

Language of learning to the language of educational responsibility

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Abstract

How do I recognise the move from the language of learning to the language of educational responsibility?

'...each practitioner researcher clarifies, in the course of their emergence, in the practice of educational enquiry, the embodied ontological values to which they hold themselves accountable in their professional practice.' (Whitehead, 2005)

I have spent the last two years exploring my values and beliefs in the classroom and working with the children in my class to develop our skills and reflections as learners.

As educational researchers we need to go beyond the language of learning into a language of educational responsibility; a responsibility to ourselves and the children, looking at educational explanations and evaluations of our living values in our class. This paper shows how I move from the language of learning to clarifying the meaning of the educational responsibility I feel towards the children in my care.

Keywords: values, responsibility, living-educational-theory.

Introduction

I was working as a Deputy Head and Y2 teacher in an English rural primary school as I worked on my Masters. This paper is an edited version of one of the modules I successfully submitted.

My intention in this paper is to contribute to the knowledge-base of education with my own living-educational-theory, exploring my values and the influences in my learning and of the children in my care, whilst looking at the insights I have gained from other education theories. Hirst (1983) explores this issue, helping us to clarify our desire to create and not replace our own 'living-educational-theories' (Whitehead, 1989).

*'In many characterisations of educational theory, my own included, principles justified in this way have until recently been regarded as at best pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in my rationally developed theory would **be replaced** (my emphasis) by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification.'* (p.18)

My previous assignments focused on aspects that have startled my pupils, my research colleagues and myself, on our learning journeys and as our reflections have created

meaning for us. The different aspects are a focus of a moment in time, a single step of thought and self reflection. But the reflections drawn and focused on at the time are different than the perspective gained now as I have changed, time has moved on and the reactions of those around us reflect back and haze my perceptions to a different understanding. This is highlighted by McNiff (2007) in her recent paper.

'My idea of the good is in the striving, not necessarily in the arriving. The good for me is not a final imaginary place, nor an abstract concept

What I know now will change into something better (p.2)

A special moment in time



'We might look at learning as a response to what is other and different, to what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs us, rather than as the acquisition of something we want to possess.' (Biesta, 2006, p.27)

For me this photograph sums up the ethos and educational responsibility that I feel is so important in my classroom. Here two children are genuinely sharing a moment of success after persevering to solve a problem together. The pleasure shines from child A's face and they hug, as others smile and share their joy. All children should have the inner strength to take risks, to question the world around them and feel a sense of responsibility and success through their learning. To reach this moment was a long and shared path, as open learners. The journey changed totally when the children began to understand that I was learning too, through my Tuesday MA group and the work we were doing in class together. The children's depth of reflection of themselves and as a learner developed the self confidence and awareness to take risks with their learning and to celebrate their successes. In my classroom, learning is talked about as a collection of skills. Once the children could see and understand them they began to use them confidently. This was the basis for the development of their awareness of the learning theories of others and their interest in challenging the 'experts' around them with their own writings. The constant

immersions in the language of learning have enabled all of us to experience the movement towards educational responsibility through our journey together.

McNiff (2007b) discusses how her 'story' or journey becomes her living-educational-theory and highlights my story as a teacher, as revealing new living standards of judgment for educational enquiries through my journey. The meanings and values of my educational responsibilities are explored through the relationships, interactions and responses of my children. My personal meaning of educational responsibility is revealed as I work through the tensions I feel between conforming to government policies and living my educational values as fully as I can. Retaining my integrity in the educational relationships I have with my pupils is very important to me as I meet the needs of my children. I am drawn to the writings of Biesta (2006), who points out that it is educationally significant to be concerned with the 'coming into the world' of my children as unique, singular beings:

'We can, however, also look at learning from a different angle and see it as a response. Instead of seeing learning as an attempt to acquire, to master, to internalize, or any other possessive metaphors we can think of, we might see learning as a reaction to a disturbance, as an attempt to recognize and reintegrate as a result of disintegration. We might look at learning as a response to what is other and different, to what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs us, rather than as the acquisition of something we want to possess. ... the second conception of learning is educationally the more significant, if it is conceded that education is not just about the transmission of knowledge, skills and values, but is concerned with the individuality, subjectivity, or personhood of the student, with their "coming into the world" as unique, singular beings.' (p.27).

