers like to say) has again highlighted the tensions I feel as a professional working with parents. Once again the social workers in the case have been castigated for their over-optimism of the parenting capabilities-this time of the parents of the perpetrators rather than the victims. If I am to have unconditional positive regard for the parents I work with and to believe my job is to ensure that their voice is heard (as Brian Lamb advocates) how do I avoid over-optimism and over-empathising (as Gaynor Arnold suggests)?

Explaining terms

In my introduction I use both the phrases 'unconditional positive regard' and 'non-possessive warmth'. I also use the expression 'deep and abiding regard' from the Donna Leon book. These expressions are not interchangeable and one of the challenges of this enquiry (and using Orwellian standards!) has been to be clear myself what they mean and then decide how I am going to describe the value I am talking about.

'Unconditional positive regard' to me means not making judgments about people but accepting them for who they are and feeling positively about them. 'Non-possessive warmth' is more a description of a feeling whereby you feel warmly affectionate toward them but are not seeking, or needing to have, this feeling reciprocated. 'Deep and abiding regard' coupled with 'approval and affection' to me implies a joining together of the other two phrases in describing an approach to people which is both respectful and affectionate. I realise that in trying to define terms I am still using words and not really getting close to what I mean because these phrases are all about relationships which are living things difficult to pin down on a page. The conclusion I have now come to is that I need to include some video snippet here to try and illustrate what I mean. In the meantime the shorthand version I will use is 'unconditional warmth'. (if there is a video clip of me doing this-this would be the place to put it!)

Narratives to illustrate the tension

I wrote 'A visit to Mrs P' about a year ago and I can see that this was the beginning of my enquiry into the tensions I am exploring. I remember at the time thinking how well I had got on with this particular parent who I had tried so hard to engage. I also thought that because of my persistence and positive regard for her I had made progress where others had not been able to. I can still remember the feeling of utter stupidity when I met the CAMHS nurse later!

A visit to meet Mrs P

This was, I think, my 6th attempt to meet Mrs P and record her views for her son's annual review. We'd already had the review and she hadn't been able to come because she was ill. But I was determined that I would include something from her when I sent the report in so arranged to meet her at her boyfriend's house.

Our only previous encounter had been when she opened the door to me thinking I was a doctor. I had previously both arranged visits and called unexpectedly without success. I was aware from talking to people who know the family and reading the boy's file that she had had post natal depression and suffered from agoraphobia. As

far as I could tell she had never been to the school in the 4 years he had been attending there.

I also knew there had been a significant difference of opinion between school staff and the CAMHS nurse on one hand and social services on the other hand about her ability to care for the boy. The social worker had written a report for the review which basically said that everything was OK at home, the house was kept in good order and Mrs P and the boy got on well. The school, however, had witnessed some extremely dangerous behaviour by the boy. They have been struggling to keep him safe and ensure he takes the correct medication. They also find it very difficult to contact her.

So the intention of my visit was both to gain her views but also to try and come to my own conclusion about how things were at home. She was in when I arrived (good start!) and invited me into the kitchen.. The boy was there and said hello to me. He was on his way out with a friend and his mum asked him to get her some milk. He agreed, took some money from her, gave her a quick kiss and left.

We discussed the annual review and I showed her what I'd already written in my report. I pointed out the phrase '... he often arrives at school tired, hungry and distracted'. She didn't seem upset by this description, which I had been anticipating that she might. She said that he sleeps well but, because of his medication, often doesn't eat breakfast. There have clearly been some problems about what dosage to give him. She gave me some pills to take into school which she said were fast release and could be given to him after lunch if he 'went off on one'. We discussed how important it was to get everyone together to talk about the boy's future and she agreed she would come to a meeting at the school if I gave her a lift.

I felt that the meeting had gone well and that I had established a relationship with her which would be helpful for the future. I had done this by listening attentively, being open and honest and sharing something of myself. I have a 14 year old boy as well, my younger child and growing up fast. We both have cats who will, in due course, replace our children when they leave home. I try to both be very 'present' with her and also have some sort of thought process going on at the same time. I want her to trust that I am there for the boy's benefit but I also need to have a critical eye and ear for any child protection concerns. I'm pretty sure I always err on the side of developing a relationship and generally think that this needs to come first.

The next day I happen to bump into the CAMHS nurse and, as I know she's known this family much longer than I have, I tell her about the visit and the pills which Mrs P has given me. She is horrified that Mrs P is dishing our prescribed medication to me and I feel rather stupid. I really should have questioned her about whether she should have been giving me those pills. After all she hardly knew me. The nurse is very sceptical about the possibility of Mrs P actually coming into school, a view which is echoed by the school staff themselves when I tell them about my visit. 'She'll say all the right things but she won't be there when you go to collect her' they say. Well I'm determined to give it a go.

So is it possible to both gaze on everyone 'with approval and affection' and start every interchange with a 'deep and abiding regard' (Donna Leon) but also apply critical judgement and ensure that, above all, children are kept safe?

A further narrative 'J's step-dad' is included in the Appendix.

During the course of my research and discussions I came across the work and writings of Robyn Pound, a health visitor in Bath, who has developed the concept of 'alongsideness' in her work with troubled and troubling families. Robyn describes very openly her relationships with these families and what she is able to do within these relationships to safeguard the health and well-being of the children.

