

In the last months of my employment at Oldfield School, how can I help 8X to enhance their sense of community, as I assist them in improving the quality of their learning about English? by Dr. Moira Laidlaw  
Draft, 4.3.01.

**Becky:** *I can't do this, Miss. It's too difficult for me. I have extra English, you know. I can't do this. You can't ask me to do all this.* (September, 2000)

**Becky:** (holding Certificate of Merit she has just been awarded for English) *This is the proudest day of my life!* (cries) (February, 2001)

**Helen:** *You can't make me! I don't like her. Why should I be nice to her?* (early January, 2001)

**Helen:** *I don't feel happy in this class. No one likes me, Miss. What can I do?* (mid-February, 2001)

**Cath:** *Be the changes that you want to see in the world!* (VSO training course in Birmingham, 4.2.01.)

**Keywords: Action Planning; Learning Partnerships; Improvement; Community.**

### **Prologue:**

In the drafting of this paper, I was given two gifts: one of a videoed conversation Jack Whitehead had with Jen Russ, and another in writing from Sarah Fletcher. All are colleagues at the Department of Education at the University of Bath. All were deliberating about my classroom practice. They watched over two hours of video-footage of my classroom, and then drew conclusions about my educational values from what they had seen. Jen talked for about twenty-five minutes on camera about her conclusions and Sarah's written analysis takes the form of notes on various aspects of the learning processes. I will be using comments from their discussion and notes to substantiate, and at times to challenge, my views of what is transpiring. I am enormously grateful to Jen, Sarah and also to Jack for their trouble and time as I have tried to improve the quality of learning with my Year Eight English/tutor group. Many thanks!

### **My reasons for writing this paper:**

#### **First:**

This paper represents a continuing account of my postdoctoral research at the school, in which I aim to help my pupils improve the quality of their learning about English and Psychology. Whereas in previous papers (Laidlaw, 1996, 1998, 2000) I have concentrated on my attempts to improve my provision of some values concerned with equal-opportunities in the classroom, this account is concerned with ways in which I tried to help a group of girls learn something about their social responsibilities as I taught them English.

I have always believed that my role as an educator is two-fold, as I explained in the opening to my previous paper (Laidlaw, 2000). Briefly, in that paper I outlined my awareness that, according to the National Curriculum, I am employed to teach English to the best of my ability, For me this means engaging in action research enquiries in which I make more conscious the processes of my own and my pupils' learning as I seek to improve what I am doing with them. Jen phrased it thus:

*[Moirra is] getting pupils to be responsible and accountable for their own learning as a way of creating a commanding voice in their own processes of education. Not the teacher's voice, but their own voices.'*

However, on an even deeper level, I believe that my role as educator reaches beyond that. I think I should act as a role model of 'good behaviour' much as McNiff et al (1992) outline<sup>1</sup>. I believe that children need to be taught about what their behaviour means, and that this process isn't best communicated by me through didactic aphorisms, but through the space I as an educator help to create, in which children feel the reality of what they are doing, and the impact of their actions on themselves and others.

Jen had this to say on this aspect of my educational values:

*[Moirra creates] a safe place for learning, a secure and unthreatening place for learning, a place where people are respectful. {It's} not just that the pupils are respectful to and of each other, but Moirra too shows her values of respect and care so clearly in that classroom. Moirra's respect for her pupils - this is only my interpretation - leads her pupils to create this atmosphere with her where they feel she is working with them and alongside them. I got the impression that the pupils are very committed to working with Moirra on their work...and this possibly means that they are willing to push out the boundaries - to take more risks with their learning...There is a mutuality.*

Sarah wrote this:

*Public accountability - what a preparation for life! Most adults would shy away from this let alone girls experiencing the hormone ridden angst of adolescence. Moirra holds her girls in security and respect...This is much more than a subject lesson - this is a lesson in life itself it seems to me. Moirra is ensuring equality of opportunity through her intimate understanding of a psychology of empowerment.*

I want to help the girls learn about how they can take responsibility for their own lives not simply be told to do so! I want to act in accordance with my values: in other words, I want to help to create an atmosphere in which each person's contributions are valued, because, if you like, I want to see a wider society in which each citizen's contributions are valued. I believe that from small acorns, great oaks can and will and must grow. Integrating the processes of Action Planning and peer mentoring (Learning Partnerships) with the underlying values of respect for each person, appears to be one way this can happen in the classroom. For more detailed information about the background to this philosophy, see my Ph.D. thesis in the Values Section of Jack Whitehead's Homepage at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net>

in which I write about the integration of these processes at length.