I am also bearing in mind the point made by Connelly & Clandinin, (1990):

'We think a variety of criteria, some appropriate to some circumstances and some others, will eventually be the agreed-upon norm. It is currently the case that each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work.' (p.7)

Revealing the meanings of my value of educational responsibility

I shall now focus on revealing the meanings of my values of educational responsibility as they are explored through the relationships, interactions and responses of my children. What intrigues me is the perceptions at that moment and how they have changed as my pool of understanding has grown and the ripples continually bounce and reflect from others and the interactions of self we explore. This should be muddled and difficult to untangle as the concepts as exploration of self is equally hazy and unclear. Do we ever feel the reactions the same, to the same event, at different points in time and place? Can then the conclusions we draw ever reflect the depth of understanding we are struggling to grasp hold of or reflect the tangle of uncertainty and the depth of question that reflects our place. This is part of the responsibility I feel towards the children in my care, the opportunity to be aware of this space and feel the joy and uncertainty positively

of exploring it. West–Burnham (2005) also struggles to clarify and explore this point. Should then we struggle with the concept of understanding or give it new meaning. Understanding as a grain of sand, a small reflection when grouped and stored with the other experiences and reflections merge to give a layer of understanding that layers and grows with time, but the depth of the layers gives haze, value and perspectives to the understanding. The children in their discussions explore the meaning for them of ‘deep learning’ the place where they collect ideas and save them. The place where ideas take on new meanings and value to them as they grow and the reflections change. Child ‘A’ recently reviewed a reflective video clip of a discussion he took part in where he describes learning as being three dimensional rather than flat and two dimensional. From his perspective over a year later and with many more learning and life experiences he talked about learning as being four dimensional and talked about the dimension of movement and time influencing his learning. An incredible leap and change but his own knowledge creation from the layers he is developing and merging at will.

As I look now at the mountain of reflections by the children and myself is being able to make links and reflect on the space between the moments and the time we didn’t feel. We have meticulously collected our thoughts in a way that reflects the moment we are in. At times that has been poetry, art, craft or discussions that we have recorded. The moments that seem unimportant and just between the points on the journey we have taken together. Perhaps it is only by reading and listening to the reflections of others to the same moment that we experience and see it more for the moment than our involvement and meaning of ‘self’ that it enabled us to feel. Not explore, because in the present we don’t take the time to explore just feel. Enabling the children to have and appreciate the skills to explore and find these moments is so important to develop their sense of self and to feel ‘possibilities’ and ‘ideas’.

I have a greater sense of myself, an understanding of my place in the learning of not only the children in my class but of myself too. A tentative awareness of the space I can encourage, in myself, inside others and in my classroom to generate learning moments and the time to merge those moments, chew them over with others and make sense of self and them. This developing ‘sense’ is the reflection of the change and move towards the educational responsibility that has grown for myself and the children through this journey. During a discussion at the end of the Summer term the children explored the idea that true learning comes not from the sessions we have together, or the knowledge they ‘receive’ or generate through work, but in the messy time inside of themselves when they make sense, merge, link and create new understandings for themselves. This we explored through ‘deep learning’ and the sense of creating our own new ideas from our experiences. Some of the children’s thoughts can be seen in appendix one.

We have explored ourselves as a learner, understanding the ‘me’ we keep hidden from the world and the ‘me’ that impacts on our learning. This has been a gradual process of reflection, discussion and questioning, of the world we accept as settled and the space we can create as a learner. We have used art, craft, poetry, video, evaluative writing and photographs to reflect on our journey to this point in time and thought. The place where we know the deep learning tangles and creates, the space between. It is this space and

deep learning that fascinates us and we are curious about. These are questions raised by the children:

Where does this deep learning happen?
What does it look and feel like?
What happens there?
How can we find it and get there?
Is it the same for everyone?

At this moment my thoughts roam and struggle to comprehend, to describe to myself, before articulating in a style that reflects the inner doubt and struggle with the space.

Is it in the moment, now or in the space between 'now and then or if' that the creation of thought materialises into an energy that creates meaning and sense. The space created by our learning skills and knowledge of self, bring the space for thought and wisdom alive. The space and moment cannot be created for us, but the encouragement brings an energy that drives creation and the exploration of thought. It's a quiet space or a noisy moment, a calm thought and a tangle of ideas that flow or stutter to life. The idea and 'I' bring the life and the frame that enables or quashes.

The thin layers we create through life, coat, and hide the creation of knowledge and wisdom we crave, sliding through our fingers like grains of sand as we grow. Hidden under doubt and experiences are the narrow understanding of learning without. Only within can we grow, challenge, create, unfurl and discover what we don't know or cannot even imagine.

