How do I encourage my pupils, through my own example and practice to become lifelong learners?

An Educational Enquiry. Masters assignment.

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Framing

"*We are all theory makers, theory dwellers and theory testers. We live on the basis of a personal theory- a personal map- of what things are like... All our knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, expectations, values, opinions and prejudices are part of this giant theory.*" (Claxton, 1984 p10)

Introduction

It is my intention in this enquiry to consider whether my own professional practice in the classroom reflects my personal value of lifelong learning with its embodied attitudes, and what impact this has on the learning of the children I teach.

 I will outline my personal learning journey, describe the living values which are important to me and the formative influences in the development of these .

Whether you like it or not, how you teach and how you learn to teach are bound up with your own personality, philosophy and values. Somewhere inside there is a set of personal standards...that serve as the bench marks you will use to guide and evaluate your progress as a teacher   (Claxton, 1990 p17)

The reasons for our actions are often rooted in our values base, that is, the things we believe in and that drive our lives. (McNiff, 2002)

I will describe the reflective professional learning journey that has been influential in developing my practice and how that road has enabled me to retain enthusiasm for my career. In this I will to explain how I made the transition from a teacher just doing a job to someone with an awareness of their own learning attributes and potential, and a passion for developing pupils as curious, original-thinking individuals.

My study will examine the values I believe I bring into the classroom, how I would expect to identify these and the criteria by which I would judge myself to be

successful in transmitting these values when seeking to improve the children's own abilities as lifelong learners. My focus will be an area I believe to be of great value; co-operative problem solving, taking risks, developing resilience, increasing understanding of how we learn better – fundamental attributes of good lifelong learners.

Being a good learner…"*means having 'learning positive' attitudes, being orientated towards seeing and seizing learning opportunities*" It requires " *emotional resilience; the ability to tolerate making some mistakes, feeling in a mental fog, not having a firm grasp on what is going on, and being somewhat anxious or even frustrated.*"   (Claxton, 1990, p153)

I intend to focus on one particular aspect of my work that concerns me, where there is conflict between my personal values and the structure I am required to work within. This an example of a 'living contradiction' as described by Whitehead (1993), in my professional life. I shall explain how I have attempted to find a way of retaining and promoting my personal values of what education is about, within a very structured curriculum, with the aim of improving the learning of each child**.**

For this enquiry I will be following the format suggested by Jean McNiff (2002 p9) in that I will be '*identifying a problematic issue, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it,…and changing practice in the light of the evaluation .*' This is closely linked to the TASC wheel approach to problem solving (Wallace, 2001) which I already use in the classroom. This action reflection cycle is consistent with the inner TASC wheel (see Appendix 1). I intend to demonstrate how I identified an opportunity to address my area of concern using a daily 15 min session of learning activities within the Numeracy lesson..

<u>My Personal Values</u>
"*The only serious method of education is to be an example*"   (Einstein)

My personal values come from a variety of sources; childhood influences, life experiences, reading, spiritual beliefs- the list is endless. I am a constantly changing embodiment of them. Appendix 2 describes these in greater detail.

On entering my workplace I take with me a belief in being honest with others, facing up to difficulties, giving life your best shot. Education can give you choices in life, but there are certain attitudes and qualities that enable you to be a good learner.

I believe that learning is not something that ends when you leave school or formal education. Some of my most significant learning experiences have resulted from facing difficulties in my own life. Reflecting on how I dealt with these problems I began to see that I myself had many of the qualities of a good learner. My self-awareness as a learner has enabled me to identify those attributes I would like my pupils to carry with them throughout their lives such as resilience, creativity, resourcefulness, an ability to reflect on what has been achieved or needs to be done, and an ability to share ideas and work with others.

The personal dispositions and experiences accumulated over the years help shape the professional role of teacher as it is subjectively experienced. The self goes on developing, for it is a process, not an entity. (Woods, 1993 p451)

Context.