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<sup>1</sup> McNiff, J., Whitehead, A., Laidlaw, M., (1992), 'Creating a Good Social Order through Action Research', Hyde Publications, Dorset.

## **Secondly:**

This paper is an attempt to celebrate something of educational value to me and perhaps to you as well, as I approach the time when I am to leave the school and undertake Voluntary Service Overseas in China for a minimum of two years. I am aware that it is possible I may never teach in an English secondary classroom again. I love teaching children. It is the most absorbing part of my life. I have the prospect in front of me of teaching adults when I know that my heart belongs very firmly to a child's incipient delight in learning. My reasons for the change are complex. They centre on a sense I have had since my father was dying last May (2000) about how I wish to spend the time I have left in my own life. As I sat holding his hand through the long, dark nights as he lay dying, I laid to rest the ghosts of our troubled relationship; I learnt to love him again as I had when I was a child; I came to remember the hopes I had had as a child, feeling them as I had then: the world was full of delight and beauty and promise. I felt (and still do) that all I now had to do was hold out my arms to welcome whatever it was the world wanted of me and everything would work out all right.

Travelling back on the train to Bath, a few days after the funeral in Yorkshire, the decision arrived fully-formed in my consciousness: I was going to China to work with VSO. It wasn't an idea, it was a decision, made without the intervention of my conscious mind: it was, in actual fact, a most elegant synthesis of strands of my ontological development, started as a child, on one summer's day when I was seven and heard Bach for the first time. I was so transfixed by the beauty that I remember asking myself what I could do in the world now that I had heard such perfection. The day after I got home after the funeral I applied to VSO over the internet. I was accepted in December, 2000. I have become acutely conscious of wanting to make the most of my remaining time at Oldfield. I want to offer the girls the best education of which I am capable. I would like to leave something worthwhile behind as a legacy for our futures.

## **A little about Volunteer Service Overseas:**

I came to the conclusion that adult education would enable me to do the most good in the world because as I reason it now, through adults I may reach more hearts and minds in the exposition of those educational processes, like action research and peer mentoring I understand so well. I therefore applied to VSO for tertiary education with English Language teaching in China, so that I will be able to help some people in a developing country *at their request*, as they seek to find new ways of communicating both pedagogically and linguistically in their aims of finding further links with their own futures. I want to make the point at this stage that in no way do I wish to act as some white, liberal imperialist, going abroad to teach others 'better' ways of doing things. VSO believes strongly, and I so wholeheartedly concur in this, that the purpose of our (my, VSO's, China's) collaboration lies in sharing skills, in sharing a future as human beings with our planet as the dwelling place for ways of finding harmony and development - personal, social, cultural, global. I believe that in exchange for my work, I will be enriched a hundred-fold as a human being, and become more focused and clear about the purposes of our lives.

I have realised that deeper than my heart's love of teaching children, is my soul's need for development, which is nurtured in the processes of education themselves. This matters to me because I believe, with Keats, *that this world is the vale of soul-making*. I concur with Scott Peck, (1980) when he writes that one of the purposes of life is spiritual growth and that for this growth to occur I need to become more focused about how the ways in which I live impact on myself and others. This has parallels with the ways I want the children to learn in the classroom with me about how their behaviour matters to themselves and in the world at large. It is about walking the talk. It is, if you like, feeling the deeper pattern of my life and bringing it into the open at last. For so long I have waited passively for life to 'get better', to be rid of self-doubt and worry and lack of self-esteem. Now I recognise that I must become the changes I want to see in myself before I can do what the VSO trainer, Cath, said at the course I went on at the beginning of February, *that we must all be individually the changes we want to see in the world*.

This decision for the future resonates perhaps as well with Finnegan (2000) who writes about love enabling justice to see rightly. I feel that it is my love for education, which drives me to do what I now perceive as 'the right thing' by teaching adults for the foreseeable future. There seems to be a verisimilitude in my psyche with the outside world, which as yet has put no obstacle in my path in this venture.

