

A journey in learning: my reflective account

Neema Parekh

Neema Parekh

*Lavad Primary School,
Gujarat, India*

Abstract

A living theory methodology for improving practice and generating knowledge asks questions of the kind 'How do I improve what I am doing?' This paper is a patchwork text: it explains how I enhanced my practice and gained clarity in my practice drawing on the Living Educational Theory approach. It concerns a personal journey I took and is the explanation of the educational influences on my learning and teaching: how I recognised my values and the inconsistencies between my values and my practice. It shows how I negated the contradictions and started living and practising my values in real life. I have used emails written to a friend and also to my mentor over a period of twelve years from 2004 -2016 to represent the emotional side of my learning and my reflections to represent the theories of my learning. Through my journey I wish to illustrate the need for Government teachers in India to become well informed of current practices and theories in education if we wish to understand the needs of our students, meet those needs and know how to create and sustain an atmosphere of care, trust and co-operation. I hope lessons learnt by me can be drawn on by other teachers so that they can make learning an enjoyable, stress-free experience for the children of rural India.

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Introduction

This paper illustrates the journey I took in my professional learning. It shows my transformation from a girl who hated her profession to a passionate person who loves the work she is carrying out. The exploratory trail of this journey, bit by bit, bridged the gap between my profession and my life. Now that those paths merge into my life's path and I am confident, they will never unravel.

I understand the importance of theoretical knowledge for both understanding practice and for communications of practice. At the same time, I also believe that it is possible to engage in effective practice without a basis in theory, which I did from 2004 to 2008; 2004 was when I started teaching and 2008 was when I met my mentor, Swaroop. My mentor empowered me and as a result I could link my work to theory, which enabled me to recognize the significance of my work. I believe, 'before interpretation can happen, living through must be achieved' (Heathcote, 1984, p. 84).

This text is written using the Patchwork approach (Winter et al, 1999). A patchwork text uses different forms of writing and is flexible enough to allow a 'combination of description and analytical commentary' (p. 63). A collection of thoughts, feelings and experiences make up the theme of my paper. To illustrate my journey in learning and transformation I have used email correspondences to my friend and mentor and replies from them, photographs, a story and videos and, most importantly, my reflections on the emails.

To illustrate the journey I have taken I have used e-mails written to a friend and to my mentor, whom I call my guru, and Swaroop Rawal, together with their replies over a period of ten years from 2004 – 2014. When I started working in 2004, I was ignorant about reflective journals. Additionally, I was doing a job I did not want to perform. In view of that, data-collection of any kind was out of the question. Furthermore, I experienced extreme isolation in my practice and until met my mentor, there was really no one who could understand what I was experiencing. The only option was writing to my friend who lived in New York. Even Swaroop, who could understand me, lived far away in Mumbai. I believe – bearing in mind that a qualitative researcher uses varied forms of thinking, feeling and reporting an account (Ely, 1996) – I have relied on the e-mails I wrote and received which were saved in the inbox of my Gmail account. My emails, written in Calibri, are my 'living through'. My reflections are my interpretations and they are in Calibri-Bold. My reflections are the clarifications of my own practice and my alliance to theory while my e-mails express my emotions.

There was a time when I used to hate my profession. In this paper I illustrate how I fell in love with my work and how the hate I experienced for my profession transformed into passion, and how time and learning, support, guidance and experiences changed my perspectives. In this paper I ask and try to answer a number of questions:

- How did the steps I take in this journey sharpen my values?
- How did the steps I take in this journey help me to find myself?
- How did the people I met and interacted with affect me and enable me to give shape to myself and give voice to my experiences?

- How did my vision towards my students change and become broader?

These answers, which led to an exciting transformation, are what I would like to share. I believe that small changes can alter one's whole life and make one more powerful. Everybody lives a life but when you learn a skill to live it in your best way, it changes everything around you.

In this journey I came across a milestone program called 'Life Skills through Drama' (LSTD). I boldly took a step towards it. I say it was a bold choice because the people around me thought I was crazy to follow it and contended I should not pursue a strange path. They suggested I should tag along with the crowd around me and continue working in the environment in which I was trapped. I ignored them and followed my intuition, and now I am here. It's a beautiful story of my learning-journey with my guru, students, colleagues and friends.

I had read a quotation by Jolie (n.d.), 'Make bold choices and make mistakes. It's all those things that add up to the person you become', which inspired me. Mistakes have played a powerful role in this journey. It was through the reflections and guidance from a guru that made learning after making mistakes open to beautiful changes.

Along with pain, grief and confusion this journey brought with it a lot of excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, satisfaction and love. As a result I want to extend all of that to the wider community.

The Beginning

Stepping into a much hated role

Excerpt from an email communication from me to a friend:

Finally the day has come. I had to really push myself to get up and get ready for school as a teacher! I just can't see myself in the role of a teacher. This is the very first day, of the first job of my life, and I yet feel no excitement! You know how I hate this profession. I don't have respect for teachers. I think they are there just to make us worry about our future. Stop us from being innovative, creative and to misguide us. Force us not to have fun in life; as if it is a sin to have fun! I hope the school and staff members are tolerable...I have no idea where I am going I feel like crying... loudly. (Personal communication, December 1, 2004).

