

JUSTICE/ IDENTITY/ RACE/ CONFLICT/ STIGMA/ PREJUDICE/ BEING MISUNDERSTOOD:

When I began teaching, I certainly had no conscious intention of becoming an advocate for the marginalised and vulnerable. I am only becoming increasingly aware, 40 years on, of the deliberate choices that I continued to make throughout my career, those seemingly insignificant choices that have shaped my values.

On reflection, I can chart how my embedded knowledge has steered a course for enabling me to enrich my professional practice with what I describe as 'cultural confidence and competence'. I am aware that I am 'driven' to find opportunities to empower those who are marginalised and to bring justice to the discriminated against, through changing 'hearts and minds' and to communicate to 'others', different and positive ways of perceiving and responding to 'difference'. I am aware that each professional position of authority that I have occupied, has provided further opportunities to influence others. I am now at a place where my values cannot be compromised. I operate totally authentically and I seek out opportunities that will enable me to make a difference.

I believe that my embedded knowledge, experience, competence and skills, enable me to gain trust and engage and support individuals and groups. This direct experience, working with individuals, communities and marginalised groups enables me to be authoritative when facilitating and training professionals during continuing professional development (CPD) courses. I straddle both worlds of theory and practice, offering me a unique perspective and opportunities to share. My practice strives towards being a catalyst for change and a vehicle for healing in an unjust environment.

This assignment sets out my life journey and learning. It charts some of the pivotal points (I have recollected 37 – see Appendix X), from behaving instinctively and without reflection as a teenager living in family conflict, to the gradual recognition of my developing embedded knowledge and ability to communicate effectively. Through my writing, I want to understand how this accumulated experience enables my vision towards imagined possibilities, as Lederach would describe 'the moral imagination (Lederach 2006).

I will trace the time line of the career choices and opportunities taken, which evidence how my values have dramatically influenced my decisions to work with and on behalf of black and minority ethnic and other marginalised groups.

Family Conflict 1960s:

My sense of justice and injustice was well developed by the time I left home. I was the survivor of a childhood where I experienced my mother's race (Southern Irish) and faith (Roman Catholic) being a password for being branded as lacking intelligence, being stupid (the butt of Irish jokes) and being a supporter of terrorism (the IRA). Just this week, a good friend sent me a 'round robin' email with the heading 'not very PC but very funny' with a list of 10 jokes about Irish stupidity.

It was already embedded in me that I needed to stand up to the bully and to defend the bullied. When my father used the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland as a 'stick' with which to 'beat' my mother, I had the choice of 'fight' or 'flight'- I began to challenge and defend her. I can still remember the adrenalin rush. The rapid heartbeat and to know that I was going to

‘attack’, terrifying though that confrontation would be. It became automatic, like climbing stairs- as to think and consider what I was about to do would bring hesitation and maybe I would back down and ‘loose’. There was no discernible thought process, a primeval reaction, even now. Was that the beginning of my embedded knowledge?

Perhaps that was my legacy.

Art School late 60s/ early 70s:

When I left school and went to art school, home, a blank canvas moving over night from a convent girl in a neat M&S kilt and colour matching top, to a hasty purchase of my very first denim jeans and a home dyed purple grand dad vest, it was my first taste of expressing my identity. I relaxed, felt at ease and was drawn to a new life of freedom, expression and being an individual. As I learned to paint in oils, a single subject dominated my giant canvases. I painted great apes, caged, forlorn and distressed. Were these paintings a metaphor? I studied these majestic silent creatures first hand at the zoo, observing them day after day (enabled by a years free pass given to me by the then owner of Bristol zoo!). Were these paintings a metaphor for my life? I am aware that my motivation when exhibiting these paintings was not about being praised for competent painting skills but was a passion to communicate, to influence the viewer to understand that these creatures deserved more- that there was injustice. Many years later, one of the happiest moments was sitting quietly in the Sumatran rainforest, touching hands with an orang utan called Julia. That passion never diminished though life moved on.

Teaching art: My emerging sense of injustice and will to do something about it probably emerged when dealing intuitively with a majority white class in the comprehensive at which I taught. The class repeatedly used the term ‘Paki’ in a derogative manner to insult a South Asian student. That familiar feeling from childhood arose in me, perhaps adrenalin? As I was reminded of the verbal attack witnessed throughout my childhood. I know that it ‘struck a chord’ and I had to act. I was possibly not consciously aware of the concept of ‘racism’ but I sensed that this particular verbal name calling was harmful, hurtful and unjust and that I needed to respond. I would carry around a map of India and Pakistan and show the children the part of India that the girl came from and how far away Pakistan was from her home. It was a first and clumsy attempt to positively influence through using knowledge. I learned later that that one has to always work on attitudes and skills. I requested being the form teacher of the ‘remedial’ class. These were the learning and social emotional difficulties cohort, the classes that most teachers dreaded teaching. I worked with them intuitively, getting lots wrong but hopefully some things right.