I am beginning to perceive my connections with the future in more profound ways since making the decision to do VSO. I wrote the following to Jack Whitehead recently about some of the girls in the class that this paper is about:

*...I know when I am with the girls I have a strong sense of destiny, without them having to do anything in particular. I just feel the process of history moving between us. If that sounds grand, that's fine, because it is. They don't have to do anything simply because they're children, but that's not enough, of course. I want them to feel that for themselves, that they are part of a dynamic process, which they can mould. They're not victims of it, but perpetrators, that within reason there is nothing that each individual couldn't be and do if they simply put their minds and hearts and souls to it. When Julia gestures with her beautiful hands, in the air she gestures within, she captures for me something of her own sense of her own destiny. She describes and explains her reality for herself, and she glows in the mastery of it. In those moments Julia seems to me to be a future self, realised in the present. I've seen it happen time and time again in the classroom with the girls. They become powerful in their own right. Their eyes are glittering with precision and focus. They are focusing, it seems to me, on a point of destiny within, completely caught up with the moment, and yet not of it at all in a sense. Julia tells us what being Julia is about. She does it gently, with clarity, and life, and most of all, she does it with utter charm. She has got to somewhere within, Jack, that I strive for within myself. The inside and the outside are melded. She is at ease with herself. In that moment she is absolutely herself. No side to her. No attempt to 'be a pupil saying something for teacher', but instead Julia telling us what it's like to be Julia. And I would suggest, the best of what it means to be Julia. I say that because she is not hesitant. She is not wondering what others think of her. She is not trying to impress. In other words she is not trying to become someone else's idea of what it means to be Julia. She is her own self. What does*

*that have to do with the future? Well, if at that point, Julia has realised instinctively, naturally, something of who she is and that self is assured, gentle, careful in explanation, respectful, sweet, beautiful, shining with promise, happy, content, enthusiastic, glowing with achievement, purposeful and so articulate about her own self, then what more has the child to do but realise such a self for always in the world? For those moments, then, I am claiming that Julia became the future. Her best future. Her most accomplished human self, or at least a pretty marvellous human future. And I want that for all the girls, those moments, Jack.*

### **My job at school:**

I teach English at Keystages 3, 4 and 5, and Psychology as well in the sixth form. I teach my tutor group for English. Since I became full-time in the school (September, 2000) I have taken on the role of tutor for this year eight group. It comprises 29 girls, of mixed attainment. I have not taught any of the girls before. I am enjoying it very much.

### **8X, An Introduction.**

*September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Today I had my new tutor group. All bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. It was lovely to realise that I have a whole year to work with them. There was so much admin to do, though, it was difficult to talk to them and to get to know them. I have to slow down. I want to know everything about them all at once. I asked them to write in their English books: 'Five vital facts about me that Dr. Laidlaw has GOT to know!' That seemed to interest them. This is going to be fun...Little Becky is going to be a challenge to me. How can I help her to feel more confident in the group? She is so self-effacing, yet so willing and sweet...Lucy says she's grateful Helen isn't back yet from America yet. She comes back next term. Tara has joined the group today and she looks lost. Must make her feel at home. Carrie's a nice girl. She can look after her until she's found her feet. I've already got a soft spot for Amy. She seems vulnerable, but with a wicked sense of humour. Lydia is lovely. So willing and helpful. Lacking in confidence, I think. I'll have to see what I can do about that. And Nadia is delightful. So helpful. Diana seems very able, but rather remote and diffident. It may simply be her manner, but I sense a negative attitude from her. I'll make a fuss of her. Rose and Julia are good friends. A strong learning partnership in the making, no doubt! Ellen's the girl who pushed Regi the Frog out of the window last year for the sponsored frog bungee jump. Nice to see her again. Must keep an eye on Cherie, though. If what her mum says is true, then Lucy was being bullied by her and the school didn't act on it. This complexity is the way it's going to be, I think. The class seems wonderful, but there are undercurrents and I have to learn to swim in these waters. (My Journal)*

During our first week, I set up learning partnerships (each girl chose a friend to work with) and I outlined the action planning process.

