

Chapter four

'I can speak for myself' - my account of working with Poppy and how I struggled to come to terms with what I saw as academic accounts of teaching.

Introduction

I worked with Poppy over two years, teaching her GCSE Integrated Humanities and GCSE English and English Literature. The work in this paper concentrates on five months, July to December 1991. Over that time I collected copies of Poppy's work, made transcripts of our discussions and wrote in a journal about my work with Poppy and her class. As we worked together I began to understand more about what an educative relationship actually meant. I began to understand what Clancy and Neil had meant about the importance of relationship and talk between teacher and student.

What's an educative relationship?

I found the ideas of Carl Rogers, Martin Buber and David Bohm useful in trying to sort out the kind of qualities that characterise such a relationship which is based on the facilitation of learning:

“ ...the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner.”

[Rogers, C. 1983]

Rogers listed these qualities as realness or genuineness, so that the teacher does not present a front to the student but is herself; the prizing or acceptance of the learner and empathetic understanding.

Martin Buber wrote of the “ *special humility of the educator for whom the life and particular being of all his pupils is the decisive factor to which his hierarchic recognition is subordinated*”. The teacher must confirm the potential of the student by being interested in them and their possibilities. “ *The teacher who wants to help the pupil to realise his best potentialities must intend him as this particular person, both in his potentiality and in his actuality... he must apprehend him and affirm, as a whole... he can do this if he encounters him as a partner in a bipolar situation*” (Buber, M. 1923)

Buber and Rogers insist on the necessity of dialogue between teacher and student and Bohm’s definition of dialogue is a helpful one here.

“ Dialogue is a free flow of meaning between people... What is essential for dialogue is that while a person may hold a certain position, he or she does not hold to it non-negotiably. Such a person is ready to listen to others with sufficient sympathy and interest to understand the meaning of the other’s position properly... a spirit of

goodwill or friendship is necessary... it is not compatible with a spirit that is competitive, contentious, or aggressive.”

[Bohm, D. 1989.]

I was sure that my work with Poppy showed some of the qualities I would expect to be displayed in an educative relationship such as learning, the qualities of goodwill, creativity through talk, and genuineness. As I read through our transcripts and so on I became excited by our work and wanted to communicate that excitement to others.

That was the rub. I couldn't write it down.

How do I write about it?

The major difficulty I had was in writing about what I'd done. At this stage in my research I lacked the confidence to write about what I was doing in my own style of writing. If I was doing academic research shouldn't I be writing in an academic way?

When I wrote the papers you've read in Chapter three I only had in mind that Andy Larter and Jack Whitehead, who were supporting my research, would read them.

This paper was different as I knew it would have a wider audience.

Using 'I' was traumatic enough for I had been schooled to write impersonally and to use "It could be considered.." or "However while it is usually thought..." and so on.

How could I write about my own classroom, in my own way so that I could represent what went on in it while at the same time make claims about it being an academic study? Quite simply, I couldn't: so I wrote nothing for a long time and read a lot, which to be honest, didn't help at all. I was too conscious about being registered as a MPhil student and eventually having to produce writing for the Academy. Terry Eagleton's view was exactly right for my mood at the time when he wrote:

"Becoming certificated by the state as proficient... is a matter of being able to talk and write in certain ways. It is this which is being taught ,examined and certificated. It is not what you personally think or believe, though what is thinkable will be constrained by the language itself. You can think or believe what you want, as long as you speak this particular language. Nobody is especially concerned about what you say... provided (it's) compatible with, and can be articulated within, a specific form of discourse. It's just that certain meanings and positions will not be articulable within it"

(Eagleton, T.1983)

I kept thinking back to the Greendown Action Research Group meeting on my first paper where the academic, not the teachers, suggested my research should be grounded in the literature. But what literature? The literature didn't really speak to me about teaching and classrooms in a way I found recognisable. The 'specific form of

discourse' used in educational research was one I felt comfortable with because of my own education but it seemed inappropriate for what I now wanted to do.

Caliban's words echoed my tensions between academic discourse, my classroom practice and my writing.

*“ You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is, that I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language.”*

Caliban in 'The Tempest'. Act I.

Should I address academics in their language or my own? Perhaps they'd only listen to my curses in their own discourse. What finally kick-started me into writing was three articles: one by Anthony O'Hear, Professor of Philosophy at Bradford University and a member of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education; one by John Elliott, University of East Anglia; and one by Jean Rudduck, University of Sheffield.

Anthony O'Hear's work " Education and Democracy. Against the Educational Establishment" denied my view of education as he argued that education was "irretrievably authoritarian and paternalist". John Elliott and Jean Rudduck both wrote about teacher education from the view of academics in Higher Education but seemed

remote from classrooms and the people in them. Anthony O'Hear, John Elliott and Jean Rudduck would find a great deal to disagree about among themselves but what I didn't like was their willingness to speak to and for teachers and students of education. I was reminded that Giles Deleuze once said to Michel Foucault:

" You were the first to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others. We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this ' theoretical' conversion - to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf" (Foucault 1977)

Being indignant that others should speak for me I wrote about my work with Poppy in a way that pleased me. I called the paper " I can speak for myself".

Chapter four

I can speak for myself' - my account of working with Poppy and how I struggled to come to terms with what I saw as academic accounts of teaching.