The tracking of learning, the probing of self and encouragement break through the layers leaving the inner exposed to swell with energy. The deep learning space we slip in and out of, almost tasting an idea but it disappears like a whisp just out of reach set us on different paths to explore. We don't always find the space or the moment, we don't always even realise it is there. The key to finding it is the discovery that it is there between 'I think and I wonder', but what lies beyond or below? 'The purity of thought that enables creation of wisdom.'

For the children this idea of being able to create new knowledge is amazing and led to fascinating discussions, sharing ideas and exploring this concept. Please see appendix one.

Demonstrating their own growing sense and movement towards educational responsibility towards others, the children shared their feelings of worry towards other children who aren't 'enabled' to find the time and energy to develop the confidence and self knowledge that they have, through exploring themselves as learners. Will they have the skills to create their own learning opportunities and understandings as my class have done?

Or will they have the different moments floating or stored safely but not the skills to grow new learning and understandings from the seeds school plants. From the discussion it really made me reflect on what my role is in the classroom. 'Teacher', to me implies departing knowledge, enabling, the phrase of 'pace and challenge' springs to mind, but none of them make me think of creating space and having time to enable children to become the self learners we want them to be. Or do we?

If we grow a generation of creative, evaluative, reflective young people who have the skills to explore for themselves, to understand how they interact with the world around them in different situations, to plan their own learning journey with an awareness that it can take many paths and speeds, be disguised as a rest place, will our present education system support and challenge these young people?

We are seeing for the first time schools that are brave enough to challenge the 'status quo' and the present government frame works causing tensions as we search for a new and truly child centred approach to education.

'There will be different ways. Children learn better when they are excited and engaged..... different schools go about this in different ways.' (DFES, 2003, p. 3)

The search has enabled new philosophies of learning to emerge and to be challenged. Ideas to be stretched and to impact on all areas of school life, from the structure of buildings, Curriculum, community in its widest sense and the role of the learner in the process. Many strengths have emerged as schools have focused on developing different strands and areas. Children are being encouraged to think of themselves as learners, set their own targets and develop a level of self awareness that enables them to evaluate and develop their strengths and weaknesses to maximise their opportunities. Schools are developing learning opportunities and their Curricula to support local interests, needs and facilities. ICT so familiar to young people is changing the face of learning, if we have the knowledge ourselves and the financial support in place to move forward at what can be for some seem a frightening pace.

As children are becoming more self aware, more self challenging and with the skills to articulate their own needs, interests and strengths, how can we ensure that we enable rather than restrict their development in a challenging, creative and forward thinking learning environment and educational framework?

Through my paper we have been trying to clarify, that it is not only identifying the best way forward, the finances and structures needed but also having the courage to change what has been 'right' for hundreds of years. We have the 'power' to change. Change for the future, but we are still analysed against criteria set against the 'old' institution and standards of assessment. Publicly analysed against criteria we push against but have not yet succeeded in changing.

Perhaps this just throws other questions into the mix rather than there being a straight forward answer. But if we feel we know the answer, do we not then know the way forward?

Can that path be the same for all schools?

How can we then all be judged against one framework of criteria?

These are the questions as schools we must pose and reflect upon if we are going to meet the needs of children who are being encouraged to be an active part of the process, to have a voice and challenge and interact with the world around them!

I have recently been appointed as Headteacher of a primary school in Somerset and this puts possibilities and responsibility in a new light for myself. But this isn't the same for the children in my class. Their perspective has grown as their confidence and self understanding has grown. They see the world and the education system from their experiences, but also from the potential they believe they deserve.

With my class we have travelled a journey of exploration of self and as learners, together, apart and in groups, where our perspectives, beliefs and values have been challenged, probed and questioned. We have changed. We have all changed. We all have a greater understanding of what makes us 'tick'. How we learn best, what impacts positively and negatively on our learning, but perhaps most importantly of all, we have all developed a sense of educational responsibility towards ourselves and the world we interact with. But for all the understanding we have created child P summed it up precisely:

'The more I know, the more I know there is that I don't know.'

This new way of learning and being learners together has evoked questions that I have no answer to. We explore big questions often to do with the meaning of life and our spiritual self that sometimes have no answers. But for the questions we have generated there should be answers, answers to be debated and thought about, but still answers. Please see appendix two.

A couple of years ago if you had asked me if my children thought of themselves as learners, felt they had a voice and were listened to I would have said yes, definitely. We always talk about topics before we start them, the children could tell me what the learning intention for a session was. Personally, they could describe what they like and don't like about school and what they were good at or need more practise at. But this process of development has opened my eyes as a learner as well as the children in my care. They have an understanding and say, but only within the bounds of the present and the session we were working in. They may have been able to tell me what the learning intention was, but couldn't have generated it independently. They had an understanding of what we were learning then, but not an over view of the bigger picture. They weren't involved in the planning for their own learning or assessment of it or setting targets. Did we talk about being a learner, what a good learner looked like, the skills involved? Surprisingly enough considering we are a school my answer would have to be no!

