

SECRETS AND BOUNDARIES IN CLASSROOM DIALOGUES WITH CHILDREN:
FROM CRITICAL EPISODE TO SOCIAL ENQUIRY

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Abstract:

Events in teaching often bubble up and demand attention because they stay with us long after the moment has passed, causing us to revisit and recreate them, perhaps to ask ourselves whether we might have responded differently. Deeper reflection and wider social enquiry become possible when incidents are recorded over time. Themes are identified and form the basis of theorizing and alternative action. Themes tend to emerge from awareness of our emotional responses to events and through an investigation of the values and beliefs that have informed our reactions to them. Since I am aiming to encourage and strengthen children's participation in the community of enquiry, a major theme in my own practice is locating barriers to my listening, obstacles that inhibit children's involvement in philosophical dialogue, whose advocates have emphasized its democratic nature and transformative educational potential. This paper describes an experience of teaching which led me to explore taboos surrounding certain topics in primary schools. In the case reported, I suggest that the subject of 'secrets' alludes to wider insecurities in the social construction of intimacy in child and adult relations. These difficulties inhibit the educational process and obscure the voice of the child, even in the context of philosophical dialogue, which aims to increase children's participation. I consider the moral panic in the UK about the safety of children and the effect on interactions in the ambiguous context of primary schools. I examine the exercise of professional judgement in respect of boundaries of private and public. Conscious of a missed opportunity, I explore secrecy, hiding, concealing and revealing and the part that these play in relationships and in the making of individual identity and the sense of self. Throughout the enquiry I seek to identify obstacles to listening that limit the potential for mutual education.

Keywords: Secrets; Boundaries; Listening; Recording classes; Philosophy with children

Segredos e limites nos diálogos com crianças na sala de aula: do episódio crítico à investigação social

Resumo:

Acontecimentos no ensinar com frequência eclodem e demandam atenção, pois permanecem conosco muito após terem ocorrido, levando-nos a revisitá-los e a recriá-los, talvez para perguntarmos-nos se poderíamos ter respondido de maneira diferente. Uma reflexão mais aprofundada, e uma investigação social mais ampla tornam-se possíveis quando guardamos registros dos acontecimentos. Os temas são identificados e formam a base para a teorização e a ação alternativa, e tendem a emergir da percepção que temos

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de nossas respostas emocionais aos acontecimentos e através da investigação dos valores e crenças que informaram nossas reações. Uma vez que visio encorajar e fortalecer a participação das crianças na comunidade de investigação, o tema principal na minha prática é localizar as barreiras da minha escuta: obstáculos que inibem o envolvimento das crianças na prática dialógica, cuja natureza democrática e potencial educativo transformador foram destacados por seus defensores. Este artigo descreve uma experiência de ensino que me levou a explorar tabus em torno certos temas nas escolas primárias. No caso relatado, sugiro que o tema dos "segredos" alude a inseguranças mais amplas na construção social da intimidade nas relações de crianças e adultos. Essas dificuldades inibem o processo educacional e obscurecem a voz da criança, mesmo no contexto do diálogo filosófico, que visa aumentar a participação das crianças. Considero o pânico moral no Reino Unido quanto à segurança das crianças e o efeito sobre as interações no contexto ambíguo de escolas primárias. Examino o exercício de julgamento profissional em relação aos limites do privado e do público. Consciente de uma oportunidade perdida, exploro o sigilo, o ocultamento, o velado e o revelado e o papel que desempenham nas relações e na construção da identidade individual e no sentido do *self*. Ao longo da pesquisa procuro identificar os obstáculos à escuta que limitam o potencial para a educação mútua.

Palavras-chave: Segredos; Limites; Escuta; Registro das aulas; Filosofia com crianças

Secretos y límites en los diálogos con los niños en el aula: Desde un episodio crítico hacia la investigación social

Resumen:

Acontecimientos en la enseñanza brotan a menudo y demandan la atención porque se quedan con nosotros mucho después de que el momento haya pasado, llevándonos a revisitarlos y recrearlos, tal vez para preguntarnos si podríamos haber respondido de manera diferente. Una reflexión más profunda y una investigación social más amplia son posibles cuando se registran los acontecimientos a través del tiempo. Los temas son identificados y forman la base para la teorización y la acción alternativa y tienden a surgir de la conciencia de nuestras respuestas emocionales a los acontecimientos y a través de una investigación de los valores y creencias que han informado a nuestras reacciones a ellos. En la medida en que busco fomentar y fortalecer la participación de los niños en la comunidad de investigación, el tema principal en mi propia práctica es localizar las barreras de mi escucha: los obstáculos que inhiben la participación de los niños en el diálogo filosófico, cuyo carácter democrático y potencial educativo transformador han sido resaltados por sus defensores. Este ensayo describe una experiencia de enseñanza que me llevó a explorar los tabúes alrededor de ciertos temas en las escuelas primarias. En el caso relatado, sugiero que el tema de los "secretos" hace alusión a inseguridades más amplias en la construcción social de la intimidad de las relaciones entre niños y adultos. Estas dificultades impiden el proceso educativo y oscurecen la voz del niño, incluso en el contexto del diálogo filosófico, cuyo objetivo es aumentar la participación de los niños. Considero que el pánico moral en el Reino Unido acerca de la seguridad de los niños y el efecto de las interacciones en el contexto



ambiguo de las escuelas primarias. Examino el ejercicio profesional del juicio respecto a los límites de lo privado y de lo público. Consciente de la oportunidad perdida, exploro el sigilo, el oculto, el velado y el revelado y el papel que estos desempeñan en las relaciones y en la construcción de de la identidad individual y del sentido del yo. A lo largo de la investigación busco identificar los obstáculos a la escucha que limitan el potencial de la educación mutua.

Palabras clave: Secretos; Límites; Escucha; Grabación de las clases; Filosofía con Niños

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SECRETS AND BOUNDARIES IN CLASSROOM DIALOGUES WITH CHILDREN:
FROM CRITICAL EPISODE TO SOCIAL ENQUIRY

Joanna Haynes

'We dance around in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.'
Robert Frost, Poet

'Secrets rarely leave us indifferent'
Max Van Manen and Bas Levering (1996)

Origins and direction of this enquiry

This paper is born out of the experience of meeting with a group of children, aged between 8 and 11, in a weekly after-school philosophy club in a small, rural primary school in the south west of England. I locate the seed of the enquiry in one particular session with the group, an episode which unsettled me and I found myself dwelling upon. I have adopted the habit of recording occasions such as this as critical incidents in my teaching (Tripp, 1996). As a visiting teacher, at the time employed as a tutor in a university education faculty, I had been granted permission by the school's governing body (after consultation with staff, parents and pupils) to keep records¹ of my work with the children for the purposes of research. This was action research (McNiff, 1993), focussing on the quality of children's participation in philosophical enquiry and the development of my knowledge and skill as a facilitator. Keeping a journal of salient and memorable events is valuable when a practitioner is aiming to enrich classroom interaction through reflection on lived experience.

¹ These records include a log of each session, some audio-recordings of our dialogues, children's drawings and questions, observation notes and my own reflective journal.



Critical incidents inform teacher thinking and action in a number of ways. Problems can be identified. Individual learning situations can be illuminated. Change is often made possible through seeing existing practice in a new light. David Tripp argues:

'critical incidents are not 'things' which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event'. (Tripp, 1996:8)

How are critical incidents 'created'? They often arise from the mismatch that exists between the learning experiences teachers aspire to bring about for students, in accordance with their educational values and aims, and the day to day life of the classroom. Practitioner action research is a response to this contradiction between values and practice (McNiff, 1993). It is an attempt to reduce these contradictions and to change practice for the better. A decision is made to investigate aspects of teaching, to actively notice (Mason, 2001) what is happening, to look with new eyes, to open oneself without prejudice towards classroom experience. Critical episodes can help to describe the relationship between a practitioner and the context in which s/he is working and, when taken together, can constitute an auto-ethnography.

Events in teaching often bubble up and demand attention because they stay with us long after the moment has passed, causing us to revisit and recreate them, perhaps to ask ourselves whether we might have responded differently. Deeper reflection and wider social enquiry become possible when incidents are recorded over time. Themes are identified and form the basis of theorizing and alternative action. Themes tend to emerge from awareness of our emotional responses to events and through an investigation of the values and beliefs that have informed our reactions to them. Since I am aiming to encourage and

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strengthen children's participation in the community of enquiry, a major theme in my own practice is locating barriers to my listening, obstacles that inhibit children's involvement in philosophical dialogue, whose advocates have emphasized its democratic nature and transformative educational potential (Lipman, 1991, Splitter & Sharp 1995).

