

Introduction

My thesis is a description and explanation of my life as a teacher /researcher in a comprehensive school in Swindon from 1990 to 1996. In writing it I have fulfilled a personal commitment to celebrate and explain my developing educational values, practices and knowledge. In submitting it for accreditation and legitimation to the Academy I am attempting to fulfil my professional commitment to the development of research-based professionalism in education.

Those processes of thinking , acting and making sense of my work , the narration of those processes and the changes that have taken place in my actions and understanding show how knowledge can assume a living form because it is always being reformulated and reworked. In my writing I have kept these words by James Britton in mind:

“ it is the continual reformulation of what we know in the light of what we perceive that matters: and the hardening of what we know into a formula that we apply ready made instead of reformulating - that is the danger. Thus, our most powerful ideas are relatively general, relatively unformulated starting points from which we constantly reformulate.” (Britton, J. 1982)

During the years that this thesis was being written, the nature of my job in school changed: I was the Head of Humanities and then became a Senior Teacher and a member of the Senior Management Team; in 1996 I became Head of Upper School with pastoral rather than curriculum responsibilities.

My thesis has a number of strands that reflect the changing nature of my job and my roles as teacher researcher. It shows how I worked as a teacher with students and, as Head of Humanities, with a colleague in school; it shows how I struggled to cope with the increasingly difficult demands of the school management and how government legislation affected my work. I also write about how, as a teacher/ researcher I had to try to understand how my work fitted into that of the academic community. And throughout the thesis there is the story of how I came to understand more fully my educational values and explain my educational development. Throughout this work I explain how I transcended the imposition of the power of others in creative and educational ways and transformed myself and my knowledge.

It was not until the final stages of writing that I recognised that this work is my educational response to what has been described as the '*politics of oppression*' (Lomax and Whitehead 1996) which they define as:

“ the imposition of values and practices that disable us from participating as fully as we might in our educational enterprises and imposed change that alienates us by appearing to devalue our educational values and practices “.

These politics of oppression consist of the imposition of values and practices that I cannot accept, for reasons I will explain, and the imposition of changes that appear to devalue my work. In responding to them through writing a thesis which describes my struggle to explore the meaning of my values through my practice and relationships with pupils and a colleague in school within economic, political and social contexts, I offer an account of an individual’s unique work in studying and coming to know her own educational development.

Whilst this study is unique, in the sense that it is a study of my form of life in education, I believe that as a study of an individual’s claim to know her own educational development it can make the following contributions to educational knowledge and educational research methodology.

In the way I have constructed my account I have shown how contingency and decision interact in the unique form of my educational development in its

particular context. I have also revealed the nature of my values as the living standards of judgment I use in making sense of and explaining my educational development. The text shows the emerging power of my 'I' to speak for myself, to account for myself, to account for my work with a colleague and to liberate myself through my own creative and critical capacities, from the politics of oppression experienced during the course of the enquiry. The text also presents a living explanation of my educational development in a way which shows the integration of the educational processes of transforming myself by my own knowledge and the knowledge of others and of transforming my educational knowledge through action and reflection.

This is not the account of a 'journey' to self knowledge and understanding. I did not map out a route of how to proceed before beginning my research and then follow it. Indeed, even trying to impose a chronological order on the work I have done and the ideas I have generated is an almost impossible task and the construction of this thesis has been problematic. How do I chart research that began with the intention of improving girls' talk in the classroom and yet became an account of my own educational development?

Perhaps you, the reader, can imagine the thesis as a kaleidoscope. I am at the centre and because of my actions and reflections different kinds of light are diffused and new insights formed. Sometimes the actions or ideas of others cause other shafts of light or shadow to appear and I have to respond to them. There are no regular patterns but slowly the lit areas begin to join together, jigsaw like, and I, at the centre, begin to understand more as the whole becomes clearer.

The thesis should not be read as if I made steady progress towards enlightenment! Far from it. I had very long periods when I wrote nothing because of the difficulties and pressures of working in a comprehensive school at a time of enormous change through government legislation. These changes set in motion by the Education Reform Act of 1988 have affected everything to do with my work: how my school is funded; what I teach; how I assess; how I am appraised; how I am inspected; what my students are expected to achieve and so on.

So, how do I share what I've done in a way that makes sense? Where do I start?