I work in a junior school with a high level of social and educational problems. There is a 30% SEN level. The children are frequently called 'challenging' and many come from dysfunctional homes. They begin their statutory educational lives at a disadvantage to children from more stable or materially comfortable homes. Their experiences of life are frequently limited, as is their vocabulary and parental support.

I have worked there for over 16 years. A good working relationship of trust and openness with the children is essential, and this is a priority with every new class.

As a teacher I see my role as providing something more than the basic curriculum. Claxton, (1997 p215) describes schools as having two curricula – the knowledge, know-how based *content curriculum* and the *learning curriculum.* It is this second aspect that I am aiming to develop more fully. What basic knowledge and skills my pupils will require in their future lives is uncertain. What they will require, to get the best out of life, is an ability to learn.

Background to my enquiry

For several years I have been informally working on changing my professional practice. Much of this came about from my involvement with More Able pupil workshops (APEX) and INSET days on teaching thinking skills, philosophy and learning strategies. These were areas that gave me feelings of excitement and enthusiasm because of the response from the children. Somehow, by involving them in their own learning, I could see them beginning to wake up and take an interest. More details of the type of activities can be found in Appendix 3, where I try to outline about 5 years of work.

I was able to share informally what I had done with other teachers and adults in school. As a result of this all new staff are provided with Inset training on using the TASC wheel and teaching philosophy.

In May 2005 the timetable was changed due to PPA time and an OFSTED criticism. I lost the early morning sessions and a 30 minute philosophy lesson. The immediate effect was that I no longer felt I was in touch with the children as learners and my week centred only on rushing through the 'content curriculum'. I feel strongly that we do not give children the best education this way. I continue to request that as a school we look for creative and flexible use of time to ensure we address the learning curriculum.

On a personal level I found I had lost that sense of 'buzz' and passion that I had previously experienced with the thinking and learning lessons. I am convinced that without that sense of excitement to sustain me, I fail to get the best from my teaching and the children's learning is affected.

How we teach, how we sustain our enthusiasm (passion) is linked to how we feel emotionally about the job we do- which has been ignored by 'reform' moves, where new strategies are imposed as the solution without considering whether the teacher feels confident about them .

   (Pardo & Potter, 2003, Beyond Cognition, in Kozulin et al, Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context p317)

With an extended numeracy session each day I found it very difficult to maintain the pupils' interest for 75 minutes working on the NNS topics, particularly on Mondays when they are often tired and unmotivated.

Reflecting on the wide-awake, enthusiastic participation I wanted to nurture in them, I thought of ways to address this problem. It seemed obvious that I would need to break up the periods of concentration into more manageable sections, but I didn't want to just teach extra content. At this point I had the idea of using at least 15 minutes daily to play maths games and work on those learning skills and attitudes that I consider important.

<u>My concern</u>

"I believe that the prime function of education in an uncertain world should be to provide young people with the competence and self-confidence to tackle uncertainty well; in other words, to be good learners." (Claxton, 1990 p66)

The children I teach lack independence as learners. They frequently look to please me, do the minimum they can or give up at the first sign of difficulty. They understand that learning will bring them some choice and opportunity in life, but not how they can take ownership of this. Although they achieved between level 3B to 4C in their previous year's optional SATs, they are not confident of their own ability. At least three of the group had low scores in the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School survey, (produced by W3-Insights), of the previous June in the areas of confidence in themselves as learners and their perceived learning capability.

Learning power grows through experience…Thus where the content curriculum might demand tight scheduling and supervision, the learning curriculum suggests that students be given some time, freedom and encouragement to explore. (Claxton, 1997 p222)

The amount of content in our curriculum leaves little space for developing children as independent learners in a regular and structured way. Whilst we may be able to use a format such as the TASC wheel, the outcome of the lesson has to match the subject based learning objective. There also has to be evidence of the children's learning against the objectives. This reduces time to focus on the development of learning itself.

