

Tanglewood Nursery School Chelmsford Essex 1992

Learning lessons from children

A memory that taught the teacher more than the child

I can remember the following session as though it were yesterday. I was new to advisory work - having been a teacher since 1971 - you would have thought 20 years later I would have got the hang of it!

Even then-my instinct told me that getting into classrooms and teaching alongside teachers or modelling teaching strategies had more mileage for change than getting teachers to understand the formulaic 'teaching by numbers' methods in vogue at the time.

The school was in any case (and is now I believe) quite exceptional and unique as all the teachers seemed to be outstanding in every thing they did. A more dedicated team is hard to imagine.

The children were in the main from extremely deprived backgrounds-many parents in the trap of either being single young mums having to work all hours and discovering all about parenting by being in the deep end, or dispossessed people with little in their lives except survival. These were often parents who lived their lives through their children when they could, so the little nursery is and was a social and emotional centre for more than the children.

The power of the imagination

The teaching team were (and still are) just fantastic! The head teacher was one of those so called 'transformational' leaders who lead the staff to believe in one thing. Jacqui believed that children could learn all they needed through engagements in ACTIVE imaginative contexts. So this meant that the learning spaces were always filled to the brim with marvellously big, often exotic and significant images in 'unusual environments'. In one area you might come across children engaging with learning that sparked off talk and activity because they were a team of workers 'under the sea', in another room a teacher would be getting ready for a journey in the 'yellow submarine' and singing away the Beatles song whilst they prepared for the take off. In the room I was to work with I was asked to help set up a Ferry Boat in the class as well as a dockside area for the boat to rest. I worked with the teacher and the teaching assistants whilst assembly occurred and we set up a sign for the cars to get through the gates, a big 'post' to tie the ferry to and badges for the workers who ran the ferry. We also set up a kitchen area with some signs that showed what we cooked (breakfast mainly) and the 'travel centre' with brochures from travel agents. A small group of the children had visited travel agents the day before on a collection mission for free booklets with their wonderful Learning Assistant.

The room was therefore 'roughly' set up by 3 adults with scaffolded signs - a kitchen area, an area for the cars to enter and a 'travel information' area. I was in the kitchen, the class teacher and an LSA by the gates for the cars and the second LSA in the travel centre. The class bubbled in from assembly led by the class teacher from next door-who said out loud:

'My goodness it's a boat, I had better get my car!'

This got the class pretty excited – so much so that they came around for a quick look deciding in the process which area they wanted to work in a story about a big ferry.....I imagine I attracted the boys as for some reason, unknown to any of us at the time, the boys made a bee line to me in the 'kitchen' and immediately began helping to sort out the food and the cooking pots and pans for a hungry load of holiday makers when they parked their cars on deck.

Elsewhere there were similar things going on-the gate people were sorting out tickets to give to each car when the gates opened, as well as show each driver where to park. Clearly there were lots of people as the queues were very very very long according to the look outs. The travel centre had of course to put out the brochures in a way that visitors could see and perhaps touch, BUT it was decided by the team who surrounded the learning assistant that visitors to the ferry were NOT allowed to take any of them away, just to read them! We just didn't have enough for them to take away, so a reading area was set up.....

The seeds of the 'disaster' to come.....

It all happened because of a young boy called Dwayne..... (None of the children in the school were older than 4 years old). Dwayne decided to find the 'pots and pans' that were missing from the kitchen. It soon became obvious that the equipment necessary to run our kitchen was not in the kitchen itself - as they had to be 'down below' somewhere - I could tell as Dwayne was on the search, not interested at all in getting the frying pan to cook the bacon!

I should have read the signs, but I was too intent on getting the kitchen sorted with the few girls who wanted to join us and the rest of the boys, who, unlike Dwayne and his mates, needed a lot of scaffolding and modelling. Dwayne's language was terribly restricted. It all had to be said through hand gestures and signs, meaningful smiles, and artful actions but very little spoken language. (The deprivation index at the school was the highest in the county and the assessments on entry made by the school had found that the majority of the children had appallingly low spoken language acquisition. Dwayne's was piteously the lowest the staff had ever seen.)