There are two interwoven strands within this enquiry. I have described my general concerns with my role as a teacher in seeking meaningful and fair participation in philosophy with children and the approach I have taken to researching this participation. The second strand of enquiry is secrecy, a topic that arose from a child telling a story about coming across a photograph in a drawer that prompted her to ask the question: 'why do people have secrets?' This is a concrete example of the creation of a significant episode of teaching, leading as it did, to my sense that there were things that could be revealed and things which should remain hidden in our discussion together. It was recorded in my journal and spent part of its early life as an anecdote entrusted to critical friends and colleagues as part of my dwelling upon it (Cooper, 1989). It was an anecdote that also found resonance in these conversations with fellow educators. Van Manen has written of the value of anecdotes in researching and writing about lived experience, in the phenomenological tradition. He argues that anecdotes form a counterweight to theoretical abstraction and are a valuable implement for uncovering meanings:

"...anecdotes possess a certain pragmatic thrust. They force us to search out the relation between living and thinking, between situation and reflection." (Van Manen, 1997:119)

This episode is one of dozens of examples when children's experiences, questions and comments have stimulated my philosophical curiosity and led me down a path I might not otherwise have taken. On this occasion it took me from reflections on my own experiences of secrecy, to informal conversations with



others, and to more formal searches for understanding through scholarly activity. I take it as an example of the mutuality of the educative process. It highlights for me the importance of thinking about the role of personal experience in philosophical enquiry, what it might mean to transform personal experience into knowledge, and the connections and boundaries between private and public domains in the educative process. Rather than thinking about facilitation as a formative process, implying that we know already where dialogue is leading, we might conceive of the teacher's role as opening the space and the conditions for letting children think (Bonnett, 1995). We could ask how to make it possible for them to take greater responsibility for both the origin and the direction of enquiries and for the creation of what Kohan (2002) has termed 'experiences of thinking'.

What subjects are permitted in philosophical enquiry? Who decides?

The period when I was meeting regularly with children in the after-school philosophy club marked a change of direction. Prior to this time, we had held our discussions during the school day. Dialogue in the group was usually prompted by children's questions arising from material such as picture books (Murriss, 1992, Murriss and Haynes, 2000). I had assumed responsibility for choosing material that would be suitable for the purposes of philosophical enquiry. Children were encouraged to consider what puzzled them in the material, to raise questions and to engage with each other within the framework of a community of enquiry. We had enjoyed discussing a wide range of topics together such as dreaming, what's real, death, monsters, being good and bad, language, particularly whether animals talk and think as we do.

In the context of the after-school club, and as the children increasingly seemed to perceive these sessions as an opportunity to explore their own thinking, they asked if they could bring what they termed their 'own questions'

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to the group, questions that arose from their everyday lives. Individuals would often approach me before a session to ask if we could discuss a particular topic. A few of these questions I perceived as sensitive in that they included reference to other people we knew within the community of the school but who were not present - on one occasion an angry and alarming outburst by a parent in the classroom, on another occasion a child asking questions about bizarre behaviour by an elderly member of her family. I found that children were often concerned to try and make sense of the behaviour of the adults around them. On the one hand, the fact that children wanted to raise these questions showed that they felt that here was a place they could discuss things of importance to them but, on the other hand, I worried that parents or staff would see such topics as inappropriate. I had those familiar feelings when one is torn between curiosity and reticence because a discussion refers to another party who is not present. I felt that it should be possible to explore these questions philosophically. Had I not encouraged the children to ask questions? Had I not led them to believe that the community of enquiry is a democratic forum? Had I not suggested that philosophy is all about trying to live wisely? Yes, but I was not sure that I had the skills or courage to pursue these questions, having always worked with a process of enquiry that began from a source such as a text or picture. Here I was outside the safety net of a technique or method or set of straightforward rules that I could deploy confidently. Philosophical enquiry should, of course, make such demands of the teacher (Haynes, 2002).

Perhaps the usual boundaries of our discussions were looser in the extra-curricular after-school club. Attendance was voluntary. I provided the children with refreshments and the atmosphere was relaxed and more informal than it had been when we met as a class as part of the timetabled curriculum. On the occasion in question, discussion took off spontaneously when one of the girls asked about tackling conflict with others. She had fallen out with one of her close



friends. In the conversation that followed one of the girls in the group said that her mum and dad had just separated and she began to cry. I invited her to sit beside me and she lay her head down in my lap. The girl who had raised the issue of conflict then went on to put the question: 'why do people have secrets?' and talked of "a photo in my mum's private drawer, of mum kissing someone else". She said, although her mum and the man in the photo were in fancy dress, the kissing didn't look like just fun. Another girl told us she had found a box of her mum's old love letters in a wardrobe.