Belle Wallace highlights this conflict when she states:

The National Curriculum Strategy does demand that learners learn a range of problem solving and thinking skills, but what is not realised is that teaching and learning in this way needs less content and more thinking time. (Wallace, 2001 p23) What I am seeking to do is demonstrate that my personal value of being a good learner is something I model to the children as I teach them.

What would success look like?

In my personal reflections, recordings of the activities, discussions with children and colleague observations my criteria for success would be:

*Enthusiastic and motivated pupils

*Able to listen to the views of others, share their ideas and use the 'best' way, not just the one they thought of.

*Children able to deal with frustration in their learning and willing to look for alternative methods; demonstrating flexibility of thinking and creativity in methods used, particularly in 'problem solving'

*Use of jottings and informal recording to support work rather than neat pages dominating the learning activity.

*Working beyond the activity – independently taking the learning further because they are intrigued or interested by it

*Able to relate what they have done to previous learning and identify new learning; describe their learning with increasing sophistication.

* Evaluate themselves as learners

* Evaluate me as a learner

Initially I hope to see this taking place in the 15 minute session, but my aim is to develop attitudes that will extend to all curriculum areas and real life situations.

Methodology of the action/reflection research cycle

My focus in the 15 minute session is to see how resilience, flexibility and an enjoyment of learning can be fostered through a scaffolded structure for problem solving and playing mathematically based games: how far 'fun' activities will engender a positive attitude to learning and enable me to put across important aspects of being a good learner.

I contacted parents to inform them of what I would be doing, asking permission to use visual evidence and written work from the children. (Appendix 11) Not all

parents agreed to the use of visual evidence and the video clips have been edited in accordance with their wishes.

 I discussed my plans with my head teacher and outlined the values I wished to develop with the children. I was also able to discuss what I was doing in an informal way with several other members of staff and my colleagues in the action research group. This was very helpful in enabling me to focus more clearly on what I wanted to achieve and reflect on what was working well.

Although I had been using the 'games' session for a couple of months already, I monitored and kept a reflective journal of the daily activities for three weeks, adapting activities as a result of my observations if necessary. Extracts of this are in Appendix 4.

Through their learning logs (Appendix 5) and talking about the process of learning with them, I involved the children in what and how they are learning and how these strategies can be used in other areas. I used their feedback in my journal to identify what has worked and what needs to be improved or adjusted.

 I have also used video of the activities to help me identify what values I feel I am putting across and what effect this is having on the children's learning. In Appendix 10.2 and 10.3 I comment on where I feel there is evidence of these values. The photographs in Appendix 10.1 demonstrate the way that the children are working well with partners.

Two sessions were observed by colleagues, one my NQT, and they provide their comments in Appendix 8.1 and 8.2.

At the end of the focus period I interviewed ten children about the activity sessions, how they viewed themselves as learners and how they perceived me as a learner. A full record of their responses is in Appendix 9. My choice was based on the more articulate members of the group or where I had felt there had been some change in how they worked.

The children's learning logs, video and photographic records, the interview responses, feedback from observers and my own daily reflections form the basis of my evidence and enable me to determine me what effect I am having.

 By reviewing and reflecting on my methods I intend to continue to develop these sessions beyond the enquiry period and use my own learning to make future improvements. In Appendix 12 I have outlined some of the areas I wish to enquire

into further. My intention is to share my results with other members of staff and discuss how this might be incorporated into the learning culture of the school.

Evaluation

Criteria 1 - enthusiasm and motivation

 I started the academic year with a repertoire of activities drawn from the ideas of Dave Kirby, the DfEE book 'Mathematical Challenges for Able Pupils' along with the Activ Flash flipcharts.

  I wanted to see what my 'customers' liked and identify why. If I was to get the children excited about learning I needed activities they obviously showed pleasure in doing.