February 1992

This paper looks at the work I undertook from July to December 1991 with one of my year ten students, Poppy. It shows us working in a collaborative and supportive way to improve the quality of our work. It also demonstrates how I developed my practice through reflection and why I became increasingly confident to question academics who attempt to speak for me. Recognising that my practice was worth describing was a great move forward for me and so was the recognition that academics who attempt to speak for me so often get it wrong.

I have a memory from the novel "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" by Mark Twain. It's when Tom is lost deep underground and to find his way out he ties a kite line to a rock and carefully edges his way through many passages. He doesn't let go of the kite line until he is sure of where he is and he knows there is no need to wind it back to his safe starting place. Since starting my research I've felt a bit like Tom Sawyer holding fast to a kite line. I have edged out from my original question about improving the talk of girls in my classroom;

I've cautiously tried to understand and to improve my practice but throughout I've held on to the ideas about talk in the classroom presented in academic journals and books. Researchers who are not teachers have written about what teachers should try to improve in talk and what those improvement should look like and too often I've accepted those models. I've tried to write honestly and openly about what I've done but too often I've failed to write in my real voice or about my real concerns because I've held on to that kite -line of what I think I should be concerned about and what I assume writing in an academic way should look like.

In a recent pamphlet, "*Democracy and Education*", Anthony O'Hear (1991), Professor of Philosophy at Bradford University and a member of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, stated that all education is "*irretrievably authoritarian and paternalist*". My paper shows an education which is collaborative and supportive and which denies O'Hear's assertions. While he has argued that education is a "*transaction between unequals*" which will "*result in a change in the knowledge, wisdom and values of the pupil*" I will show that my work with a student allows parity in dialogue despite the unequal power relationship, and that the work we undertake enables *both* of us to change because of our insights and our developing understanding of our own educational development.

O'Hear's pamphlet provided another focus for my work and for this paper. His view of education denies mine. As my students and I live out our experiences in the classroom we negate O'Hear's descriptions of education as '*authoritarian and paternalist*'. I cannot accept his call for an education system which is "*divisive, elitist and inegalitarian*". My rage that an academic, remote from the classroom, could deny my experience and my values in his writing, pushed forward my work as a teacher- researcher.

O'Hear's pamphlet enabled me to recognise that my practice is worth describing because it attempts to live out values which are important to me. That recognition has helped me to let go of the line. I now feel confident to describe my practice in a way that I was reluctant to do so before. I can no longer be silent when someone in O'Hear's position is distorting and undermining the very things I care about in education.

O'Hear denies completely what I attempt to do in my work in the classroom. As a teacher I also try to be a reflective practitioner systematically researching my own practice in order to improve the quality of learning for my students and for myself. When I began this research I felt supported by the teacher research movement and people like Jean Rudduck and John Elliott who seemed to understand that a new form of educational knowledge was being created by teachers producing accounts of their work in the classroom. However even academics like Elliott and Rudduck sometimes only pay lipservice to teachers as

researchers and remind me of parents who can't let their children grow up. They say they want to encourage teachers to be reflective practitioners but then devalue the use of it all to the teaching profession. In doing so they too deny my experience.

In her book which explores reading and culture Jane Miller (1990) uses seduction as a metaphor to show how women are excluded from literary theory. For women read teachers as the metaphor fits. Thus teachers are seduced by academics who simultaneously include and exclude us in their writing about teaching. Our presence is taken for granted and yet denied and we are enticed into narratives which reduce us by exalting us. They speak for us. I can speak for myself.

Recent articles on initial teacher training in the British Educational Research Journal by John Elliott (1991) and Jean Rudduck (1991) stress the importance of critical reflective thinking in teaching. Both criticise government plans to shift initial teacher training from Higher Education to schools because they believe that all student teachers need frameworks for thinking about what they do and that these frameworks can only be provided by people like themselves.

Elliott seems to want to protect student teachers against disillusioned competent teachers while Rudduck perceives teachers as increasingly experiencing the schoolday as “*an intense and unremitting series of pedagogic, pastoral and administrative demands*” with little time for reflective practice. Rudduck’s call for a ‘*language of consciousness*’ and Elliott’s ‘*model of professionalism*’ seem to court teachers and yet to spurn us. They seem to offer no way in which the reflections of competent teachers can be used to show educational development.

My account of work with Poppy thus highlights a tension between the educational theory presented by academics and my own understanding of competent practice in teaching. As I wrote this paper I became determined to judge the quality and effectiveness of my professional practice by reference to my own educational standards which I understand by reflection on what I do in the classroom. Such reflections create a new form of educational knowledge which is grounded in practice and it challenges those academics who attempt to talk for me.

Working with Poppy

Why Poppy? In July 1991 I was still interested in improving the kind of conversations I had with girls in my classroom. I interviewed a number of girls from the class I knew I was to

teach for the following two years. I talked to them about their humanities work and intended to follow up work with all of them. I tried to build up a pictures of them as learners and wanted to find out about what motivated them. When I talked to Poppy I began to understand that her writing was important to her because she became more enthusiastic and talked more personally about it than anything else.