But it is only now, after taking part in the journey and knowing the children and the potential of our education system better that I even realised it is no. That feels a shocking confession or is it an indictment of our system. I have been trained to be a good teacher, to challenge all the children in my care, to monitor and track carefully and enable as many of my class as possible to reach 'level 3' at the end of KS1. OFSTED judged my teaching as good and excellent and I fit the system and methods for teaching at the present. But I don't want to fit any more! But as we have (the children and myself) gained an awareness of ourselves we have also understood the system and world we must interact with. So although I fit the system I have also made the system bend and flex to the responsibility I feel towards my children and the ethos I treasure in my class. Our belief in ourselves as a learner enables us to access and appreciate the different methods of teaching and learning we experience. This was made very plain by the children when we were discussing SATs just after they had finished. They are taken under exam conditions and I wondered how the children would feel. But they were very clear and positive about the whole experience and enjoyed doing them. Every child! They talked about all of the different ways we learn, making me think of a jigsaw puzzle. This is just one piece, one experience that compliments and jars against others, but is a positive experience if we treasure all learning. The world the children will experience will not always be easy and will challenge them, this is how they made me feel listening to them and that they will have the skills to access and take the positive from learning experiences they come across, or that finds them.

'Perhaps learning is a journey we undertake our whole lives, by realising the quality of the experiences on the journey and not the results, we learn more about ourselves and our values grow and change'. (Wallace, 2004)

I am not alone! Our reaction to the impact and emotion of the qualities weaves through our lives, sometimes hidden from memory, sometimes hitting us with depth and time.

So why now am I feeling out of step, as do my children with the rest of the 'system'?
Are my needs changing?

Do I feel the needs of the children are changing?

Is the responsibility I once felt was mine, changing and being accepted and understood by the children too?

Do I feel the children deserve to be totally involved in their learning to enable them to be life long learners?

Is it only by understanding ourselves and how we learn that we can begin to understand others and interact fully with the world around us?

At this point I feel we come back to child 'P's' comment:

'The more I know, the more I know there is that I don't know.'

The journey started with the TASC Wheel by Belle Wallace (Mounter, 2007) and a beginning of two years of steps, not on a path but free ranging where our learning and enquiries took us. Now with hindsight the importance changes. The Rainbow of Skills initially seemed a tremendous piece of work that inspired the children and helped them to develop a vocabulary and understanding that learning is not some innate skill we are born with, but a collection of skills that we can develop and strengthen. At that time the difference in the way the children talked about themselves and their learning was fascinating, we developed the log further involving ideas of the children. It seemed a very important step – at the time. But now two years on the importance as a stepping stone is still there but has paled as other moments intrude, mixing together. I view the steps now with almost fondness for the memory and the step they enabled, the opening up of other opportunities, although I didn't see that at the time, but was caught up in the moment. The value comes from the moment, but also from the journey that transpires between, when you have a reflective view over time.

The Rainbow Log and the process of the TASC Wheel gave the children skills with which to explore in a greater way, the world around them. To challenge, question and see beneath the surface layer we often take at face value. How you define or pin point this is difficult. It isn't tangible or visible or even measurable! It has given them the understanding that they can create knowledge and understanding from the collection of their learning, but that this space is controlled, developed and used by them. It is this space the voyage of discovery has enabled them to use, but also gives them the awareness and 'self responsibility' that not all children are given the same opportunities.

It has created dissatisfaction with the lack of a voice they feel they have. We offer a token gesture and give power to the student council, but only within the parameters that we allow. No student body has access to a platform to share their learning, views or question developments and the direction of their school. No national body of pupils are asked to help develop and inform policy. My children feel strongly that often grown ups like children and want to help them, but don't talk to children and have forgotten what it is like to be a child.

'Why don't they ask us?'
(Child B)

I hesitate to answer I don't know why!

Is it because we never have asked the children, because we teach them and they learn?
Does it stem from the old adage that children should be seen and not heard?
Or do we feel we know better as the adults?
Perhaps another option could answer because it has always been this way.....

The journey has been unsettling, I feel for the first time that perhaps blinkers have been removed and there is a whole world outside of the box that I have accepted, that I was not even aware of before the journey we shared.

If it took the journey for this level of awareness are others able to find it alone, without the living action research framework?