Keeping a child's early questioning spirit alive can be one of the keys to success in learning. (Fisher, 1995 p1)

After about a fortnight it I observed from their responses in class that there were three elements of an activity which they preferred, and therefore were more inclined to work at with enthusiasm:

- They liked to have something to hold, place or move such as number cards or counters.
- They liked to actively take part, whether it was by pressing a box on the interactive whiteboard, 'walking through' the problem or holding up their response on a small whiteboard.
- They liked using verbal responses, white boards, scrap paper rather than recording more formally and having someone to share ideas with.

With this in mind I encouraged them to use any equipment they felt they needed, used diagrams or pictures to represent the problem and demonstrated how this could help.
 In the learning logs, the observation comments by fellow teachers, the video analysis and the questionnaire responses there is evidence that the majority enjoy the activities, many describing them as 'fun' or a good way to warm up. The video clips of card activities have a buzz of pleasure. I feel I am passing on my own value that learning can be fun in the way I introduce the 'Gnome Home' activity.

Criteria 2 -security and self esteem factors – working with a partner or using peer support

Much of our learning is founded on co-operatively achieved success. With others we can do more and achieve more than we can do on our own (Fisher, 1995 p90)

One of my own values is the belief that talking to someone about what you are doing, particularly if you lack confidence, can enable you to achieve more that trying to solve the problem anxiously on your own. Adult or peer support can enable you to extend your own learning.

Before beginning the actual daily monitoring I had observed the benefit of working with partners and using peer support when using an interactive game 'Bobby Butterfly'. An outline of this is contained in Appendix 4. It shows how advantageous having support is, whether it is another child or adult to scaffold your learning.

In my journal observations (Appendix 4) I note the frequent use made by most children of a working partner, and how at least one child (CH) looked for feedback from others when he found his group did not provide the support he required. This is also detailed on the video commentary. I have also observed how KM lacks confidence when her partner is absent. S is another child who benefits from the support, not just in these sessions but in the daily lesson. With his partner's support he is able to achieve far more than if on his own.

In the video clips, the children frequently use a partner to talk through their ideas, some very quietly, and they identify using this strategy in their logs. I feel this is one of the obvious success areas. In the interviews all said they would use a partner if they were stuck. Very few prefer to work on their own, these being the most able boys who told me that a partner can slow them down.

I have noticed a subtle change too in this area. By explaining to them the difference between 'copying' in a test and using someone else's ideas to help, they are becoming more discriminating as to the appropriate situation. The next issue to deal with here investigating the reasons for a partner who doesn't make much of a contribution, and ensuring that they evaluate another person's idea, not merely assume it must be the best method. SA will often choose to ignore LJ and work on his own, yet in the Activity video clips (3m52s) he is working animatedly with LF.

Criteria 3   Flexibility of approach, looking for strategies and perseverance
The sessions are beginning to expand their knowledge of different strategies. I have identified approaches to them, using myself as a model 'problem solver'. In their logs

they can identify when they had to change initial ideas, and my NQT colleague was impressed at the way they could use elimination. I now need to extend their repertoire of strategies, give them the vocabulary to explain what they are doing and build on this initial progress. In recent SAT's practice tests the quality of explanations was far better than previous years.

Perseverance is difficult to measure accurately; in the later video clips there is less 'off task' behaviour. CH has been a good indicator of this. In Gnome Homes he was frequently off task. In the next video he and TS are working well (Appendix 10.3). My observers noticed a lowering of perseverance when they were stuck or if they avoided using something to help. (Appendix 8.2) I have given the children feedback that this is an area where they are improving. Some activities were unfinished but persevered with, showing me that they have passed the need for an instant solution. There is still a need to continue to work in this area.

Criteria 4   Use of informal recording

This is working well in the activities and main lessons. For at least one child (SA) it is a confidence boost not to have to record his ideas neatly and the result is he is more willing to try out ideas.

This reflects Claxton's (1997 p 130) opinion that:

'Creativity of intuition and problem-solving is reduced by a feeling of threat or pressure.'

Wipe off boards or scrap paper are a common feature of the sessions and some will even use them in the main lesson before committing themselves to paper.