The part of the discussion about her writing went like this:

Erica: *Have you got any strengths that I can build on in the humanities area?*

Poppy: *Writing.*

Erica: *Any particular form of writing?*

Poppy: *Any form. I just love it.*

Erica: *How do you go about it?*

Poppy: *Well, I just write it usually. I don't think about it. You're supposed to plan it out but I never do. I always find it goes wrong if I do that.*

Erica: *Do you draft out?*

Poppy: *No, I don't do that either.*

Erica: *I see. Right.*

Poppy: *I usually edit as I go along, which most people seem to find difficult but...*

Erica: *You find OK?*

That conversation in July formed an unwritten agenda for me in my future work with Poppy.

I intended to encourage her to think about her writing and to encourage her to draft and re-

draft her work because that seemed to be a good thing to do in order to improve her writing.

I formed agendas for the others too but Poppy and another girl, Jo intrigued me. They appeared self-assured but apart from many of the class. I liked the direct way the both of them dealt with me. My work with Jo concentrated on the development of her reading and the recognition that her emerging feminism had a place in the classroom. The description of that is for another time. I want to concentrate on Poppy in this paper.

In our first class I asked all the students to write to me in their journals and to tell me something about the way they worked. Poppy wrote “ *I’m going to be honest and start by writing something which probably won’t be to my advantage. I’ve found that over the third year my best or favourite pieces of work were done under pressure to a deadline. Strangely, this is my favourite way of working, or at least it is with writing. Writing is my strongest aspect of Humanities and Communications, but I can only write pieces I’m happy with outside of school. I wish I knew how to organise myself as it’s important, but at the moment I don’t.*”

I replied to all the journal entries that night, writing in Poppy's"... *To set your mind at rest about telling me to put the pressure on - I was intending to do it anyway! I usually set coursework with two deadlines: one for the first draft; and another for the final piece and I expect discussion between the two*"....

The next day she wrote "*It's good (dare I say) to hear about the drafts etc because I think the discussion part will help me*"

So at the beginning of the autumn term in September, I wanted to understand something about Poppy as a writer as it was obvious that she wanted to understand something about her writing. I wanted to discuss questions like: How did she get her ideas? How did she plan her writing? What did she find difficult? What did she understand by the process of writing? If I could understand those kinds of things then I could find ways of helping her to improve the quality of her written work.

We worked on questions like this for the term and in December 1991 in preparing for a student profile Poppy wrote about how she thought her writing had improved "*Since September I've changed my style in very small ways. I use your criticism constructively now, to improve each piece until I'm happy with it myself...*

I draft a lot differently in the way that I feel that I can improve, I think I used to feel that I couldn't improve through criticism.

In September I was lacking in writing confidence. Now I question advice, and use it to fuel my enthusiasm to writing"

Over that term she had become more confident of her own voice and had come to make demands upon me. Our work had become a genuine enquiry into ways of improving her writing.

When Poppy wrote "*I use your criticism constructively now... I think I used to feel that I couldn't improve through criticism... now I use advice and question it"* she shows her acceptance of my role as an educator who supports her in improving the quality of her writing. She isn't accepting everything I say but uses what I say to question her own ideas.

When I write to her in her journal comments like "*I'm interested in what you said... Could you explain a bit more?"* I show that I am interested in her and her potential to improve as a learner. Questions like that are genuine questions and I was interested in the reply. This bears no relation to O'Hear's model of a teacher who is authoritarian and a learner who is in no position to make judgements on what they are being told by their teachers.

Our dialogue was supportive and facilitated learning. Poppy had helped me to understand something about herself as a writer and to understand something about myself as an educator.

Poppy's First Essay

At the beginning of September Poppy's class had had a series of sessions discussing the tensions of family life, concentrating on conflicts of young people with their parents. We'd read some poetry and short stories on the theme of parent and teenage conflict and I'd asked them to write a story about the same kind of thing.

Poppy's drafting book had two pages of notes, plans and jottings of various story lines on parent/child conflict and then two and a half pages of a story headed "First Draft". She'd written about a girl who was late home and her mother, who was furious. The story was unfinished and Poppy had paused with the girl going angrily upstairs. My comments in the drafting book about her first efforts with this story were *"So where is this leading? You've given the situation but will the reader get both points of view?"* To that Poppy wrote "No" in the margin next to it. I also wrote *"There seems to be something deeper that's wrong with this mother/ daughter relationship. Can that be brought out?"* Poppy wrote "Yes" next to that.

She gave me more clues about her difficulties getting her story sorted out in her journal where she wrote “ *I find it difficult to get ideas ... I just can't get started. I haven't done enough in class...*” I replied “ *Can you account for that? Could it be the subject I chose - would it be easier if you chose one yourself?*”

The day after I'd written to Poppy in her journal I was able to have an extended conversation with her in the classroom about how her writing was going. Through this Poppy helps me to understand something about how she gets ideas and how she wants me to support her in improving her writing. She shows that my comment in her drafting book “ *There seems to be something deeper that's wrong with this ... relationship. Can that be brought out?*” affected her thinking because in conversation she says “ *as you said*” (my story) “*needed a bigger theme to it*”.