In "*Cleopatra's Sister*" Penelope Lively had the same problem of where to begin and wrote:

"At which moment? A narrative is a sequence of present moments, but the present does not exist, or exists only as a ripple that runs right through the story, a procession of contingent events leading tidily from birth to death. A lifetime is so

conveniently structured: it begins and ends. It can be seen as a whole, dismantled and analysed, and can be diagnosed as an uneasy balance between the operation of contingency and decision ... a conjunction so capricious that it hardly bears contemplation by those unfortunate enough to get mixed up in the process “. (Lively, P. 1993)

How my work developed was a result of ‘ *contingency and decision*’ and in describing a series of ‘ *present moments*’ I hope that I show how I learned about my values and practice, revised my concerns, responded to contingencies and came to understand my own educational development. My thesis offers an understanding of professional development that takes place in school and is directly related to the learning of the pupils and the people within it.

As you read my work keep in mind it is a story of my own learning and how my ideas change as I live through my experiences. Perhaps you could read this thesis as I read crime novels - I read the story quickly to find out what happened and why, and then return to read the novel slowly to appreciate the nuances of plot and the subtlety of character. You may need to suspend your usual judgements until the second reading because although this work appears to be in a familiar form I think you may find it unfamiliar.

Chapters two to seven stand as they were written at the time. They are chapters of 'present moments'. Each chapter shows my understanding at that time. You will see that in Chapter four I was only able to react emotionally to certain texts - by the end of the thesis I hope you will see evidence of my learning as I engage with texts. Chapter nine shows my understanding of the whole work.

Chapter one was the last but one chapter to be written and yet it deserves to be read first because it explains the values that underpin my work in education and why this thesis is so important to me. I also show how, after five years of work, I have come to recognise that my contribution to educational research is a valuable one because it shows an individual's unique work in studying and coming to know her own educational development. I therefore offer my thesis as a way of understanding professional development through the explanation of my work and with a direct relationship to the learning of pupils and a colleague in the context of school.

Chapter two is a consideration of the debate on the nature of educational research; the standards of judgment I wanted to use for my work at that time, and

an explanation of why I believe a teacher's voice in educational research is an important voice.

Chapters three to six concentrate on my work in school. I show how I began to understand that action research is about improving ones own practice by showing my first attempts to improve the quality of the work of others which ended in failure and then details my work with one particular student; a class of students and a colleague.

Throughout my accounts of my work with students and a colleague I give another story: it is a story of my own educational development as I resisted the imposition of the power of others. While I was investigating how to improve my work I became concerned with the methodology of how I was to represent what I was doing and how knowledge about education is usually constructed. Alongside my accounts of my work with students and colleagues is another story of how I engaged in a struggle to understand how the academic community, management of my school and government legislation affected my work.

In chapter four where I write about my work with one student, Poppy, I also respond to academics who speak for teachers and in doing so deny my experiences. In chapters five and six where I write about my work with a class and with a colleague I also write of my struggle with the ideas of accountability forced on my school by its management and the government.

My thesis ends with an explanation of how I came to understand that my educational knowledge is a living educational theory which can be judged by using my values as living standards of judgment ; why I believe that such theory is vital to transforming teaching into a research - based profession and how this thesis makes a contribution to understanding how the creative responses of an individual researcher can include her appreciation of current educational action research methodology without permitting such methodology to constrain her capacity to create her own living educational theory.

I make these claims to have contributed to educational knowledge:

- that this thesis is an holistic representation of my work as a teacher in a comprehensive school.

- that this work is a contribution to present understanding of the use of values as appropriate and developing standards of judgment which can be used to test the validity of a teacher's claim to know her own professional educational knowledge as she engages in enquiries of the kind " How do I improve my professional practice ?"

and this work is intended as a contribution to the debate on

- professional development in the context of the intention of the Teacher Training Agency to develop teaching as a research- based profession.

- values in education and the community outlined by The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Most of all, I hope my thesis moves you, the reader, to think and act a little differently. It is an account of an important part of a life that continues to be lived.

Perhaps an introduction to such a thesis should end with these words from

Raymond Carver:

“ If we’re lucky, writer and reader alike, we’ll finish the last line or two ... and then just sit for a minute, quietly. Ideally, we’ll ponder what we’ve just just written or read; maybe our hearts or our intellects will have been moved off the peg just a little from where they were before. Our body temperature will have gone up, or down, by a degree. Then, breathing evenly and steadily once more, we’ll collect ourselves, writers and readers alike, get up, ‘created of warm blood and nerves’ as a Chekhov character puts it, and go on to the next thing: Life. Always life.”

(Carver 1993)