



REFLECTIONS on Early Learning in Nature, February 3, 2012

I was very struck by some of Robin Duckett's words earlier today, when he was describing the essence of the various projects that form the common ground, the meeting place for all of us here. This is what he said: 'What we do is not-nothing. It doesn't just happen. It's a *strong* not-nothing.' So what I'm going to do is pick out some of those strengths.

First, and most obvious: even in the middle of Darlington, there is a lot of Nature to be getting on with, a serious amount of outdoors in all its glorious forms; very little of our mother earth is actually covered with safety surfacing. And we have seen today a most satisfyingly rich variety of images of the trees and mud and sunlight and dead birds and bluebells in the woods where the lucky children in the ELiN project have been spending many hours over the last two and a half years.

The second strength of this project, in my view, is its attitude to time. This is a slow-moving project, with many repetitions. Those of you who teach in schools will be familiar with the Ofsted emphasis on *pace*, and the philosophy that the common unit of time for both teachers and learners is *the lesson*. Many, many years ago, when I was an infant teacher myself, I can't recall any lessons at all; in our planning, such as it was, the unit of time was normally the week, but certainly never less than a day. Whereas now I see hurried teachers, in Year R and onwards, scrambling from lesson to lesson, each with its warm-up, group-work, plenary, begin-again sequence – coming to a climax, to put it crudely, at least four times a day. I am glad to know that ELiN isn't like that; there isn't any hurry and hardly any clock-watching. The children seem to have all the time in the world. Perhaps you remember the photos of Sean, lying on his back, looking at the sky, lifting his arms in salutation to the heavens. Maybe this peacefulness is born of Sean's secure knowledge that he is coming back to this place again next week, and the next week, and the week after that. He's lucky enough to be part of an experience that values slow learning more than fast learning.

You'll have noticed that we have been shown no lesson plans, heard no confident predictions of outcomes ["By the end of this lesson you will have learned..."]. Instead we looked at Jyll's and her colleagues' marvellously untidy map of the forest, and the children, and all the stuff in the forest, and all the big ideas the children were meeting there, and all the kinds of learning that might be going on – a map that is the most effective antidote to over-planning and dead-end learning objectives. There's a strong 'slow food' movement in parts of Italy – and it's good to know there's a strong 'slow learning' movement in parts of the Northeast.

The third strength is – equally obviously – the strengths of the children – of children as *thinkers*, as well as their strengths as climbers, builders, enquirers and intrepid explorers. You will all have your own favourite 'awe and wonder' moments: mine include many of the thoughtful theories we have heard, such as 'Maybe the trees drink up the sea.' Equally memorable is one child's remedy for a lonely tree: 'It needs a grandma to give it hugs.' And I was deeply impressed by a child who [maybe] doesn't yet know, or [maybe] has forgotten the word for 'anchor', but who still knows what an anchor does *and* how it works, *and* how to put this into words of his or her own: 'a big hook that keeps the ship still.'

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It's also fascinating to see how the adults are ready to respond to these intellectual strengths, even the most unexpected ones. I remember the Ivy Road team describing the discovery of a dead bird; what the adults see first is germs, but the children see a cause for sympathy and the pressing need for a full-dress funeral with wrap-around musical accompaniment. Which duly took place – and put an end to the episode.

We also saw many compelling examples of early literacy learning [in various forms, from dictated stories to full-length library books] – too many to single out a few – but the message is strikingly clear: when children take to the woods, they don't just come home with magical memories, they come home well-prepared to take the next step in their growth as skilful communicators, writers and readers. Why? Because they have something to say and the desire to tell the world about it. And did you notice that the boys were enthusiastically joining in these activities?

Lastly, we should acknowledge the strengths of the adults involved, what they have brought and continue to bring to these encounters. In particular, let us note the strength of *their* learning. We heard moving commentaries from both Emma and Rachel on what they had learned *from the children*. I was also struck by Gerry's frank, honest account of some of the times and places where this kind of learning didn't happen, a careful, sympathetic analysis of what can and sometimes does go wrong.

My abiding interest, as I wrote for the conference programme, is in children's learning, but in all honesty, after nearly 20 years in the field of Continuing Professional Development, I am almost equally interested in adult learning. So I was very distressed to read recently about Michael Gove's take on the subject of so-called 'under-performing' teachers. His solution to this problem is simplicity itself: speaking on the BBC's today programme, he said "Sometimes a headteacher intervening with a few brisk words can get things right" (reported in *The Guardian*, 14.1.2012). I must admit that this approach had never occurred to me in all those long years – but I'm delighted to know that Gove's approach is a very long way from what happens at Skerne Park, where Di Teasdale is the head.

Today has done much to cheer me up from the despondency brought on by Gove and his colleagues, because everything I've heard is robust evidence that educators *do* learn, and, what's more, just like children they *love* learning. And this day's listening has cheered me up on another front as well: it's been wonderful to spend a day with a whole range of different kinds of educators who are not sounding miserable – or depressed – or fed-up – but distinctly cheerful – optimistic – and proud. There is a definite sense of well-being and high morale in the room, from start to finish. And when I wrote down the words 'high morale' on my note-pad I remembered something else I'd read in the education columns just lately.

In an interview in *The Guardian* (24.1.2012) Sir Michael Wilshaw, formerly the first principal of a shiny new Academy in Hackney, and now chief of Ofsted, explained that a good head would never be loved by his or her staff, adding "If anyone says to you that 'staff morale is at an all-time low' you know you are doing something right."

His words leave me almost speechless; but I do know this – that if educator morale around here is getting higher and higher, as I believe it is, you must all be doing something right. And I take my hat off to you – and the Sightlines team – for proving Sir Michael Wilshaw an idiot.

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