Extract Classroom Conversation:

Poppy: *I had trouble trying to get ideas for it - usually I just get on with it.*

Erica: *So why did the plan help you?*

Poppy: *The brainstorm helped me think of ideas I could use.*

Erica: *So do you want to talk me through the brainstorm then?*

Poppy: *Well, I was thinking of ideas, a theme for my story first of all about arguments. I settled on petty little things and like you said afterwards, it needed a bigger theme to it. Why were they arguing all the time? I thought there might have been a death in the family.*

Erica: *Then you got on to making just some notes*

Poppy: *Mmm. I changed my ideas completely then - they're still having arguments but I thought of why they could be having arguments.*

Erica: *So what made you change your ideas?*

Poppy: *I just got a sudden flash of inspiration, that's all.*

Erica: *OK...(omission)..... so you've done this draft, this plan, brainstorm. What about the draft? Because in your journal you say at one point " I'm finding it difficult to get ideas for it. I can't get started. I haven't done enough in class. I hope to have more luck at home."*

(Yes)

And then you said you got inspiration. Do you know where that came from?

Poppy: *No-where really. Just all of a sudden I thought of something. I don't know what it was. I might have been talking or something. But I thought about the end because I realised when I was writing that it didn't really end properly. It needed something else so I thought there could be a thinking scene so that it explains a lot why they're arguing.*

Erica: *What would the thinking be about?*

Poppy: *She'd be thinking about the brother who would have died, be blaming the mother because her mother doesn't talk about him so that's why they argue.*

Erica: *Yes. That would make sense wouldn't it? Because the argument that you describe is interesting.*

Through the drafting book, journal and conversation I had begun to build up a picture of the way Poppy went about writing. She had written a plan because she'd found it difficult to get started; my comment on the "deeper reason" for the family conflict had got her to think; she'd written more notes but what had got her to write was a "sudden flash of inspiration". Her inspiration seemed to make me a bit redundant and so I asked her about my role before we finished talking:

Erica: *What's the most helpful thing I've done with this lot then?*

Poppy: *Being critical I think but in a constructive way because that's what I need because that makes me think more.*

Erica: *Do you find it useful to talk about it or do you like the way we use journals or a mixture?*

Poppy: *A mixture actually. If I'm not clear it would be good to talk about it but otherwise the journal's fine.*

What I liked about her comment was that she was making the judgment about what was helpful to her learning. She will decide when she's not clear and then will talk about it. I liked the confidence that showed. Poppy had the last word about her piece of writing in her coursework review. Such a review is written before the final piece is given in for marking and is about the process of writing the piece. I don't think I gave the class a clear idea of the audience for the review. Most students, including Poppy, wrote as if to the examiner, but it was useful as it showed she was thinking about her way of writing.

"I've written a story about conflict and relationships within a family environment.

I wrote most of my work at home, where I could concentrate without having to speak for any reason.

When I was thinking about my ideas I spoke to the teacher and my family. I asked them what they thought about the story before I wrote it. This helped me to get my thoughts and ideas clear. I went through a number of ideas before choosing the most promising. I planned what I wanted to happen in the first section, using them only as weak guidelines.

When re-drafting I added a whole new section to the end of my story in which to tie loose ends and bring the story to a conclusion explaining the occurrences of the story to make it clearer. (I decided this after speaking with my teacher)

I feel my piece has fulfilled requirements, although I can never feel totally content with my piece. But I think I've learned where to stop when it comes to re-drafting..."

And so by the end of September, through talking and writing, I understood that Poppy wrote plans and ideas; she thought about her writing; she liked quiet for writing; she found talking about her writing useful; she was prepared to redraft and that she was critical about what she wrote. She already seemed to have moved on from what she had said in July about writing when she'd told me that usually she just wrote and didn't think about it and that she didn't plan or draft. I had come to understand her to be developing a different approach to her writing.

Focusing on her own work

I was reasonably happy with Poppy's work in September: she was approaching her writing in a thoughtful way; she was prepared to re-draft and she was motivated to improve. Her next piece of writing arose out of a piece of work the class were doing on the short story, "*More than just the disease*" by Bernard Maclaverty. I'd read the story to the class and we'd done a number of things such as role playing the main characters before I asked the students to write extracts from the main character's diary. The story is about a boy, Neil, who has psoriasis. He spends a holiday with a schoolfriend but is so self conscious about

his skin that he doesn't join in with swimming but won't explain why. A neighbour, the strange Mrs Wan, helps him to come to terms with his disease.

Poppy wrote in her journal “ *I'm looking forward to the writing 'in character' although I think I may fabricate some things slightly*”

She went ahead and drafted and re-drafted her writing talking to me before doing the final piece. On giving me the final piece to mark she attached a coursework review. In that she wrote “ *I wrote most of the piece at home, though thought about and made notes at school.*

As I went through my piece, as I was writing, I kept thinking of even more detail that I could add. But there was no space where they could be logically fitted in.

When re-drafting I added two extra paragraphs of Neil's personal thoughts. I feel that these helped the piece's presentation greatly and made it more realistic.....”

Our conversation about her draft essay shows how our work is collaborative and supportive. I ask questions but Poppy is firmly in control of her writing and has a clear idea of what she wants to improve.

Extract classroom conversation 4th October 1991

....Erica: *Do you identify with the boy in the story?*

Poppy: *Yes because he's self-conscious about part of him like everybody is, and the way he describes it.*

Erica: *But it's a very real thing that he's self conscious about, isn't it?*

Poppy: *But Mrs. Wan didn't seem too bothered and neither did Michael. It's perhaps not as bad as he thinks.*

Erica*you've used things from the story like about school, ' talks with authority' and then you go back to one of the teachers at school. That's very strong.*

(Skims back through draft)

Didn't understand that bit.

