

Activism in a Troubled World: 'The Spirit Level or how I became a literary activist'.

A summary of a paper for the 2020 ESREA Conference in Canterbury

This paper uses metaphor to discourse on how I became a literary activist in a troubled world. Metaphors and images are a useful tool in auto/biographical research: Merrill and West in *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research* ask whether there are any particular metaphors that attract you in considering your life history?' (2009: 96) and Elizabeth Hoult in her book, *Adult Learning and La Reserche Feminine* uses the metaphor of ecdysis, a snake shedding its skin, to show how she transformed herself as a researcher (2012: 178-184). My metaphor is the spirit level, seeking for balance amongst opposing factions and ideas. It begins appropriately with me making one when I was a young teacher on an in-service course. I was shown how to bend and shape a hollow glass tube in a Bunsen flame, fill it with coloured liquid and set it in wood – a spirit level.

Stories help create a sense of self and meaning says Kim Etherington in *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher* (2004: 75). My story as a teacher activist begins with making the spirit level; reading educationalists like Wynne Harlan in *The Teaching of Science* (1992); discussing philosophers like Karl Popper who proposed that that 'Science is Scientific method', Magee (1973); and engaging with tutors like Dr Anne Pennell who told me that I could teach anything. After such inspiring ideas I became a Science Advisory teacher charged with teaching Primary teachers how to deliver The National Curriculum in Science from 1990 – 4. At the end of my contract I had shown teachers who had given up on Science how they could deliver the subject in the classroom: 'I dropped Science as soon as I could. It was because of a teacher who demonstrated everything...I now talk to children about what they are learning (in Science) –about the concepts for instance. I try to fit what we have learned into the processes, using the right vocabulary and terminology' (Leyland, P., 1994: 37).

The story continues when I showed teachers how they could identify 'gifted and talented' children. This was a government initiative of the 90s inspired in part by Deborah Eyre who said in *Able children in Ordinary Schools* that, 'Statistically around 40% of the average

comprehensive school are likely to have been identified as able in something or other'. (Eyre, D. 1997:24). This was not as successful as the Science activism and teachers remained sceptical, although I published a book about it called *Be a better Gifted and talented coordinator* (Leyland, P. 2006). More rewarding was the training of teaching assistants, my first role for the WEA, where those from marginalised communities in Reading and Slough were shown how they could assist classroom teachers through the WEA's 'Helping in Schools' Programme, and even become teachers themselves.

My literary activism developed as a result of this teaching of adults: Reading amongst literary and sociological works, I was struck by the fact that 'The Spirit Level' was a shared title of books by Seamus Heaney and by Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, and how this connected with my own beginnings in adult education. I had delivered ESREA papers on the subject of teaching literature for the WEA during research for which I had found that reading great literature can help one to regain one's balance when the mind is distressed or out of equilibrium as a result of illnesses, disabilities, or traumatic events encountered in the course of an ordinary life. I was keen to go further, exploring the idea that our emotional health could benefit from reading and discussing novels and poetry in a learning situation, and that this could directly affect our well-being. Mark Edmondson in *Why Read?* (2004) says that we can construct ourselves from novels, poems, plays (2004:86) and that like Proust writers can get the reader to feel what they feel (2004:107). With the WEA I set up a project to test the idea. The course was free and took place over five weeks with current students advising me how to plan it. Sometimes people who have been listening to you can put into words what you are thinking but haven't yet found a way to express. One student came up with the following:

Reading can enhance our life: Reading poetry/novels can lift us out of our everyday experience, and offer us pleasure, mental stimulation, a sense of wellbeing and company. How do words and imagery affect us, enhance our sense of connection and hearten us, encourage us to express ourselves and empathise with others. [WEA Student]

I kept a reflective journal of the project for my supervisor. I tried a very random teaching and response approach which I had developed with the adults in this particular group. We

looked at favourite books - novels, poems, and autobiographical works. When I asked them at the end of the course to talk about why reading literature mattered to them. I wrote down their responses. One of these was:

It was an opportunity to step inside another mind.

But even better was the powerful:

It can make someone who belonged nowhere belong somewhere.

Seamus Heaney's *The Spirit Level* (1996) and Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) both dwell on the theme of empathy, an idea which I found amongst the student's responses as shown. For Heaney it is the reconciliation between the two opposing forces in the 'Troubles' of Northern Ireland. He shows that in literature we can find emotional closure: One of my students chose as their special poem to read, *Postscript*, the last poem in *The Spirit Level* (1996) in which he describes a car journey driving west to County Clare and how his feelings are captured:

*You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.*

In *The Spirit Level* (2009) Wilkinson and Pickett ask us to consider the poet, John Donne's, *No man is an island, entire of itself...*, in *Meditations XVII* (Nonesuch Donne, 1967: 538). This heads their chapter on *Dysfunctional societies* where Britain and the USA are shown to be way up the scale on health and social problems due to inequalities of income (2009:174) This chapter leads directly to the profound discourse in their follow-up book, *The Inner Level* (2018). They argue that 'empathy' as described by Simon Baron Cohen, is a universal solvent

immersed in which: 'interpersonal problems and marital difficulties, problems at work or with neighbours, political deadlock and international conflict can all be solved...' (2018:87).

This 'empathy' or emotional balance was identified by the WEA student quoted above as a key to the way reading literature can enhance our lives. I think it is also key to the furtherance of our humanity with regard to one of the pressing issues of our time, the threat posed by climate change. If 'the good and beautiful' has a meaning for me as a literary activist it must be in Donne's idea that '*...every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main*'. As we search to solve our current ecological crisis, I am delivering my next course - *The Poetry of Climate Change*.

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