*9<sup>th</sup> September, 2000. 8X completed their first action plan yesterday. It was really interesting to look through them this morning.*

*...Interestingly, Diana wrote in answer to the third question about who can help her and how: 'I can help myself. I don't need other people looking over my work.' She is bright,*

*quite keen actually, but there is an obstinacy there, a mulishness, almost. I feel it personally. It probably is directed against my teacher-persona. I can help her, so I would like her to feel the value of what I can offer...*

*Lydia wrote this for the second question about the reasons for her concern: 'I want to do well. I want people to be proud of me. I want to be proud of myself.' This is extraordinarily open of her, the poppet. I must support her. She needs to know how lovely she is. Such innocence should be treasured...*

*Becky wrote: 'I want to inprov my spelling'. And on the question about why she was concerned, she wrote: 'becus I alwas get it all wrong and I don't lik getting it wrong. Everon is beter than me.' That brings a tear to my eye. I wonder what it's like to feel that level of unaccomplishment at the heart of what happens in school. Every day. This doesn't feel good. I have to do something about this...I spoke to C. (Head of Special Needs) last term and said I wanted to improve the quality of differentiation at the lower end of the attainment range. What I actually want is to empower pupils - like Becky, or like Cherie who finds the work so much easier. That's the ultimate challenge for me as a teacher. It's my ontological duty. It's why I teach. I watched Becky yesterday, struggling with each section of the action plan. Turning to Lea for help (which is fine, of course). I do want the girls to have some educational relationship with their chosen partner, but I want them to feel they can master things for themselves as well.*

*Cherie is such a bright girl:*

**1) What do I want to improve?**

*I want to widen my vocabulary and the scope of my writing. At the moment I take no risks. I write what I am told. I want to experiment and work for myself.*

**2) What are the reasons for my concerns?**

*I always do what I am expected to in English. I write the stories and work out what the teacher wants. I want to do things my way. Dr. Laidlaw says I may if I want.*

**3) How can I improve the quality of my work in English?**

*I can write things which make me feel I have accomplished something. I can think about the tasks we're doing. This term, Blake's poetry. I can do something different with it. I can read more as well.*

**4) Who can help me and how?**

*Dr. Laidlaw can help me by keeping her promise. (We discussed that and she was referring to my promise to encourage her to write and reflect in her own way.) My mum can help me by comparing this term's work with what I have done before and saying if it is different. Hannah can help me by checking my work through and correcting errors and giving me hints on how to make it more interesting.*

**5) How will I know that my work in English has improved?**

*I will feel better about it. Dr. Laidlaw will notice an improvement. Her comments on my book with reflect this. Hannah will be able to see it too. Mum will tell me as well.*

*Wow! Cherie has grasped so quickly the essence of action planning. I am going to have to harness her talent. So, Becky at one end of the spectrum of achievement, and Cherie apparently at the other. Cherie so clear about her own learning, and Becky so conscious*

*of not being clear. And yet what they both seem to have in common, apart from the fact they are in the same learning environment, is that they both appear to want acknowledgement and affirmation for their own uniqueness. They seem to be looking to the English process as one of self-empowerment as an ideal. Cherie seems more confident about achieving it than Becky. But that's again my job. Becky must have some sense of achievement in my lessons, or I have failed her educationally. I must enable her to feel that the processes we are going through are thoroughly open to her too, that she can function well in them and do with them as Cherie is: bend them to her insights...And Lydia and Diana have revealed so much through their action plans. This process really works! (My Journal)*

### **Transition:**

For the first half term we looked at some poetry by Blake and Frost in an anthology that I compiled for the faculty some years ago. I love reading Blake in particular with young people, because his imagery, his imagination, his symbolism seem to evoke strong reactions. In my experience children are never indifferent and the starkness of his ideas resonates on a profoundly spiritual level:

*October, 2000. Who can be indifferent to Blake's genius? He touches such profound seams of human reality. 'Tyger Tyger burning bright!' Wow! This takes me back to my first year in teaching, 24 years ago, when little Alison Phillips read out a short-story in assembly she had written through inspiration gained from the poem. I can see her now so clearly, blonde and shy and freckled, standing on the stage, her knees knocking visibly in her nervousness. Her small voice gradually achieving greatness in the cavernous assembly hall. The teachers and pupils rapt in attention for what Alison was achieving. How, with her delivery, she stopped time, perhaps until this moment of writing. At the end of her reading aloud, she is looking up at me across the hall with such a glorious grin of triumph. I want this for Becky. I want that kind of moment, that triumph of achievement for all my girls. I want that for the whole world, let's be honest...This is one of the reasons I am going to China.*