Poppy: *Talking about the house and the house is unusual.*

Erica: *I get it. Because the house is Mrs. Wan's, it's exotic.*

Poppy: *Yes. Shall I change the beginning of it then to make more sense?*

Erica: *Yes. It's only just occurred to me what it actually means.*

"Being Mrs. Wan's house it's very exotic". I get it now. OK.

Poppy: *That part? (points to a section I've marked "forced") It was definitely.(Laughs.)*

Erica: *It was forced.*

Poppy: *Yes.*

Erica: *Yes, it was there for the sake of it really.*

Poppy: *It was.*

Erica: *So you don't mind taking that out?*

Poppy: *No*

Erica: *Where is it going now? What's the next thing that you want to do with it?*

Poppy: *As I was writing it I kept thinking of the things I wanted to put in it but if I put them in, it wouldn't sound right. I thought of going through it again reading the story a couple of more times and adding the odd sentence here and there (yes)....I still think it's too short this piece.*

Erica: *I think there are only two bits in it that need extending. I agreed where you put there was a little gap. Where you said there was a gap there was a gap. (right)*

This bit about why you told Mrs. Wan.

Poppy: *I've got a bit. (turns page) Hang on, no, that isn't it. I'm going to write a bit to join there.*

Erica: *That's better. And if you deal with that bit about Mrs. Wan ... it's OK...*

Throughout that conversation we were dealing with the issues of editing, drafting, planning and making explicit Poppy's own responses to writing within the context of producing a piece of coursework on a short story. She really focused in on her own story when she said " *As I was writing it I kept thinking of the things I wanted to put in it...*" and so on.

Within that same conversation, at the same time we were talking about her essay, something else was discussed which was initiated by Poppy. What most interested me about that was that we were exploring an idea together; an idea connected with the coursework and yet separate from it.

Before talking to Poppy about her draft writing I'd read this in her journal, "*Jo and I wanted to ask you about the "Not just the disease" writing. I feel that there's much I can add and improve on. And I remember that in the third year we had optional extended pieces outside the usual work. Would this be possible as I've got interested in this piece.*"

I wrote back to her pleased that she could feel confident to ask such questions, "*I'm interested in what you say about the idea of extended pieces. Could you explain more on Friday?*"

On that Friday our conversation had two parts to it; one about the piece of writing on the short story as described above and the other about the possibility of Poppy doing another piece of writing. Although I talk more than Poppy there is a sense of mutual exploration of what it is Poppy wants to do. This exploration can be seen by the way we speak. Our conversation is not grammatically perfect but starts and stops with interruptions and affirmations from the listener to the speaker of the moment. We both seem free to explore our ideas with the aim of moving Poppy's ideas forward. We start to talk about this idea of Poppy writing a different piece when I asked what she wanted to do.

Extract classroom conversation 4th October 1991

Erica: *See I wonder if it's this piece you want to extend or do you want to use the insight you've got from this piece to set up a piece of your own which is about...*

Poppy: *What kind of piece would I do then?*

Erica: *This idea of being anxious about yourself and having to gain a kind of insight and a self esteem that you don't have. That's quite difficult.*

Poppy: *Could be interesting though.*

Erica: *Yes. I mean what kind of things are people anxious about?*

Poppy: *Everything - the way they look, things they wear, things they do, things they say, way they feel, friends they've got.*

Erica: *Even people that look outwardly incredibly confident and happy...*

Poppy: *Yes, have got it hidden. It's often the way though because they feel self conscious...*

Erica: *Yes. It's like hiding it.*

Poppy: *Yes. Because they don't want people to find out the way they are. (yes) And they won't have to deal with them.*

Erica: *I think that's really true. The difficulty of doing a piece on your own and exploring that is do you create characters or do you write it truthfully. Do I mean that? Do you know what I mean? If you write about yourself (Yes) It's too exposing...*

Poppy: *Yes. I don't want to do that*

Erica: *... because you're putting on paper all the things you're trying to hide anyway and that's too hard I think. (Yes) Having to create characters...*

Poppy: *That would be better because you can use your own anxieties anyway and no-one will know they're yours.*

Erica: *Yes and often writers who make up characters, the character is a kind of jigsaw of lots of people that you know so if I was to write a book maybe three of my friends would identify with the main character because a little bit of each of them would be in that character.*

Because I think that you've done this job very well- this essay- and I think that's the question I set, that's the coursework. Your own writing is also very important and will take longer and you may want to work on it for weeks and not have a deadline but to use that idea, how people have a particular persona that's to do with the way they see themselves, and how that can change through experience and through contact with other people.

Poppy: *I'd like to do that actually.*

Erica: *Do you want to?*

Poppy: *Yes*

All the way through that conversation I had the feeling that Poppy had made up her mind what she wanted to do, she was motivated and wanted to get on with it. What I was able to offer was support to focus those ideas and to affirm my interest in her as a learner and writer.

The day after that conversation I was delighted to read this in Poppy's journal, "*I'm really looking forward to this extended 'spin off' piece of writing. That's about all I've got to say, really. But perhaps we could sort out specifications i.e. where it's going, what it needs*" I was delighted because she'd used the word 'we'. She had invited my support in a work that was obviously important to her. This seems to be a complete contradiction of O'Hear's notion of authoritarian, paternalistic and unequal education. I, the teacher, am being invited to participate in a learning process by a student who has decided what that learning process should be. She asks for my support in sorting out specifications. The way that she asks makes it clear that she feels free to accept or reject my help because the writing is hers. She sets out the terms clearly enough "*I'm looking forward...That's all I've got to say*" but then the invitation "*...perhaps **we** could...*" . I suggested to Poppy that she brainstormed her ideas about this new writing in her drafting book and then that we set some time aside to talk about it.