By now Dwayne had decided to 'look' in the actual cupboards themselves. These were quite extensive and children were definitely NOT encouraged to hide in them, presumable because they could disappear in the warrens. Dwayne was obviously not aware of this directive and continued to crawl about in dark spaces to 'find' what we didn't have for cooking a good breakfast for hungry travellers. This was such a great learning moment for me - he was passing me imaginary things from the cupboard as well as other objects that I could only accept with grateful thanks - and having to work out for myself how to deal with this level of invention. I remember learning from Dorothy Heathcote, try to read what is happening, rather than reading what I wanted to happen! The trouble was I couldn't for the life of me work out what was missing, even though Dwayne, Shane and Billy were frantically busy trying to communicate with me in all sorts of ways, what we didn't have and had by now got all their other mates helping them look as well. I looked up for help from one of the adults who knew all about four year olds, but none was available to me at this point of the session, as lots was happening by the gates and even more in the travel centre. I could see I was on my own here.

Saved by an accident

So I took the crazy step of turning my back on them and walking away! Only, of course, away from the cupboards, even though the 'lads' were inviting me into their secret (and by now very cosy) space under the counter. I had to have a brain wave. Taking a piece of chalk from my pocket (how it got there is a long story) I spoke quite urgently and asked if any of the bystanders had seen the kitchen people who were 'down there' (under the floors of the boat.) They were mainly girls and those boys not yet friendly with Dwayne's extremely busy team. What was so fascinating about Dwayne was that he commanded real leadership without very much spoken language at all, in fact it was highly restricted, and hand 'gesture-words' which were occasionally fun to translate, though often lots of the meaning was lost in translation - especially on me. However he could give out orders that were instantly obeyed by his devoted followers.....

His friends however seemed to understand every sign he used, and more..... However, not to digress, I am holding a piece of chalk, smiling and signing:

‘I am going to do something very naughty’.

To the boys in the cupboard this was electric, I was one of them it seemed, since I was about to draw something on the carpet in chalk!! This adult would have to be dealt with by the class teacher, who was informed immediately that a sinner was in their midst! However, the teacher knew the game and was in any case far too busy with the gate team to help, they would just have to get on with it, especially as the man had drawn a circle that represented the doorway to ‘down there’, under the boat..... The posse of informers returned to the kitchen. It was agreed that I would be allowed to carry on, as long as the chalk was rubbed off. I agreed at once just as I signed expressively- ‘opening the hatchway ‘ of the ‘door down there’.

Well this caused amazement, as it meant we could all go down! And ‘down’ we all went.....I suppose it would have looked a little like ‘London’s Burning’ to anyone watching not knowing we were all going down to the hold of the boat.

As you might expect, it was Dwayne who found ‘it’- i.e. the source of the whole week’s work and the calamity that had had all sorts of ramifications as well as deep learning for all of us involved.

Dwayne’s discovery

It’s hard to imagine the hell of having strokes of genius and not being able to communicate it to any one. This for our dear learner called Dwayne was what it must have been like, no spoken language, but so much else! Dwayne’s gesticulations of panic, as well as urgency and pointing and so on had me baffled. Here we all were looking for the missing things for the kitchen and what did we have now? A discovery of sorts but what was he going on about? (I really was hoping this lesson would finish pretty soon). Looking around again for support I managed to get every adult to report out loud what was going on. The cars were about to be let on the boat and the area for the travel info was up and running with the last touches. I had to report (with help) that the kitchen was NEARLY ready, but we were just looking ‘down below’ at something that seems to have gone wrong and, in that moment, Dwayne yelled out

‘E-eer, i-eer!!!’ (Later I discovered this meant -‘Its there, its there!’)

It was a few seconds before we began to understand the problem, confirmed by the ‘crew’ (who knew Dwayne’s language codes so much better than the adults), we had a hole in the ship ‘down below!’