*What is lovely is that I have C. (Head of Special Needs) coming in every fortnight to help me improve the quality of learning with the group, and in particular with girls like Becky, Afia and Nadia who have extra help already with English. His presence in the classroom is restful: he has a lovely aura and the children clearly seem to trust him. He chips in whenever he wants to add something and it is great to have another set of insights about what is happening. In addition Jack wants to bring his digital camcorder in to record the class's learning processes. Maybe with the next Unit. (My Journal)*

After Blake and Frost, we looked at 'Carrie's War' by Nina Bawden, a novel about the Second World War. We read it in chapters, mainly for plot and characterisation and I set the girls some sequencing tasks in their learning partnerships in order to help cement the relationships and also the complexities of the plot. In early November, after three visits from C. I e-mailed him the following message:

*I am, as I said at Sports Day last year, trying to improve the quality of my differentiation with the lower-attaining pupils. I would value your feedback. So far, I feel that the earliest session you saw, revealed the*

*children working appropriately at and beyond their levels, with some interesting work in subsequent lessons on standards of judgement. These lessons on the Class-Reader have been, in my opinion, reasonable from the point of view of learning partnerships, children talking about issues with insight and some clarity and some learning about writing styles and ways of conveying information succinctly. I have felt less pleased, however, about the strategies I have used to enable for example, Afia, Nadia, Tara and Becky to make the most of their learning, although in the next couple of weeks I want to make some individual time in lessons to consolidate their learning about strategies of writing. I think I need to inject greater variety.*

*Anyway, just some thoughts.*

*Maira*

### C. e-mailed back:

*...It is always difficult with such subject-matter when you're having to coordinate the learning of the whole class. I know what you mean about variety. How specific is the action planning? Has Becky said which spellings? Has Nadia talked about all of her concentration? I think the plans need to be more specific, especially for girls like Becky, Afia and Nadia. Keep up the great work! C.*

So, I needed to be more specific. Ask Becky which spellings, Nadia, which situations demanded her concentration, Afia how she could help herself precisely. After a couple of weeks completing the reading of the novel, I decided, as I often do, to ask the girls to work in learning partnerships on projects related to the book. They might choose whichever aspect of the novel that interests them - be it rationing, evacuation, fashions of the time (!), newspaper reports of the war, or the lives of ordinary people. They were then to work in the following four weeks before the Christmas break, on a presentation containing at least two strands of their understanding. One was to be in a written form and the other in a presentation entirely of their own choosing.

### **Crisis:**

For much of the rest of this paper I want to dwell on the beginning of this term (January, 2001) to the present (early March, 2001). Before the Christmas holidays, I had felt that the class was functioning really well as a group, that we were evolving a unique learning community, in which people were beginning to feel valued, safe and challenged.

Rachael had written in her exercise book at the end of term at my request to make one positive and one negative judgement of our English lessons after our first term together.

*I really like being in this class. I didn't like English before because the teachers were always saying my spelling was bad but we have fun in your lessons. We do lots of different things. I don't like having to leave the lesson at the end.*

Lucy wrote:

*It's usually fun. I don't like reading for ten minutes at the beginning of every lesson but I do enjoy the variety.*

Tara wrote:



*Your kind to us. You make us feel welcom. i like being in your class. its beter than my old shool. nothing bad realy. you get a strop on sometimes. (What **does** she mean?!)*

Jack had been visiting the lesson on many occasions with his digital camcorder and the children appeared to be accustoming themselves to his presence:

*Early November, 2000 (during the Blake and Frost Unit). Jack came into the class today. He has such a natural way with him. The girls almost appear to treat him as a senior member of the group. I noticed at one point Jack asking Julia and Rose to talk about their picture. Julia suddenly became so articulate about it. I have never seen her react in such an amazingly mature, authoritative way. She seemed about 30 years old as she talked eloquently about how the aspects of the picture fitted together in her view of the poetry, how the colours embodied the perspectives of the poetry's characters. It was breathtaking. I have no evidence, but I feel that somehow, it was Jack's presence that brought it out. He speaks to the girls exactly as he speaks to me. He listens, he cares, he values. It's lovely to watch, lovely to think that the girls have so many people committed to their education.*

So, the stage seemed set for educational presentations in a learning community of increasingly socially-conscious young girls. Cherie's group, comprising of three sets of learning partners, had written diary-entries for Carrie, and also produced a wonderful poster with a collage of memorabilia from the War. They had tea-stained the paper so that it appeared old. They had included news-items, descriptions by reporters, civilians, and pictures of the devastation. It was masterly.