We talked in the classroom during a morning session. It took place amid a lot of activity as students were going in and out of the room to do observations, surveys etc. Poppy and I were interrupted a number of times and there's a lot of background noise on the tape. What's difficult in transcribing this is not being able to show the body language. At times in the transcript I appear to be going on a bit but it was in response to Poppy's intense look of interest and head nodding. I felt that she was willing me to carry on so that I'd get to what she wanted to pick up on.

The main reason we talked was to look at her ideas for a piece of writing. The transcript shows our mutual engagement, with ideas being teased out and respected. We started by looking at the list of ideas she might write about.

Extract from a classroom conversation 18- 10- 91

Erica: *Right, show me this thing. I'm really looking forward to this.*

Poppy: *I don't know why. It's like a brainstorm of my ideas - there are so many.*

Erica: *(reads) "Looks"*

Poppy: *Whether you think they're good or...*

Erica: *Oh right "Clothes, Jokes" What do you mean, jokes? Don't understand that.*

Poppy: *Can't remember now actually.*

Erica: *People making fun of them?*

Poppy: *Could be. yes.*

Erica: *" Friends. Enemies" (Reads a list) Got any more? That about sums up the human race. I'm not sure what you mean by "taste" Is that about anxieties about peer group then?*

Poppy: *Yes.*

Erica: *Can I write something on this book?*

Poppy: *Yes*

Erica: *(Writes " Is that peer group pressure?") " Physical appearance." Those things always interest me. How people feel about themselves.*

Poppy: *Yes*

Erica: *Whether they are too fat, too thin, too ugly, too beautiful. Whether their hair is too long, too short or whatever.*

Which one of these... choose, say, three things that you think you've got enough ideas about to explore a bit further.

Poppy: *Could be any of them - except allergies or diseases. I wouldn't do that one.*

Erica: *Well look, why don't we start off with things that you've got anxieties about?*

Poppy: *All of these actually.*

Erica: *Things that are most, sort of, make you most anxious and then- if you're going to write*

Poppy: *Yes, you have to know something about them.*

Erica: *Yes. OK. Do you want to start at the bottom and go up or at the top and come down?*

Poppy: *"Guilt" - All the time!*

Erica: *OK - about what sort of things?*

Poppy: *Something you think you've done wrong. You think you've offended someone.*

Erica: *Guilt about how you treat other people or what you say?*

"Work" Not much?

Poppy: *Not on the whole.*

Erica: *Scrub that one?*

Poppy: *Yes*

Erica: *Ok. Sex?*

Poppy: *Frequently*

Erica: *That's anxieties about growing up and wondering what is it?*

Poppy: *Exactly*

Erica: *Scrub that one then?*

Poppy: *"Secrets". If you've got secrets you don't want anybody to know so you get worried about them.*

Erica: *Right and you can't share them. So they're... that might be difficult for a character.*

Poppy: *It would be*

Erica: *You're still having to draw that line between what's Poppy and what's character.*

And that might be for your private writing that you don't want other people to read, that you don't want me to read or an audience

Poppy: *You can have secrets about other things though.*

Erica: *Like what?*

Poppy: *I don't know. Secrets I haven't got secrets about.*

Erica: *Right. So you could make them up. (Yes) Fine.*

"Past"

Poppy: *Pretty wide that isn't it?*

Erica: *Yes because it links with secrets, in a sense.*

Poppy: *Yes it links with a lot of things.*

Up until that point I felt that we'd been skirting around what was concerning Poppy. We were at ease with each other and had given each other room to talk about ideas. It wasn't my aim to get Poppy to open up her private self to me because that could leave her in a vulnerable position. I wanted her to feel confident enough to write about what was important to her. She did open up though, in a way which showed that she trusted me to listen to her and to accept that her concerns were important. I knew after I said 'families'

that Poppy wanted to explore this further. She kept nodding and affirming what I said. I talked about divorced families as a hunch. I had no knowledge of Poppy's family circumstances.

Erica: Anxieties about families as well (mmm)

People have anxieties about their parents' relationships (yes)

About their relationships with their grandparents (yes). Whenever any group of people live together in a house- it could be mother/ daughter, all sorts of things. So that's a possibility, isn't it?(Yes) There's lots starting to be written about the experiences of being a child of divorced parents and the research that's going on at the moment about the trauma of children when their parents split up. Because everyone always concentrated on the parents (Yes) and always assumed that the children would be OK. There used to be the thing that people should stay together even though it's not working or that it's better for them to stay put - it's never really been sorted out. Nobody knows who it's better for and who it's bad for... anxieties about relationships in a family, about parents and whether they should divorce or what happens when they do.

Poppy: Something that gets me angry about that, it's a bit off the subject, is when people say single- parent families can't bring up children. That really gets me angry. They say that they can't learn...