Criteria 5   Working beyond the activity – self motivated extension

The results were disappointing. Partly this is due to the time structure. The short session is barely long enough for the majority of children to complete the task, let alone extend it. There were several occasions when the activity had extension ideas, but the higher ability group stopped after the main activity. (Journal entry for 16/1/06)

Criteria 6 Identifying new learning skills

The children found this very difficult, unless I had identified a specific skill. Initially their logs reported very little learning. In the later activity video clips I go through the skills I want them to focus on. This was because I realised they needed to build up a repertoire of identifiable learning skills and the necessary vocabulary. I should really have anticipated that my own reading and experience put my understanding well in advance of them as 8 year olds. I have since made a point of identifying the learning aspect and the responses in the interviews suggest they are developing their ability to express their learning more clearly.

Criteria 7   Evaluate themselves as learners

I wanted to see whether the children saw themselves as 'good learners' when the activity was easy or something they liked. Would they still consider themselves a good learner when it bored them? The logs don't suggest this is the case. Their evaluations were more linked with their confidence and how they rate themselves against their peers. I feel I have only scratched the surface of this self awareness and need to develop it further.

CH made an important observation in his interview with me when he said he didn't know whether he had good learning habits, but it would be helpful if someone identified them.

Criteria 8 How they see me as a learner and whether they can identify what I value.

Teachers, whatever their subject or pedagogical expertise, whatever their own biographies and predispositions, are working with the beliefs and attitudes of their students….The most powerful messages of teacher success are to be found not only in test or examination results but in the personal testimonies of students.   (Day 1997 p202)

The interview responses imply that the children view me as a separate species – that of teacher. As such I am assumed to be interested in learning and good at it. Their comments made me aware that much of my learning goes on outside of a lesson and that they have had little opportunity to see me 'walking the talk'.

Their interviews answers about my values were very frank. Whereas I was hoping to come across as a source of inspiration to be a lifelong learner, I found they saw me as

someone who insisted on good manners, hard work and being quiet. My own reaction to the videos was to feel my 'performance' lacked the sparkle of passionate enthusiasm for learning. They have identified some of my values in that I persevere, I look for different methods and I enjoy problem solving and learning in itself, and that I like the learning experience to be enjoyable. The bridge that now need building is the one that links my values to lifelong learning.

Implications of my Findings and Future Plans

They (the pupils) do not respond positively because they are told to try harder…but because they find most of the work interesting, because they know that their teacher expects them not to give up at the first sign of difficulty, because they know that their efforts will be valued, and because they have sufficient confidence in their teacher's judgement to believe *they will be successful in the end.* (Galloway et al 1998 p141)

Passing on ones life values to a child is a serious responsibility. How I present myself as an example of a lifelong learner can make a difference to their future lives, although I will not be the only influencing factor as LL pointed out to me in the interview.

From the evidence of my enquiry I feel I have only just begun to pass on my value of lifelong learning. In Appendix 12 I have reflected in greater depth where my enquiry needs to go next. I still need to create opportunities to involve my pupils in learning how to learn, extending it to learning opportunities in life. There is a need for me to continue to overtly model my perseverance and flexibility in new or 'problem' situations and how I handle being in the fog.

I believe I have shown that their level of enthusiasm and ability to support each other's learning has developed steadily through these sessions.

The children have also become much clearer in explanations. This vocabulary and language aspect needs developing in all year groups and be included in our school focus of raising the standard of speaking and listening.

I feel that the time constraint is not ideal for developing the lifelong learner qualities without them being addressed elsewhere in the timetable. As an enjoyable activity to produce a more positive attitude and confidence in maths, it works. To enable the development of co-operative learning, it is successful. It helps me retain my

enthusiasm for teaching, but as a way of developing lifelong learners the effect is as yet limited. I have been able to put across some of my living educational theory, but there are still omissions. What I would wish to see is a 'learning lesson' slot on the timetable, not restricted to any one subject or topic, a time when I could show them what excites me about learning and they could be involved in activities more personally suited to their interests.

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