Wary of the direction that we were taking, I tried to steer the group into a more generalised discussion of secrets. More examples were offered. Lucy and Katie said they were best friends and so they told each other everything. Stephen and Ben said they had a secret that was just for them. Several children spoke of places where they hid their secrets. Instead of pushing for greater depth in the exploration of the question as I normally would, I allowed the discussion to amble and I was conscious of trying to avoid any further disclosures that might be considered sensitive.

As I have reported, I was keeping written records of my work with the group. The comment in my journal referring to this conversation with the children reads: "this all felt like dynamite to me". I recorded that I felt both engaged by the subject matter of secrets but alarmed by the possibility that I might be somehow exposing the children and/or betraying the privacy of their families. In the next session, I attempted to raise the issue of confidentiality and sensitive questions in the group and to suggest some tentative guidelines that might enable us to pursue topics of concern to the children without intruding on the privacy of family members. But I think the children just sensed my disquiet and they withdrew or avoided questions they might otherwise have brought up

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for discussion. This was not a satisfactory outcome. It felt as if I was using my authority as a teacher, however delicately, to silence them.

Voices in the head: the impact of the child protection agenda

One factor that has led to topics such as 'secrets' being treated as a taboo is the association of children's secrets with the presence of sexual abuse, with adults using the appeal and exclusivity of a secret kept to conceal illegal maltreatment and to maintain their power and access to the child. In the construction of sexual fantasy, secrecy often features as a dimension of arousal. The original Polynesian meaning of taboo describes something sacred and forbidden, at once holy and unclean. The present confusion and uncertainty in representations of the child's body and in the sphere of intimacy between the young and adults seem to fit this definition. The ambiguity seems to be something we find hard to tolerate. The prominence of cases of sexual abuse makes it very difficult to broach childhood in conjunction with sexuality. To challenge the silence on this subject is to run the risk of being accused of a lack of concern to protect children and to threaten the very existence of childhood.

Teachers often find themselves in the forefront of any 'panic', such as the current one in Britain about the safety of children from adult interference. Teachers, along with other professionals and carers, are 'in loco parentis', whilst parental responsibility for children is increasingly privatised² and the lives of children are subject to more extensive public scrutiny, surveillance and state intervention³. Running parallel with the inhibitions and anxiety is an increased emphasis, at least at policy level, on the voice of the child, on children's human rights in a range of areas, including survival, development, protection and

² In the British cultural context a predominant construct of parenthood is still one of 'ownership' of and offspring can be construed as social assets or liabilities.

³ Large scale Government schemes like Surestart, (similar to Headstart in the USA) where, as well as providing childcare, mothers and fathers are offered 'parenting skills'.



participation rights. In the guidance they offer adults working with children, concerning the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF suggests on its website:

'Adults are expected to create spaces and promote processes to enable and empower children to express views, to be consulted and to influence decisions.' (UNICEF, 1999)

Children are increasingly targeted by advertisers, and better off children have a degree of power as consumers. They face new freedoms and new dangers. As well as the right to express their views, it can be argued that electronic games, popular music and television, the medium of total exposure, also provide children much greater and more ready access to knowledge and culture. They do not need to decode the printed word to unveil the secrets of the adult world (Postman, 1994)

Teachers and other adults need to think about how to demonstrate their respect for children as persons but the current climate of fear and ideas about the rights of parents⁴ often conflict directly with this. As well as being an educational/philosophical practitioner and researcher, I am a parent, auntie, carer for friends' children and my children's friends, conscious of the growing clamour of voices contesting the safety or preservation of childhood. When I work as a teacher, it is my professional duty to act 'in loco parentis' regarding children in my care. Standing in the place of the parent is to seek to inhabit a stance of parental love. Making judgements and decisions about children in my care is certainly informed by the love and interest I hold for the children in my family. It is not my intention in this paper to define the parameters of parents' authority and rights in respect of their children, nor to discuss how these should be considered alongside the rights of children. I have found David Archard's

⁴ The recent media debate about parents rights to smack their children is an example.

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(1993) work very helpful in this area. What I do want to hold on to is love as a basis for considering how to listen to children 'in loco parentis'.