The intellectual and practical motif which most readily captures both the values and alternative practices exemplified in the Student as Researchers initiative is that of mutuality, of education as both a shared responsibility and a shared achievement...' (Michael Fielding, 2001)

Fielding discusses the benefits of student researchers but through very narrow eyes, the 'achievement' of gaining educational knowledge. This is not my understanding of education; surely this implies the old standards we have had for generations, trying to link new ideas within the framework of what we feel comfortable with.

But there is hope; Hutchinson (1998) also writes about action research but as a promising forward looking reflective tool for future change:

'...empowering nature of research which takes the form of action research.valuable role in effecting school change'.

Will the children remain challenging and self reflective or will it gradually fade and be lost if they work within a system and with teachers that are caught within the frameworks that have bound us for so long?

We begin and end as a circle, and cycle of questions that we don't always have a definitive answer for. But that is the glory of the journey. It is the end of this moment but just transient in my journey.

'We might look at learning as a response to what is other and different, to what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs us, rather than as the acquisition of something we want to possess.' (Biesta, 2007, 27)

Appendix one

We also generated vocabulary that we felt describes that space we create and use, deep learning:

Old, ideas, new, rough, smooth
Over flowing
Stringy, sticky, gooey
Tangled, tangly
Clear, sparkling, spark, flash
Dark, light
Full to the brim
Colourful, swirl, swirly
Flow, flowing, stumbling
Messy, unordered
Deep, digging
Finding, searching
Mixed up, muddled
Puzzled
Jiggling, wobbling
Frizzy
Weird
become

Easy learning becomes hard. New learning becomes old until it becomes gooey, sticky, icky, weird, deep flashes now and again make a sound when slick, then get all mixed up at the end.

Until it curls around

Until

I'm going to learn, it comes to a stop

Comes to the edge

So it helps out until learning breaks out

Until at the end it gives up the dinosaur

Wake up

But flashes hopefully, then the dinosaur is tired, then goes to sleep

And then tries again.

By AR and ZD

'It is all tangly and fiddly. It's gloomy and dark. Easy learning becomes hard new learning becomes harder. I'm going to learn until it comes to the edge. It's tingly and magic , it's got loads of wisdom in it and shiny. It helps out until learning breaks out.'
FM and OL

‘Old wonderful ideas swirling together to make one big brilliant idea but when the big brilliant idea explodes we get all muddled up.
It feels like runny larva all over the bottom of our brain, but sometimes it doesn’t pop so you keep your brilliant idea. AW and NL

‘When I do lots of learning I feel like all my ideas, are strings all tangled up but will arrange. I feel the strings are wobbling, light, dark, smooth, over flowing, sparky, flashy, deep, fizzing, old and new.
I feel old, happy, magic, floaty, warm rough and good.’ SM

‘My ideas become a deep rainbow that glitters in the colourful night it flows in a golden tube that makes a learning dinosaur that comes up with gold ideas’ TW

‘Dark bubbles with ideas in, scrunching together, creating brand new thinking, completely unordered but sorting itself out. Thinking feels really strange.’ DR

‘My brain swirls round like fire works going to turn into new ideas
They go together with the thinking which will make a really good idea!
Sometimes it doesn’t mix
Multicoloured when thinking hard
Learning looks
Stringy when
If you look
It’s not like that
Different
Brain never stops swirling
Tangles when learning deep’ CWA

‘I drift my way around
In and out of new things
It’s swirly and it is colourful
It is rough learning menace of learning
New things drift around me where ever I go
I learn the way I go so I learn even when I’m not in school and England
I drift and learn all year round
I always learn something new
It’s my world learning’ MD

JA ‘Deep learning feels like peace and challenging’

TH ‘I skip between learning and deep learning, sometimes my brain gets tired it feels like the deep learning is always hard work.’

OL ‘Everyone can be a deep learner. I am a deep learner sometimes. My head thinks I am a deep learner, but my heart thinks I am not quite.’

SM ‘I am a deep learner because I am a Year 3 and I have great ideas which are funny and exciting. Learning can be two things, hard or easy. I think learning is like all four seasons put together. I also think it is fun as well.’

AS 'I think I am a deep learner because I can mix easy ideas, and make it into one big idea. It feels hard to be a deep learner sometimes.'

Appendix two

'Why is it that only grown ups write about learning?'

'Why don't they ask us?'

'We are great learners, better than older people sometimes, but why don't they listen to us?'

'Can we change things in school?'

These are the questions that I have explored and talked about with my children. Often they have become an issue as the children have gained in confidence, developed their own sense of 'educational responsibility' and have begun to challenge the perceived and sometimes clear boundaries they feel are in place in school

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