I now believe with a passion that teaching involves learning to communicate with each individual, to find ways to unlock and enable learning. These children, back in the 70s and 80s were badly failed by their schooling. My art room became a sanctuary to many young people. It was through offering lunchtime and after school sessions that I began to be aware of the troubled lives of some of these pupils. I signed up for counselling training as I felt ill equipped to respond to some of the scenarios that I heard about. Art was a fantastic vehicle for promoting inclusion. You just had to be able to hold a brush or a pencil and then had access to a peaceful haven with a comfortable climate. I wrote several plays and directed them with casts of over 100 and a number of parts for those who were marginalised- the glue sniffers (see photographs), truants, those with more severe learning difficulties and for the chronically shy. This was very rewarding and a proud chapter in my teaching history.

Teaching in the USA early 80s:

Is it only through experiencing difference that we are encouraged to view our values, lifestyle and practice to make comparisons and see other possibilities? I spent a year teaching in the USA. Here I experienced a vastly different education system, the benefits of which have remained with me and the disadvantages and prejudices too.

In Wisconsin there were key features. It was a mainly middle class, white district and the state was 98% Catholic. Just 5 miles from the school lived the home of the legendary Green Bay Packers American Football team. About 10 miles away were the North American Indian reservations, the most famous Indian name being Oshkosh- home of tough workwear. The relevance of these characteristics to my writing is about prejudice, double standards and discrimination.

In one class I had a schoolgirl mother who had her baby at 12. I also taught North American Indians who were discernible by their names and features. I was invited to a prestigious event where the Green Bay Packer Team were the star guests. The Packers were mainly black Americans. They were the ultimate heroes across the USA. In contrast, black students at the high school (very much in the minority) were treated as second class citizens, as were the North American Indians.

I ran a charity fashion show, inviting students to volunteer to model fashion items from local department stores. The schoolgirl mother put forward her name. When the list went up, there was a deputation from a group of mothers, complaining about the inclusion of this girl in the show. She was described as 'flaunting herself' and that the school were condoning her situation. I was appalled. The girl did take her place with the other girls on the catwalk. This was certainly shocking to me, even in the early 80s. The general population seemed oblivious to the hypocrisy of having a strong faith but a poor sense of equality and injustice.

County Advisor for PSHE late 80s:

The ability to do something about my strong sense of injustice came in a brilliant opportunity. First I was invited to become part of the County teaching team to promote 'Active Learning' throughout schools. This led to a 4 year secondment as a county advisory teacher for Personal, Social and Health Education PSHE. This government initiative enabled me to learn the strategies to fully engage an audience in a wide range of situations. 'Developmental Group Work (Leslie Button) has been in the forefront of my practice ever since. I had extensive training in participative and experiential methodologies and designed and delivered my own courses across a county, working in every level of educational setting,, putting everything I had learned to use. The evidence was in front of me as I saw attitudes challenged, confidence developed and knowledge absorbed. Professionals (and parents at evening workshops) would arrive with one set of beliefs and attitudes and leave with another. I had found a powerful method to change hearts and minds. Whoever the audience, the courses were run entirely using active learning methods. These consisted of card sorting, responding to statements, forming 'attitude continuums', ranking and other simple methods to engage. Skills were learned through the methodologies being used on the training course. The mantra was 'starting where the participants are' and then gently moving them forward in a non threatening and fun way. Feedback and reflection were built in, from a belief that we learn effectively through recollection and reflection and so feedback sessions were an essential ingredient.

This will have been the time when I developed the confidence to realise that I was now 'armed' with the tools to make a difference to the disadvantaged and excluded, through engaging those who were in positions to make a difference in training. The four years of developing expertise in these methodologies changed the way that I communicate forever.

This embedded knowledge opened the door to my having a powerful toolkit that could be used anywhere in any situation and would deliver successful outcomes.

1. Anti racism beginnings in school settings
2. Secure unit & Wansdyke- working with the marginalised and excluded
3. Adoption: observations of race issues- selection and restrictions on grounds of colour
4. STAR writing & training,- Key Note Speech, twilight sessions
5. Women's Group: black business, white trainers ideology of white supremacy
6. HO: drugs, crime, counter terrorism- the move to Diversity- theory & practice, engaging & learning
7. PVE: engaging with Muslims, Bombing, conferences
8. Friendship: Immaculate & Zimbabwe- work permits & abuse, fundraising
9. Social justice group/ CAFOD parish rep/ charity giving
10. Identity- Pakistani & Somali young women- Waasila & SDG FGM
11. Pax Pontis: new migrants/ consortium/ forum
12. Conflict Transformation Through Performing Arts Plymouth
13. Kelly's pregnancy
14. UME conferences/ EU Europe
15. Bristol CC Elders programme Consultation, concert, radio show
16. Community Cohesion- emergence of a new umbrella term
17. Refugee Festival Arts Tent/ City of Sanctuary- use banner
18. Creative Ed training teachers
19. Linkage elders: consortium, training, empowerment
20. Fundraising