Professionalism, as currently constructed for teachers, can be more of a hindrance than a guide to action. One of the definitions of a professional, arguably, is the extent to which he or she is 'response-able', expected and prepared to manage risk, to meet the unanticipated, and make appropriate decisions in situ. All groups of professionals work within guidelines and codes of practice issued by their professional bodies, so it is worth looking at some of the professional advice given to teachers in England. My interest for the purposes of this discussion is with the effects of such guidance, particularly child protection policy in public institutions such as schools, although it has had a widespread impact on parental relationships too (Furedi, 2002). These policies are a useful illustration of the way that the *possibility* of adult neglect, abuse or interference has come to dominate the agenda concerning intimacy in relationships between teachers and pupils. For example, teachers are informed

'it is unnecessary and unrealistic to suggest that teachers should touch pupils only in emergencies. Particularly with younger pupils, touching them is inevitable (my emphasis) and can give welcome reassurance to the child'. (DfES, 1995)

Researchers have been documenting the growing panic among childcare professionals about touching children in their care (Appleton, 2004 & 2005) and some schools have drawn up codes of practice on touch. Paradoxically, there is also a growth in the number of professionals offering touch services such as massage to help calm children down:

'While everyday informal touch between adults and children is viewed as suspicious, touching is recast as an area of professional expertise, and consigned to special massage sessions' (Appleton, 2005)



In the last few years, groups of people whose work involves children have had their trustworthiness brought into public doubt as a result of investigations into child abuse by members of the group in question. Priests, nuns, vicars, sports coaches, social workers, nurses, care-workers, teachers and the police have all joined the ranks of those to whom we cannot quite trust the care of children. The policies and practices which are supposed to protect children often reinforce a sense of mistrust between adults and children where the possibility of accusation turns children into a danger to adults working with them. The guidance often given to children regarding the risks associated with talking to strangers is to approach an adult you know or a person in uniform and report the problem. It seems that a uniform is no longer believed by many adults to guarantee protection either. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children informs readers of its leaflets that the majority of child deaths, injuries and emotional abuse and neglect are at the hands of parents and main carers in a domestic setting. The stranger=danger campaign, which is the backbone of child protection policy in schools, can be interpreted as a rather desperate attempt to clearly pinpoint the sources of danger by identifying strangers as 'baddies'. The facts about child neglect and abuse means that this campaign can effectively disempower those who most need empowering. This is to leave aside the difficulty in defining what a stranger is and the unjust and misleading blanketing of all strangers as a potential danger. Teachers are also advised that they should avoid being alone with a pupil in a confined or secluded place and that they should never guarantee confidentiality to a pupil.^{5[5]} The issue of confidentiality between teenage pupils and teachers has recently taken on a different slant in the context of young people's rights to confidential advice on sex, contraception and

^{5[5]} I understand that legally doctors are exempted from this guidance. In my own doctor's surgery there is a sign on the walls entitled 'Here to listen but not to tell' that read: 'We provide a confidential service to all our patients including under 16's. This means that you can tell someone else about this visit but we won't.'

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abortion versus their parents' rights to be informed about their children's health, sexual behaviour and life choices whilst still legally 'minors'.

In my work with adults undertaking educational work placements with young people, the level of anxiety about physical contact and about discussing anything remotely personal with children has increased. Students are both afraid of being accused of improper conduct and deeply uncertain about managing issues that are regarded as sensitive. It is a highly gender-laden pre-occupation too. There has been a big drive to recruit more men to work with younger children, but they are the ones who report the greatest anxiety about possible accusations of child abuse. During this same period, changes have been made to the National Curriculum for England and Wales. It now includes Personal, Social and Health Education (including sex education) for all phases of schooling as well as Citizenship Education from age 11. These inclusions in the curriculum carry the expectation that teachers will be involved in education concerning relationships and emotional health and well-being, as well as moral, social and political issues.

Moving beyond the professional guidance to teachers in this field, a cursory survey of the media illustrates contradictory views of the child. On the one hand we can identify the sexualisation of children's bodies in the imagery and language of some advertisements - this would be difficult to avoid, since all allusions to buying seem to imply arousal. On the other hand there are examples of the exploitation of what I term the 'naïve child'⁶ stereotype, in advertisements for items associated with successful adulthood such as cars, mobile phones, banking, and business. This imagery in the media is coupled with growing fear and mistrust concerning all relationships between adults and children. In the wake of the abduction and murder of two young girls by a school caretaker in

⁶ Children are portrayed as cutely playing at being adults, but without the guile or realism associated with the adult world.



the summer of 2002, one story in the press suggested that a father and mother, after consulting with 'experts' at Reading University, proposed to implant electronic tagging devices in their daughters' arms, so that they would always be able to track their whereabouts. Around the same period, I read a report in the newspaper of one school where staff had been advised by the head-teacher that, if pupils ever touched them, they should raise both arms high up into the air.