Becky had chosen to work with two learning partners, Afia who shows some sequencing difficulties in the subject and Lea whose work is scrappy, but who is quite linguistically gifted.

*December 2000. I've watched the three of them preparing throughout lunch hours for weeks now. They have made costumes which they bring everyday. They are learning their lines. Becky is playing the part of Carrie's mother, and it's so sweet, because she's about half Lea's size, but she has a real presence now. It's lovely to see. It is what it's all about. The little group is so earnest about getting every detail right, checking with me about the lengths of skirts, the colours of shawls, and shapes of hats. I watched them today in Penn Hall. Took me back to Alison Phillips again in assembly in 1978, standing in the wings before Sally Constance gave her a hearty nudge onto the stage! Becky stood uncertainly, shifting from foot to foot, was prompted by Lea with an elbow and began hesitantly. Lea scorned her first effort and I remonstrated with her and reminded her about the role of a learning partner. I do wonder whether it's entirely fair for Lea, though. She finds English so much easier and has more self-confidence. She is always having to stop in mid-flow for Becky. I cannot allow one girl to sacrifice the quality of her learning for anyone else. Lea does need to learn something about grace and charm. She seems to have awkward social skills, but the reasons for that could be complex and maybe none of my business. After all I am not into creating a clone-culture, where everyone says please, thank you and the rest, like some automated processor. I want girls to think for themselves. I do*

want them to be kind, to be sensitive to the needs of others, but I want them to learn how to balance that with their own legitimate developmental needs: they have a right to get it wrong, to be tentative, to learn through experience, to be children, for God's sake! I also don't believe that people can freely give of themselves if they feel unhappy, undervalued, insecure or pressurised. Perhaps the way forward here is to praise Lea for her kindness, because, in her own way, she really is working hard on Afia's behalf. Mm. Need to think about this one. (My Journal)

Jack videoed the girls in their presentations and Sarah had this to say about Helen's group:

### **Note Eleven**

*This isn't perfection - but it is so so good. I would like to see the girls talking without their books - addressing with certainty their audience - perhaps this will come? This presentation is more studied but as such is a stage in learning in developing educational autonomy. Look! The girls understand the value because of this experience of presentation - of non-text representation - they are encouraged to use whatever means they feel appropriate to provide evidence of their learning and improvement...*

*And [Moira] is more - she lives social responsibility endorsing equality "Helen because she has been away" as she directs "Stay where you are!" without this endorsement this could be overbearing! Come on girls and what did you like about that? she urges. Drawing out and setting boundaries in which to explicate opinions and to 'be'. Moira is definitely 'in charge' but just look at those smiles! The children appreciate one another! She models appropriate responses and hands back opportunities for the girls to try them out for themselves.*

I'll be honest, when I read the above comments, I cried. They so endorsed what it was I wanted to do in the classroom: role-modeling equality, embodying my value of respecting each person equally, creating a warm, challenging, safe and happy learning environment in the classroom. Our perfect future society has to start somewhere, after all!

*February. Helen came to me this morning in tears. 'No one cares about me. Everybody hates me. I don't want to be here.' This from the child against whom many allegations of bullying have been levelled since she rejoined the class after being in the States for a term. I am moved, actually, that she came to me, given that after two days after her return I had to report her to the Year Head for bullying, a report which necessitated the parents of all the girls involved to come into school. She sobbed in my arms, a lonely, lost child. The child who bullies because she doesn't know how else to command attention and feel good about herself, I guess. And what have I done to help her integrate back into the group? From her point of view? We talked through her actions and I asked her to consider different ways of looking at them. After about ten minutes she stopped crying and started, it appeared, actively to engage in ways of looking that were challenging for her. I had the class first lesson, and I watched the way she behaved. She asked, instead of taking, 'Can I sit here?' 'What are you doing?' I wasn't aware of her doing it for my*

*benefit, either. But it has shocked me. Not because I don't believe bullying happens, and not because I am so naïve that I thought everything in the garden was rosy, but shocked that such different realities can co-exist. On the one hand, Helen shone in her presentation. She glowed, with what seemed to be self-esteem and a sense of achievement. She stood aside for Ellen at one point, her arm offering Ellen the space. This was a gesture of power and peace. And yet... When I wrote to Jack on 23<sup>rd</sup> February about the power of the future in the present selves of the girls, I said:*

