

## **Beyond the qualification: learning from learners how to be a better teacher: another idea someone might like to pinch. Please do.**

### **History of the idea**

The idea was formed during an exchange of emails between members of the International Professional Development Association (<http://ipda.org.uk/>) me, Cliff Jones, Anne Jasman in Australia and Helen Mitchell of the University of East London. I had circulated an extract from something I was writing that was a reflection on working with children more than thirty years ago (see below). It also raised the issue of children's' views being ignored to the detriment not just of children but also of teachers' own professional learning and development. Anne then sent a very short reflection on the same theme from her first year of teaching. I suggested the above title for a book or web page and, as then Chair of ipda England, Helen encouraged the idea so it was discussed at an ipda England committee meeting and subsequently by further email exchanges.

The idea does not, however, have to be limited to what can be learned from children. The age of 'learners' can be very wide and extensive and 'teachers' never stop learning from 'learners', young or old.

As with **Abstracts** it is some years since I began trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade various organisations to host such a service. Perhaps someone might like to pinch the idea. I am sure I cannot be the only one thinking like this.

Unfortunately, I do not have the capacity to receive and post such anecdotes. Others will have. Below is my thinking on what such a service might look like.

### **What it might look like**

I envisage a mixture of short and medium length pieces and consider that between about 350 and 1,000 words is what people feel comfortable reading.

The strength of anecdote and story or vignette can be quite powerful and I don't see the need for lots of referencing, though a little theoretical contextualisation might be useful at times. The initial idea was to share stories from people in different countries. From time to time we might include editorial picking out the themes that are developing.

## **Audience**

This is anyone interested in and fascinated by the idea of teachers learning from learners how to be better teachers. I do not in any way suggest that teaching qualifications are not important. I do, however, believe there is benefit in sharing what can be learned when learners are brought into the professional learning equation.

## **Guidance**

I believe that that learners and others in the stories should be protected by anonymity so if names are used there should be a statement that real persons are not referred to by their own names.

In the examples on the next pages italics have been used to indicate some reflection on the significance of the story. I suggest that this practice will be useful for readers.

## Examples

### **A story of The Sheep and the Pig by Cliff Jones (I tell this story a lot so forgive me repeating it)**

Some years ago, in a Liverpool Nursery School where the headteacher was very keen on Records of Achievement, a four-year-old child asked the headteacher if she could put one of the two pictures she had done that day into her portfolio. The answer was “Yes, which one?”. Now the child had done one picture of a sheep and one picture of a pig. The picture of the pig was really very good: clearly a well-delineated and recognisable pig. The picture of the sheep, on the other hand, was not very good at all.

When she asked the child which picture she wanted to choose the head was surprised to be told “The sheep, of course”. Being an experienced teacher, and remembering that a purpose of Records of Achievement was that the child should own the decision about what went into the portfolio, the head refrained from intervening at this point. She did, however, ask the parent who came to collect the child why she thought her child had chosen the poor sheep rather than the much better pig.

The mother replied, “Well you see, she has been doing pigs for months. Our house is full of her pictures of pigs. That’s her *first* sheep.”

In other words, the achievement identified by the child as worthy of celebration was the taking of a first step towards new learning.

*The head teacher told this story to schoolteachers and advisors in Liverpool. Listening to her I think we learned that choosing what to recognise as progression is not the sole prerogative of the teacher: that when a child exercises the right to place a value on learning the teacher can begin to look at evidence from another perspective: to see other meanings in it.*

*I have often wondered what happened to that child. Did she ‘progress’ through an education system that only gave value to better and better pictures of pigs while discouraging her from ever again claiming that her poor sheep was an achievement worth recognising?*

#### **Post scriptum**

*More than twenty five years later, standing in the checkout queue in the Co-op I found myself next to the former deputy head of that nursery and told her that I often wondered what happened to that little girl. She is now publishing and doing well. I did not have the chance to find out more.*

***Failing to Learn from the Learners or Who Should Write School Reports?  
By Cliff Jones (early 1980s but also told in other places on this website)***

For some time I had been trying out different ways of producing school reports, attempting to escape from the eternal set of variations on the word 'satisfactory' combined with 'very', 'quite', 'un', 'not', 'not very' and more. Remember them?

My idea was that all the children were entitled to three things that so far had been kept from them. First, they were entitled to a framework and language that could help them make overall sense of their learning. Second, they were entitled to tell their teachers how they made sense of their learning. Third, they were entitled to be listened to before a teacher made any statement that made a judgment about them.

There was a fourth entitlement. They had the right to contribute to the shape, nature, scope and language of the sense-making evaluation framework.

So I drafted a framework and, mostly with my own registration class, got it into a shape that we thought would work throughout the school. The next task was to persuade colleagues to accept it. Here I made what I believe is a classic error. I believed that those members of staff who did not object to it were accepting of it. Having persuaded senior management to extend registration on a Friday morning we embarked upon what I believed was a journey into that socially fulfilling world called 'comprehensive education'.

*Guess what? When it came to writing reports half the staff ignored everything the kids had written. I ought to have taken more care and more time to embed the project. The key to gaining consent was the sharing of ownership and after more than thirty years the feeling of having persuaded the kids to come to a dance at which teachers failed to take the floor with them continues to gnaw at me.*

*And collectively we failed to learn from the learners.*

## **Annex**

**Below are the VALUES and PURPOSES of ipda. They are included as reference points for the above.**

### **VALUES**

- **Commitment to consultation and open decision-making**
- **Respect for and understanding of different cultures**
- **Willingness to support, encourage and exchange the learning of professional educators**
- **Commitment to the importance of research and dissemination**
- **Respect for dialogue and critical debate.**

### **PURPOSES are to:**

- **stimulate critical insight and provide support for policy-makers, providers and professional educators;**
- **share among members ideas, practice, concepts and theories relating to professional learning in education;**

**provide opportunity to share problems, interests and concerns through critical friendship.**