In the public arena there is effectively a ban on photographing children in places such as swimming pools or in any kind of performance at school, although seeking children's permission to photograph or record them or make use of their work never received such widespread interest and increased levels of official surveillance through closed circuit television are seldom questioned⁷. Technology is increasingly used, in school and in the family setting, to record children's achievements and to document the landmarks and highlights of their development, but we are uneasy about how to portray or to represent them. We watch children all the time, but we do not know how to look at them.

I have included the wider backdrop of uncertainty concerning the safety of relationships between adults and children to emphasise the kind of tension that is created for teachers between responding to their students as persons and responding through their institutionally defined and publicly influenced roles. Most teachers are all too conscious of the need to answer for every word and action. In a climate of fear about child abuse and uncertainty about the trustworthiness of adults the public voice is likely to be heard more loudly. Many teachers retreat behind the barrier of a legalistic construction of 'in loco

⁷ A nursery in Dundee, Scotland, described as 'cutting edge', has installed technology costing more than £100,000, that provides children with a grounding in computer skills and e-toys whilst enabling parents to access their goings-on via webcam, using a series of passwords. This is perceived as demonstrating the confidence of the nursery staff in the security they provide for the children and enabling parents to engage in virtual supervision. Guardian 31/10/02 and www.the-technotots.com

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parentis', minimising the possibility of harm, either to child or teacher, by reducing risks via rules and regulations such as those described above. Teachers do continue to exercise a choice regarding expressions of intimacy in their care for children, but the child protection agenda casts a shadow over it.

In the classroom the degree of public mistrust leads many to prefer teaching from a script and holding on firmly to the certainty of the position of teacher as all-knowing subject. Sharon Todd (2002) refers to the adoption of such a stance as the sanitisation of teaching, where teachers simply avoid any possibility of ambiguity. In primary education at least, this is partly facilitated through the presentation of teacher-as-maternal-figure. In the construction of the teacher as mother, love and passion are enveloped within an image of safety as opposed to risk.

The construction of adult child relationships in the primary school

The primary classroom can be viewed as both laboratory and domestic space. The caring nature of primary teaching is intricately bound up with the role of the Church in the historical development of primary education in Britain. The role of the primary teacher as mother is also bound up in the essentialist child-centred philosophies and evangelistic practices of education and in traditions of child psychology that emphasise norms and stages of development. These practices establish children as minds to be formed, bodies to be measured and as objects of study and they dominate the field of research in childhood (Walkerdine, 1984). The teacher's role is not only to instruct, but to measure and assess, supervise and observe as part of a package of protective care.

In small schools, the maternal metaphor often extends to the school as a whole. Here groupings of children are closer to those of groups of siblings and the scale of the operation allows for greater flexibility. Such schools often



describe themselves as aiming for a 'family ethos'. Both physical and metaphorical spaces created in primary schools express ambiguities in the experiences of teaching and being with children. Boundaries of private and public space are blurred by presenting the early years' classroom as a domestic space, with some of the imagery and trappings of private houses: sofas and soft furnishings, toys, mini-kitchens and domestic role-play areas. This is posited as accommodating the child's emotional and intellectual transition between home and school. Some practitioners provide additional 'sanctuaries' (or observation posts?) by creating womb-like spaces for further retreat within the classroom. These hiding places may be more or less delineated and identified, through the use of curtains, low-level screens and the addition of clothing, artefacts and prompts to escapism or fantasy. They may be created on a temporary basis through the use of storytelling or other creative activities. On the one hand, these spaces are intended to support the child as needing to be playful, self-directing and imaginative etc., on the other hand, they operate as windows of observation to the child's inner/private life. They make it possible for teachers to 'eavesdrop'. Some classrooms retain a carpeted area, perhaps with cushions, where children gather and sit closely together for some activities, particularly those regarded as more intimate, such as discussion, storytelling and the beginnings of the all important teaching of literacy. Children's personal experiences may be tolerated as part of the transition from home to school life. These domestic spaces are less evident as children get older and relationships with adults in school become more formalised. This junior phase of schooling is also associated with increased emphasis on the acquisition of public knowledge and a diminishing role for children's personal experience. The physical changes in the classroom space mark a much more explicit boundary between home and school and a corresponding reduction in the authority of the child as a knowledge creator.