*'Helen, for example. In the clip you've got, when Ellen talks about Helen's accomplishments there's a shot when she smiles shyly, but with her eyes really affirming what is happening. It's much milder than what I see with Julia (see letter to Jack earlier), but it's there, that quality of becoming the future.'*

*Yes, it's there, but what kind of future do we want to create in the present? And how much can I help Helen to become more secure in those qualities, which affirm herself and others, rather than undermine them?*

### **What kind of future?**

This is not the end of the enquiry by any means. In most of my research papers I have, with my pupils, found solutions to the questions posed in the research enquiry. I began this process, giving rise to this paper, with the research question which heads it: *How can I help 8X to enhance their sense of community, as I assist them in improving the quality of their learning about English?*

It is still my research question, but I believe that what I have shown in this paper is my growing understanding of the complexity of this process of building community, rather than a growing improvement of it with the children. I believe I have found a pastoral equivalent to the oft-heard cry from subject teachers, that pupils do not transfer their knowledge and skills from one subject to another on the curriculum. They learn how to spell a word correctly in English, but then spell it incorrectly in History, for example. I think some of the girls in 8X have learnt how to negotiate particular values with me in the classroom, to do with co-operation, respect for others, taking responsibility for their own learning and valuing the individual gifts and talents of their peer-group. I do not think that some of them have learnt to transfer those insights to situations outside the English classroom. It is perhaps unrealistic for me to expect them to do this. However, I want this to happen. I would like to know how I can help the girls transfer these insights. This, I believe, would mean my learning to recognise a much deeper sub-text than the one I operate on day-to-day. I think this sub-text I am intuiting, is about the narratives we are making of our lives. As James Hillman (1983)<sup>2</sup> writes:

*'When we open that book to read in English about plot, we find that wherever plot appears, the original Greek word is 'mythos'. Plots are myths. The basic answers to 'why' in a story are to be discovered in myths.'* (p.11)

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<sup>2</sup> Hillman, J., (1983), 'Healing Fictions', Jossey Bass Publishers, New York.

I agree with Hillman's further contention that human beings create and are created by the narratives we tell ourselves and each other. That each one of us exists partially in the fictions we and others create about ourselves and others. Therefore, I, in conjunction with 8X need to develop appropriate experiential metaphors for us as a group, ones which enhance our sense of community and make it possible for individuals to cast off their doubts and fears and resentments as they pursue improvements in their learning.

To illustrate my point about narratives, let me digress a moment. In a brilliant episode of 'Star Trek: The Next Generation', called 'Darmok', Captain Picard encounters a peace-loving alien whose whole ontology is based on shared myths, whose language is constituted entirely by descriptions of mythical heroes. His race shares and makes sense of all experience through myths and legends. Their language is perceived by the star-system as incomprehensible. Picard is sent with his crew to make first contact with this 'strange' people. Darmok, the opposing captain, sets up a meeting on a hostile planet, in which both will be overcome by a murderous alien if they can't learn to speak the language of the other and learn to co-operate. Intervention by either side has been prevented. In trying to make face-to-face contact, Darmok says to Picard, as a gesture of greeting: '*Dalal and Jamar at Tenagra,*' which alludes to a time in his race's history when two great warriors, Dalal and Jamar met to hold peace talks at Tenagra. Picard cannot understand the peaceful intent. His perception of the event is entirely different. He fatally misunderstands the alien's wholly good intentions and when an alien entity appears and fights with Darmok, it fatally wounds him. As Picard tends to his counterpart's dying hours, he suddenly recognises how the other is using language, and begins to tell the dying man about Odysseus, and other Greek myths. Darmok dies, knowing that he has been successful in his aim of making genuine contact. Picard then relays to Darmok's ship what has happened, by repeating Darmok's words to him. He learns the truth of this race's myths, how their ability to render sense from the cosmos is driven through the stories they tell each other about their shared and ancient past. How their pasts, presents and futures, are knitted, seamlessly, through myth. The implication here is that humans are created through story as well, and that we need to understand each other's stories and create shared stories in order to live together peaceably. And that's what I want. I don't for one moment, assume a simplicity here. But there are, for me, glimmerings of a new way of seeing.