Erica: *Where did you read that?*

Poppy: *Politicians said that the other week.*

Erica: *I don't know. Who do you live with Poppy?*

Poppy: *My mum*

Erica: *You live with your mum. Is she divorced? (Yes) And you know from experience that isn't true.*

Poppy: *I get on better now that my dad's left than I did before.*

I hadn't heard Poppy speak with such passion in her voice before. I felt personally pleased that she trusted me enough to say something about herself and pleased for Poppy that she had the confidence to use her own experiences in the context of the classroom.

Erica: *I'd imagine that you're very close to your mother now (Yes). So in that sense it's quite a good topic for you to do (Yes) because there aren't many stories/ novels about the relationships mothers and daughters have when it's just them living together. I know there's "Kate and Allie" (Yes). My daughter loves that. They do have difficulties but it's like any other family. You're writing about a certain kind of family. So that one is worth thinking about because it's using your own experience (Yes) and the experience of your friends to create characters that are very believable.*

Poppy: *I think that's the best one actually.*

Erica: *Do you?*

Poppy: *Yes.*

Erica: *This is hard to explore (Yes)*

At this point I took a step back from the conversation in my mind. I didn't want Poppy to feel forced into doing a piece of writing about one-parent families. I wanted to give her room to retreat if that was what she wanted to do. I looked back at the list she'd written but Poppy was determined not to be deflected from what she wanted to do.

Erica: *"Physical" I'm good at this one. Physical appearance. I've got all sorts of hang ups, so that's OK.*

Poppy: *Yes. Bit tricky to do though. It might not be as interesting as this one to do. I'm settled on this one.*

Erica: *Are you?*

Poppy: *Yes.*

It seemed to me that Poppy had a number of ideas about what she wanted to write. I saw my role now as helping her to clarify some ideas. As we talked Poppy sorted out some

initial ideas about her story. It was to focus on the relationship between a mother and daughter; the mother had never married; the daughter was still at school.

Erica: *OK . Home and family. And you're going to write about characters? (Yes) So who are the characters going to be?*

Poppy: *A mother and a daughter*

Erica: *OK. A mother and a daughter*

Poppy: *So is it going to be a story or is it going to be, I don't know. Is there anything you want?*

Erica: *What do you want?*

Poppy: *A story I think is best. With arguments.*

In asking me what I wanted I think that Poppy was simply asking for reassurance that it was her work and that she was in control of it. She already knew that she wanted to write a story. She just needed support to get started.

Erica: *... let's use this page as a brainstorm so anything you say I'm going to write down.*

Poppy: *I probably won't say anything now.*

Erica: *And anything I say I'll write down. It's a ...*

Poppy: *A story. Their relationship*

Erica: *Might be useful to try to get a mental picture of what this mother and what this daughter are like before you delve into the relationship. What actually makes them people?*

What kind of age group?

Poppy: *I always have trouble with age*

Erica: *Would it be straightforward to make the daughter your age?*

Poppy: *I think it would*

Erica: *Rather than to do someone of eight or eighteen*

Poppy: *I wouldn't know them would I?*

Erica: *No. How old are you now? Fourteen? And so this mother must be thirty-five to forty-five? (Yes) Late thirties. And where do they live?*

Poppy: *In this country. That's a start.*

Erica: *House? Flat? Caravan? Bungalow?*

Poppy: *Flat.*

Erica: *I find it useful to try to get a picture of the kind of things that they do. I presume that the daughter is still at school? (Yes) Where does the mother work? Does she have a job?*

I'll just write down "job" -it's to get you thinking really. (Yes)

I'll put down "circumstances" Is she widowed, divorced, unmarried?

Poppy: *Never married*

Erica: *Never married*

Poppy: *Never married might be a good one actually*

Erica: *Think about where the story's going to start. Is it going to be at the end of a marriage or straight into the relationship.*

Poppy: *That'll be it. Straight into it.*

Erica: *Straight in. Yes?... When you did something about relationships you focussed on a problem. This doesn't have to focus on a problem but it has to have something happening*
(Yes) So you need to find a focus about what it is that you want to explore in, writing about this mother and daughter.

Poppy: *Could be just a focus for a short time on their relationship with nothing much happening. I have this thing about worrying about arguments as well.*

How she was to go about writing her story was as important to Poppy as what she was to write. We talked about a little about the planning process and how she was going to get started.

Erica: *Fine. Sometime you're going to have to consider the form... .. this is the mother's day; this is the daughter's day; this is the their time together. So the form of the story might be quite interesting because you'd get one person, then the other person then them together and what they tell each other about each other. I'm not sure. There's a lot there.*

So what's your first step?

... Poppy: *Like describing the flat or something. Describing the daughter.*

Erica: *And it might not be the stuff that you put in the final piece but it will build up in your head a picture and from that you can work- it's a bit like laying the foundations, isn't it?*

Poppy: *Could have a brainstorm about what they're going to be like as well?*

Erica: *That's always useful. I always find that useful. Other people have other ways of doing it.*

Poppy: *Could make it up as I go along.*

Erica: *But remember you said you weren't going to do that as much.*

Poppy: *I like doing it that way though. (laughs)*

Erica: *In a sense though if you're going to write a brainstorm and a paragraph that's your planning. You don't have to plan it any other way so you will be writing as you go along but then you won't necessarily be using all that writing in your final piece. That's almost like - what can you call it - exploratory writing? starting off writing? Building blocks. They're needed. They're really important but they might not be there at the end.*