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In the introduction to this paper, I suggested that children in technology soaked societies have much greater access to knowledge and culture presented through visual media. This widens what we understand by literacy and changes what it means to be literate. It does not eliminate but it reduces the relative importance of the written word and increases the significance of other signs. One question that emerges is whether it is any longer possible for adults to keep things hidden from children, let alone whether or not it is beneficial to do so. Does technology enable us to have more or less secrets? The teaching of literacy is traditionally one of the foremost and most political of tasks in the primary school, in the way it positions each of us in the world of knowledge.

Neil Postman (1994) argues that childhood as a highly distinctive socio-cultural category first became firmly established with the growth of widespread literacy:

'Literature of all kinds – including maps, charts, contracts, and deeds – collects and keeps valuable secrets. Thus in a literate world to be an adult implies having access to cultural secrets codified in unnatural symbols. In a literate world children must become adults. But in a non-literate world there is no need to distinguish sharply between the child and the adult, for there are few secrets, and the culture does not need to provide training in how to understand itself' (Postman, 1982:13).

Postman's notion of 'training' here seems to suggest learning of rules and constraints that are created in the complex social conventions associated with literate cultures. Van Manen and Levering (1996:138) suggest that our understanding of childhood itself is intertwined with the concept of secrecy as prohibition. In this understanding, the child has many faces but one of the most compelling is of the image of the child as vulnerable and therefore requiring special love, care and security. Linked to this is the idea that the child is a person not yet formed, needing to be educated and trained to come into her own. The child is also seen as dependent and this dependency provides the adult with



their sense of responsibility. Van Manen and Levering argue that these beliefs lead to irresolvable debates about what is good or bad for the child and childhood becomes defined in terms of what must be hidden from children. Therefore the leaving of childhood is about gradual or brutal initiation into the secrets of the adult world (Van Manen & Levering, 1996.139-140). These accounts refer to adult secrets that present a threat to childhood, the secrets that need to be repressed. It is this danger that seems to overshadow all other discussion about experiences of secrecy and their significance in the development of the self and in human interaction. It is this danger that seems to signal the need for the adult to deploy a particular kind of protective love, to guard the child from the secrets in question. In my work with teachers, certain picture books (notably by authors such as Maurice Sendak, Tomi Ungerer and Max Velthuijs) have been seen by some colleagues as a potential threat, if used to stimulate open-ended dialogue, because of the possibility that they might lead to topics such as death and dying, loss and abandonment, or strangers (Haynes and Murriss, 2005).

My account of my experience with the group of children discussing secrets indicates the need to investigate the boundaries of my role as a teacher and of the in-between space of an after-school club and the ground that might legitimately be explored in such a setting. In the episode of dialogue with children that I have reported, I have explained how I felt this sense of danger about discussing the personal examples that the children raised in the context of the discussion about secrets in the classroom. I suggest that this led me to suppress further discussions by introducing a rule about confidentiality, whereby children could only introduce such examples if they could somehow make them anonymous, a pretty impossible task, given their inexperience. I think my reactions alerted them to my anxiety and introduced the idea that there were risks attached to this kind of subject matter. I think it was a great pity, and a lost educational opportunity, that this anxiety resulted in a dampening of

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discussion and of my need for avoidance taking precedence over other interests and needs in the group. I am not talking here about psychological needs to 'disclose'. Disclosure is not one of my goals in such philosophical dialogue, but making room for children's personal knowledge is. The distinction here is that it is meaning and insight that is being sought in dialogue, rather than personal reparation or healing, although these might ensue. This example shows me patrolling the boundaries and illustrates the tension referred to earlier in the teacher's role. Perhaps the tension is partly created in the attempt to interpret the nuances of the rules about hiding and revealing, private and public. However, my use of teacher authority forecloses the possibility of any different encounter. It takes the form of allegiance to maintaining an official and given curriculum with its view of knowledge as abstract and detached, rather than in a preparedness to locate the knowledge embedded in the live and concrete.

A crucial feature of work in Personal and Social Education, now part of the official National Curriculum for England and Wales, is that children do often want to work with concrete examples that they know and not with the hypothetical cases that teachers (and often philosophers too) might prefer. The exclusion of children's experiences, it could be argued, is part of their disempowerment as persons within the educational system. My own regret is about the lost opportunity to have an extended dialogue the philosophically rich topic of secrecy. On the occasion I mention, I was very much taken with the question 'why do people need secrets?' and the references in the children's examples to secret areas of the house, a photograph in mum's drawer, love letters in a box. These examples of 'containers of intimate history': desks, boxes, drawers, describe a certain order or a unique pattern of family life and, at the same time, their existence confirms something instantly recognisable and more universal about close involvement with other human beings (Bachelard, 1994). These examples seemed to me powerful in the way they expressed the mystery



and uncertainty of relationships in a household and of the particular position of children and the control of spaces in the home, the desire to explore forbidden spaces and the fear, or thrill, attached to discovery and to being discovered.