So, I have five months left in the classroom with these young people before I go to China to discover and help to create new stories. My thanks to Jack, Sarah and Jen, the children of 8X too, for beginning to share our stories into myths that might help us to lead better lives in the future.



## **Postscript:**

*Diary Entry, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001. What an amazing day today with 8X!... I saw something with Afia that I didn't expect to see at all. My mistake! Today, she led her group in a presentation about Equal Opportunities. Afia still has some learning difficulties in English. She finds narrative sequencing particularly difficult still, for example, and has little confidence...*

*A little background. I have wanted to see how far the group has come in terms of being able to organise their own learning and then the presentation as well. Last time they presented, a few girls wrote in their evaluations of the whole experience that I 'interfered' with the process of the presentation by setting the rules of engagement all the time (and they were right, on reflection), so this time I decided to set the parameters of the unit of work, give them access to the research facilities, discuss with them issues from a personal perspective - all in about three hour-long lessons, and then open the 'cage door' and expect them to fly. I made it clear about my role as a facilitator, as a helper, as someone committed to their choices about which area of EO to concentrate on. We discussed their responsibilities and they were adamant about being responsible for the method of presentations as well as the content.*

*Well, for the three weeks of their research and preparation time, I monitored, helped, advised when asked, discussed ideas, and cheered them on. I notice in passing how gratified I feel that some of this group of 13 year old girls felt confident enough, in what I generally perceive as a homophobic atmosphere, to research and present their ideas on the perils of homophobia...*

*Afia! Well, she fronted her group of five students. She introduced their presentation on racism. Ruth launched straight into her targets. The following is taken directly from video footage of the presentation:*

*Afia: Hey, just a minute, Ruth! (giggles) You can't start with the targets. No one's going to understand what they mean if you don't talk about what you're doing on racism first. Yeah?*

*Ruth: Whoops! (giggles) Er yeah. I'm going to be looking at how difficult it is for a girl in school who's Black and most of the people are white.*

*Afia: That's better!*

*I love that bit! 'That's better'. She really knows, doesn't she? It reminds me so forcibly of that moment of insight when Helen Keller speaks her first word in later childhood, 'water', because suddenly she understands the connection between the object and the word. Here I feel powerfully, that Afia has internalised the connection between meaning and process, and that connection, that dialectic, is itself educational. Back into the presentation, slightly later on:*

*Afia: I am pleased with my target (handwriting). I know that I could concentrate on imagination and getting stuff more on paper, my ideas and that. But I wanted to pick a target that I knew I could get on with now. I get fed up sometimes when I can't do it. But I*

*can do this (opens exercise book). This is the way my writing used to be. You see how it's all off the line and crossings-out all over the place. Sometimes I don't write legi..legi..*

**Moira:** *Leg...*

**Afia:** *I'll do it, legibully. Yes, legibly. I don't always write legibly as you can see (shows exercise book around to the class) but look at this (shows new exercise book round with much neater handwriting and clearer presentation). I think you'll agree it's much better. I'm pleased with it...*

*Wow! Such aplomb. Such confidence. When I try to help, she interrupts. This is clearly her territory, not mine and she is going to do it for herself. I feel like bursting with this. Why? Because Afia has seemed to have so little confidence in herself and her own achievements. She has appeared to make little connection between process and product, between the how and the what, and also to embody any epistemological dialectic between inaugurating her values as standards of judgement and the meanings and significance of her own work. Yet that presentation showed, in my judgement, a real sense of ownership of purpose, meaning, outcome and standards. She was in charge, not only nominally of the group - a role I very much doubt she would have taken earlier on in the year - but of herself and her sense of that self. She wasn't wanting comparisons with anyone else. I believe she was finding comparisons with herself and feeling a growth and development in that process.*

I am in education because I believe in the right of all humans to health, happiness, and self-determination where appropriate. I believe that human beings have a right to nurture their own individuality for their own fulfilment and that of others, (as long as that nurturance doesn't detract from the rights of others' individuality) and to find an appropriate place in communities. I believe that my role as an educator is to help individuals to find workable and fulfilling dialectics within themselves and with others. In the context of going to China in August 2001, I perceive myself as embracing these developmental equal opportunities values (as I have described and explained them in my previous three papers on the Web at <http://www.actionresearch.net>) taking on wider parameters than I have hitherto managed.