'Working with parents, I am responsive both to their needs and to those most likely to enhance well-being of children. Alongsideness could risk my collusion with parent's needs over those of children, or the procedures of other professionals. Responsiveness to children is paramount and requires my assessment of need and action on their behalf. This is my responsibility through professional remit and the expectations of society. Pivotal for balancing my decision-making is my professional expertise and my personal thresholds of morality, observable in practice as embodied values. For me, these values are under an umbrella of alongsideness, which is held up by respect, self-determination, responsive responsibility and equity of rights for children. Values provide a safety net by keeping my actions under constant tension'.
Robyn Pound Phd submission 2003

I understand Robyn to be describing here the same tensions that I am aware of. I can also see in the video clip of her what I recognise as 'unconditional warmth'

Is it possible to resolve the tension?

Having considered my writings and those of Robyn and other professionals the conclusion I have come to is that this tension will always exist. Therefore the key question for me now is how I can get better at both developing relationships with parents whilst safeguarding their children? Having become conscious of this tension how can I improve my practice?

A key element of this for me is that of being 'genuine'. By this I mean that when I am with a parent I am *really* listening to them and not just half listening whilst waiting for an opportunity to continue with my own agenda. I wonder about the experience of the parents (and indeed colleagues and pupils) I work with when I am listening to them. Do they know that at some level I am making judgements about them or do they believe that I am just listening? I think that I am at my best when this simultaneous listening and thinking is an unconscious process but I also think that with practice I can always become more 'in the moment' and empathetic. My worry is that if I start trying to unpick and analyse how I do this I will find that either a) I become unable to do it any more (having made my unconscious competence, conscious I am unable to become unconsciously competent again) and/or b) I find that actually I am not competent at all! Its all very well having values but what if you don't live up to them? The danger in saying 'these are my values, this is how I want to live my life' is that other people can then readily point to the times when you don't live up to your ideals! Here the Buddhist concept of 'honin'myo' comes in handy. Its literal translation is 'from this moment on' and it means that we can always restart and try again. At this point I would also like to introduce the Buddhist concept of the 'Ten Worlds' or 'Ten Life-states' as this is a fundamental ingredient of my own living theory. Richard Causton in his book 'The Buddha in Daily Life' introduces the concept as follows:

‘The Ten Worlds or Ten States of Life, an absolutely fundamental principle of Buddhism, teaches that everybody possesses ten basic inner states of being which we all experience from moment to moment. Briefly these Ten Worlds are Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Tranquility, Rapture, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. To explain Hell is the state of suffering, Hunger is the state of being under the sway of desires, Animality is the state of instinctive behaviour, and Anger is the state of constant competition or conflict.... Tranquility is the neutral state of peace and calm and Rapture is the state of being temporarily overjoyed at the gratification of a desire..... The state of Learning is that in which we learn something from the teachings of others, while the state of Realization is that in which we come to some partial understanding of life, however great or small, through our own efforts and observations. Bodhisattva is the state of altruism-of finding joy through helping others; and finally the state of Buddhahood is defined as absolute happiness and is only attained as a result of the actions we take when in the state of Bodhisattva.’

At first glance the various life states seem like a hierarchy through which one progresses however an important facet of the ten worlds is that of ‘mutual possession’. This is where this Buddhist concept meets up with the tension I have been describing. Mutual possession means that each state contains all the others within it. For different people one or other life state tends to be more dominant and will affect all the other nine. For example:

‘the Hunger of a person dominated by Tranquility may appear as a longing for something but without any action taken to achieve it, while the Hunger of someone in the grip of Animality can be seen in the behaviour of sale-time shoppers for example.’

I aspire to the state of Buddhahood in which the qualities of wisdom, compassion, strength and energy are always evident. The more I am able to be in this life-state the more I am able to be ‘alongside’ parents and be able to respond in a genuinely helpful way to whatever life-state they are in at the same time as exercising the judgements needed to keep their children safe.

In conclusion

Donna Leon’s book is called ‘Blood from a stone’ and there have been many times during the course of writing this enquiry when I (and my long-suffering colleagues probably) wondered whether it would ever be finished! I find putting my thoughts into words and then putting those words onto a page very constraining. In conversation and discussion I am much more a listener than a talker and when talking try to be sensitive and responsive to whoever is listening-checking often to make sure that they have understood what I am trying to say. In order to write this enquiry I have needed to rely on an audience as I have gone along, in particular my colleagues at the B&NES Conversation Café who have read and commented and advised and supported. I have also come to recognise the importance of the ‘layby’ (see p2) and that by writing, rather than just talking and listening, I am able to share more fully the values which underpin my work and my life

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Appendix

J's step-dad

On my way back from Keynsham I decide to drop off the speech and language report to J's mum in person-rather than put it in the post. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly I know she's been unhappy about what's been happening at school this week and I want to give her the opportunity to ask questions/have a rant/ make some new plans. Secondly I think, given the history of her complaints, that it would be helpful to try and have a better relationship with her. Thirdly, to be quite honest, I'm curious to see where J lives. The family are on a child protection plan and I think it's useful to have an understanding of their circumstances.

Anyway she's not there. Her partner, who I've met once before at a CP conference answers the door and says she's at the shops. I explain why I've come, give him the report and arrange to come back after school tomorrow. He seems keen to talk but I am in a hurry. He starts talking about the most recent incident involving J at school and asks me what we are doing about it. I am polite and apologise for any distress caused. He then starts telling me about the special school he used to go to and how he was treated there and we have a brief discussion about the limits of discipline nowadays. Whilst we are talking and I am edging toward the door and I am distracted by his T shirt and the wording on it. I finally realise that what it says is 'NICE LEGS-WHAT TIME DO THEY OPEN TONIGHT?' I find this so offensive! However what can I say about it? I know he has learning difficulties, I know the children have been on the CP register but he has brought some stability into their lives. I know he and J's mum have just started a parenting programme and evidence seems to point to his commitment to staying with those kids.

My middle class judgements about his T shirt are pretty irrelevant-or are they?