I had noted the children's interest in having their own hiding places that nobody else knows about. These brought back flashes of memory from the dominion of my own childhood, of owning boxes with keys and locks, of the darkness under the bed and behind the door, of creating dens with blankets and sheets, or in corners and cupboards⁸. The home as a place containing secrets and also spaces to hide expresses its ambivalent position as shelter, as sanctuary and/or a place where we can be painfully reminded of the secrets to which we are not party, or that we would rather not know about, or both. These examples of dark, forbidden and sacred spaces seem to me to allude to experiences of intense privacy, of being alone with the self, of self-discovery and of self-direction. From psycho-analytic perspectives, experiences of secrecy and privacy form a necessary and valuable part of the path towards inner competence and part of the unique narrative of the self (Langeveld, 1967, Van Manen and Levering, 1996)

The challenge for me, in listening to children's accounts of concealment and revelation, is how to strike up a balance between the educational potential that such experiences offer and the disturbance that they can cause, to my position as teacher, to the privacy of those that the accounts concern, or to the children's inner selves. I am concerned that opportunities to participate, by acting as co-authors of the agenda for discussion, and thereby raising questions from their lives might be limited by the imposition of teacher rules, in the context

⁸ Both Gaston Bachelard (1994 - first published 1958) and M.J. Langeveld (1967) have written phenomenological accounts of the experience of intimate spaces that discuss their significance in childhood and in memories of childhood in the continuing narrative of the self.

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of what is intended to be a more democratic and critical approach to personal and social education.

Towards a philosophy of listening

Luce Irigaray's (1996) exploration of the question 'how am I to listen to you?' describes the ways in which relationships have assumed that:

'...the elder is supposed to know what the younger is and what he or she should become. The elder is supposed to know the younger and only listens to him or her within the parameters of an existing science or truth' (1996:116).

She argues that the kind of language used by adults within such a construction of relationships results in '*paralyzing the freedom of the child's becoming out of a lack of autonomy on the part of adults themselves.*' (1996:116)

In this concern to tackle the disturbance in my facilitation of philosophical dialogues with children, I recognize this lack of autonomy as I struggle for a pedagogy of choice and openness. I am not looking for a technique that has been proven to work, nor a principle or set of guidelines that can be applied. Neither am I simply suggesting that the 'voice of the child' should be given automatic preference over the rights of any others. It's more a case of envisaging a way of living with the risks and ambiguities of teaching described in this paper. It is difficult, but important, to learn to manage the kind of uncertainty and disorientation that can happen in discussion with children (Haynes and Murriss, 2000), if we want to be open to the possibility of new thinking and if we acknowledge that the current balance of power between adults and children in school can present major obstacles to our ability to listen to them. It means giving more emphasis to the idea of the professional as one who is expected to deal with the unexpected and who is therefore prepared to take the risks that are associated with broaching the as yet unknown. It means turning our backs on the



assumption that older is necessarily wiser, and accepting that a child, like any other, can reveal something we have not yet considered, that is so far unspoken.

Irigeray writes:

"I am listening to you is to listen to your words as something unique, irreducible, especially to my own, as something new, as yet unknown, It is to understand and hear them as the manifestation of an intention, of human and spiritual development." (1996:116)

Irigeray (1996) articulates a number of conditions that make the statement 'I listen to you' in the context of love between subjects a possibility. It is to listen in a dimension in which I do not assume that I already know you or what your future is. It is to listen with an encouragement towards the unexpected, towards your initiative and your becoming. It is to listen without presupposition and without implicit demands, with a silence that is a '*space-time offered to you with no a priori, no pre-established truth or ritual*' (1996:117). The silence is a condition for self and mutual respect and assumes that the world is incomplete, still open, still capable of revealing itself in many forms, including philosophical ones. We could conceive of the teaching situation as a context of love capable of encompassing such conditions. What I think is possible is a listening response that turns towards rather than turns away, that involves both passivity (Chinnery, 2003) and effort (Fiumara, 1990), rather than stock phrases and learned answers that leave no emptiness and squeeze out the possibility of thinking. The surrender might be to silence or to the chance of complications. The effort is in conceiving of philosophical work in education not as the giving of form to future persons but as encounters (Kohan 2001) with persons present in which there is also the possibility that I might be influenced.

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