.....*When you've done some more bring it back and we'll have another look.*

Poppy: *OK*

What I'd like to say now is that Poppy went away and wrote an excellent story but that didn't happen. In class we were working on the ideas of the tensions between schooling

and education. Poppy did some research on mixed and single sex education and produced a research report. The written work on a play script "*Flying into the Wind*" was not a problem for her. She planned her essay, drafted, redrafted, proof-read her work and produced an interesting piece of writing. All through those processes she asked me questions, we talked about the writing and wrote to each other in her journal. I felt that our conversations about writing had helped her to focus on her work and she seemed to be growing in confidence. But she didn't produce the mother/ daughter story. I felt torn between wanting to give her the space that independent writing deserves and putting on teacher- like pressure for her to produce something. If I was not prepared to be the 'genial authoritarian' that O'Hear would like me to be was I actually failing Poppy? I had too much belief in our work to accept that idea. If I wanted Poppy to be independent I couldn't interfere. As we left for the Christmas holidays Poppy said she would do some writing ready for the new term. She saw me in January to say that it was hopeless and wanted to talk about it.

Conversation 14th January 1992

Erica: *Tell me about it.*

Poppy: *I scrapped all those ideas. I thought of some more.*

(OK) Still on anxieties and I thought of a different way of doing it. Instead of a story I'd like to do an essay. And at different points in it I thought I'd do a scene or a play or something that would express the ideas that people feel but then I thought that would be too complicated .

I'd already decided that Poppy needed something like my permission or approval to stop attempting to write this essay. I was pleased with her classwork. She was under no obligation to do any more. I underestimated Poppy's determination to write. She agreed that what we'd talked about in planning her original idea had been important simply because of the nature of the conversation and that she may not write the planned piece but she was determined to write something.

Erica: *I'm not sure how to put this, do you think that the experience of talking about views was important itself and whether it leads to writing or not is actually not important. Do you see what I mean?*

Poppy: *Yes. I see what you mean. Yes. I think it probably was.*

Erica;... *I thought talking about anxieties in general was very important (Yes) ... And I think that translating everything from your head into written work isn't always necessary. Does that make sense?*

Poppy: *Yes. (pause)I did this ages ago. (hands me her book)*

Erica; *Let's have a look...*

We looked at her drafting book together and talked about her difficulties in getting started.

Poppy said that she needed a purpose to write but finding that purpose was difficult. She rejected my suggestions of keeping a journal or writing letters because she knew it wouldn't work for her but agreed that her way of thinking of ideas and then not following them up didn't work either. I tried to encourage her to write as much as possible so that a piece would eventually emerge.

Erica: *Put it this way, if you were a musician, is it because you're trying to write a symphony before you write a line of music?*

Poppy: *Yes (laughs) Yes!*

Erica: *So as a writer before you write your grand piece you've got to write a paragraph, a line, half a page.*

Poppy: *I've never worked like that before.*

Erica: *Why not try it (Yes)*

... I don't think it matters what you write I think it matters that you write. It's not coursework. There are no deadlines. I found it quite hard last time not to intervene and to say 'where is it?' and then I started to do it and thought 'no, this isn't fair' In a sense you do like the pressure (yes). But then you don't like it at all.

Poppy: *I like the pressure it makes me do it.*

We finished our conversation by agreeing that Poppy would give me her drafting book every week, whether she'd written in it or not. The following week she was away from school, ill, but sent her book in with a friend. In it she'd written something about her views on clouds. It started off like this:

Go.....

I feel like writing about clouds and although this may sound harsh I always marvel at how people see them as a romantic escape (or an escape for their romance?) The shapes they see in them, the poems written about these collections of gaseous water molecules them; all they are is gaseous water molecules given mainly from the sea.

... Stories about or involving the sea are always romantic and often tragic. But why?

Perhaps people realise in their subconscious the great ruling the sea has on their lives.

What with the moon, its phases and all

I'll never see the beauty in it myself. But am I missing out? Or just plain lucky to miss it all?

Most of the writing was like this but the last phrase in brackets was delightful. It was

" I think I may re-title this to " I am a writer"

Poppy was pleased that she'd started writing. Her coursework writing on poetry showed how she was improving her writing but that writing was for school. Poppy knew that she could do that. It was outside the demands of the classroom that she had to show herself that she could write. Her phrase "*I am a writer*" seemed to affirm her belief in herself.

The work that we had been engaged in over this time had been collaborative and supportive. I had learned something about my role as a teacher as I had been forced to think about how and why I intervene in a student's work. I had learned about the way Poppy went about writing and that could inform my work to improve the quality of writing in the classroom. Poppy had changed her view of herself as a writer and could state without doubt that she was a writer. She recognised in her self assessment that she had grown in 'writing confidence'.

Poppy's determination to make her own judgements and decisions about her writing did not result in poor writing. O'Hear (1991) argues that if children "*who are as yet unformed human beings and a prey to desire and passion*" make their own judgements and decisions about education the result will be "*a decline in educational standards*" and behaviour. My work with Poppy shows that such statements can be denied through practice

O'Hear offers me no evidence to convince me of his thesis. My work with Poppy is an example of how a student and a teacher can work in a supportive, collaborative way in a genuine enquiry to improve the quality of their education. I offer it to academics who are tempted to speak for me as an example of a teacher speaking for herself and who is creating a new form of educational knowledge.