The cars were about to be ushered on board, and of course the travel shop was really happening - preened assistants were ready for the crowds with lots to show and tell.....In my neck of the woods, however, life wasn’t so straight forwards. Dwayne now rushed around from the hole area and grabbed the gate teams’ teachers arm (remember she was manning the gates with her class and just about to let all the cars on). Now clearly with all Dwayne’s power, the teacher was under no illusion that something definitely was wrong, Dwayne’s friends and close associates backed him up -

‘There’s a hole, a hole-water! Water!’

The disaster was clear, we had a hole in the boat and Dwayne was the saviour of us all, no cars could come in and the travel people would just have to wait a while. So the gates were ‘shut again’ and the poor people in their cars, who had tickets to get on the boat, had to be told they would have to wait until the hole was ‘made better’. All hands were called for to help get the boat to safety and got to the repair area and, having achieved this monumental task, we sat down and had a well deserved cuppa

and a snack. (This was just the time when the class had their milk drinks and snacks specially prepared for them as for some this and lunch were the only 'square' meals they would see until tomorrow.)

It was during the quiet and serene time of 'snax' that the conversations took a most interesting turn. We went straight into an enquiry mode.....how to repair the hole in the boat.....Whilst apples were being crushed between teeth almost ready to fall out and of course through copious amounts of cold milk, the children pondered the question. I could hear not only the chomping of healthy food but almost the thoughts of the minds of these little people tackling the problem.

'We could use wood.....'

'My dad has nails.....'

Boy: (one of Dwayne's buddies) 'Bricks.' This simple word caused us all to stop munching and consider the importance of this thought. Yes bricks, we could stuff the hole with bricks and all would be well.

Me: 'I was just thinking, how could we make sure the bricks don't fall out when we get going across to France?'

Girl: 'My dad has got some stuff, I don't know what it is though, you mix it with sand I think.....'

Boy: (one of the travel people) 'Oh-there's that stuff that you mix (shows with hand gestures plastering motion signs).....'

Girl: (from the door team) 'Orrrrr..... we could use that stuff in a big pot, it goes round and round.....'

(I was guessing in my head, a cement mixer perhaps? Best to keep quiet I thought, I didn't have a track record of success as far as interpretations with 4 year olds go.)

Others chimed in at this being a brilliant idea and that bricks would also need to be got hold of and with all this, all we had to do was sort it out.

But as it happened. Dwayne had another idea.

Tomato ketchup

He leapt up from his table and rushed over to me, beaming, I was definitely the person who could make his ideas happen, the evidence was overwhelming - after all who made the hole idea work for him? If only I had his faith. He was twisting an imaginary object his hands as if he was wringing the neck of a chicken (oh dear what was happening now I thought, he obviously wants to wring water out of a cloth to mop up the sea water, was this it?) My face must have told him that the signs he was speaking in his 'expressive' way to me was not enough, so he rushed over to the lunch table where several clean and tidy ketchup bottles stood. Grabbing one, he now did the same, holding the top and signing as hard as he could:

'Look how difficult it is getting the top off!'

Panic must have shown him I was not in touch with his genius. So he had to help me more, this time he signed pouring the ketchup, spreading it out, then holding up two objects and clasping his hands together in triumph! I was beginning to get his drift, but surely no 4 year old could make such

connections, surely he wasn't saying that as its so hard to get the lid off a ketchup bottle it must be ever so good at sticking bricks together.....my face must have told him his grand design of an idea was getting into my poor simple adult brain, yes I was right.

When I reflected back to him thus:

Me: 'So your saying, if we could use ketchup that sticks the tops on so hard we could use it for the bricks and it would work for them?!'

Dwayne: 'Arrr!' (This was accompanied by lots of big nods and beaming smiles!

It was as though he was saying:

'Yes at last you've got it. Shame I had to work so hard to explain to you. I hope you noticed how many chances I gave you and how I made it simpler and simpler so you could eventually get it?'

Next day

The children were on a rotor due to the pressure of places at the nursery, as well as their ages, so Dwayne and his friends would be the 'morning' group. After a lot of discussion with the staff and the learning support team, the next day Dwayne came into the class with the excitement of wooden and clay bricks. A dad who could mix a bit of cement and a table where there were lots of ketchup bottles to try out on the hole fixing materials to see if the ketchup would work for our boat.....