Excerpt from an email reply from a friend to me:

I know how you hate teachers, but all teachers are not like ours. There are good teachers in world but you haven't come across them. Anyways, you are the first in our group who is going to earn money and that too at the age of 18 years!we tried hard to convince your parents to allow you to join computer engineering course but nothing worked. They wanted you to have a safe, secured job, stable with no risks... At least you managed to convince them if you didn't enjoy your job to let you quit after one month. (Personal communication, December 1, 2004)

Both these mails illustrate my emotional state. My parents wished me to be a teacher for many reasons. First, in India, teachers have a high status in society, practically a God-like position (see Rawal, 2006). Secondly, a Government job is considered a secure job in our country, where, due to the 6th Pay Commission, teachers get a sizeable salary (Ramchandran et al, 2005). Besides the security, the Government offers its employees attractive and life-long benefits, like housing, health-care, a pension, provident funds and so on. These made a Government job extremely desirable to my parents. There was and continues to be no guaranteed stability in a public-sector job (Raj, 2013, Murlidharan, 2015). However, I was 18 years old and had no interest in teaching and did not even think about 'security' when I considered career options. I desired a more prestigious job – like that of an engineer.

A doomed beginning

Excerpt from email communication from me to a friend:

The first day was a huge disaster. My mother was angry with me as I cried all the way to school. We arrived exactly in time for school, at 10:45. Once we arrived there the whole scenario was strange. The village was so dirty, the roads were strewn with cow dung, and villagers carrying grass on their head, walking their buffaloes, 'welcomed' us.

Somehow we passed through the stinking roads and we saw the school-gate amidst the villagers' homes. The school-gate was locked but kids were playing in the school playground. I wondered how they got inside. Just then one kid came and climbed the gate and went inside.

At 11:30 a big van came and all the teachers got down. Even though they were late none of them was anxious. They opened the gate and welcomed us. We finished all the administrative procedures. A stamp on my document says that from now I am an official government schoolteacher.

By this time, in sheer disbelief, I had stopped crying. I had never imagined a school like this! At the same time I could see tears in my mother's eyes; I think she was now regretting throwing me into this place.

A little while later, even though it was not break-time the teachers started eating their lunch and then proceeded to take a nap. They advised me that there was no need to teach the kids as they are all stupid and not meant to be educated. 'Don't waste your energy', they said.

The kids, they were sweeping the classrooms and the ground. They happily served the teachers; getting water, tea and so on. All the teachers did was to take attendance and say the prayers. That's it. First day is over...

Now I am sure just one month and I will quit this job. After seeing the school even Mum is convinced! (Personal communication, December 3, 2004)

There is a discrepancy between the Ministry of Human Resource and Development's (MHRD) agenda and the state of education in India, especially the state of rural education. I

am not saying no one cares or that all teachers are bad; however, the ones I met neglected their duties. I have observed that instead of supporting children from at-risk communities, who are often first time learners, teachers often ill-treat them. Teachers lack accountability and motivation. Referring to education in India as 'an endangered resource' a UNESCO report (Redif.com, 2009) suggests that about a quarter of the budget is wasted on absentee-teachers. I was stuck in a job like this, with no desire to teach and no role- model to look up to.

A flicker of 'a living contradiction'

Excerpt from email communication from me to a friend:

One teacher, who is 50 years old and has been working as a teacher for last 20 years, was searching for something in the bundles of exam papers for at least an hour. So I went to assist her and I asked her what she was searching. She said, 'I am searching an absentee number's [child's] answer paper'!!!!

Seriously I question the Indian education system and feel awful for these kids. The system pays around 30,000k per month to this lady for her job. Her job is to teach and guide students and all she thinks the most important job was to take attendance. She did attempt to teach them reading, writing but with erroneous methods and information. I really feel very bad for these kids. I feel their future is dark and aimless. How can the system be so negligent and without vision? This school seems like a factory. Its products are well trained, obedient slaves.

I believe we are doing an injustice to these innocent kids. These kinds of scenes disturb me. I cannot just ignore or be a silent witness to this situation, because that would be going against my values. On the one hand I think I should quit my job and on the other I feel that these kids need my help. I believe I have the capacity to help them. How I will do this? I don't know.

All this is stirring up the rebel in me. I sense that I am on my own as I really don't know if other teachers experience this pain. I don't know if others want to rebel. I don't know if others want to do something about the system, education and so on. Taking any action is very far off but nonetheless I am at least thinking about these problems.

These are the conflicts going on in my mind and heart. (Personal communication, December 12, 2004)

Excerpt from an email communication from me to a friend:

The kids are amazing. Their eyes have so much to tell me. They feel shy. They are not very close to me, yet they respect me. I feel their love for me is chaste, without any expectations. Why? I don't know.

As for what they think about the other teachers, I can see they are in awe of them and obey their commands. Whether they love them or not? I can't figure it out. The children are so innocent and taught to believe that teachers are supreme, so without any doubt they have to obey them whether they like it or not. They are not allowed to question or doubt what the teacher says. Nobody is allowed to oppose or challenge teachers, no

matter what the children feel. I imagine this is the guidance these kids receive from home and as a result they don't question teachers and the schooling system. They just follow it blindly.

I believe this is not correct. Students should be allowed to question and in this the way school can educate children to become good citizens. I think that this is the actual role of education, schools and teachers. (Personal communication, December 12, 2004)

This was the first time I experienced what Whitehead (1998, p. 5) expresses as 'myself as a living contradiction'. I saw the chaos around me and knew, albeit spontaneously, that this was not correct. My critical response to the educational system and the practitioners in it was intuitive. I knew in my heart that something was wrong here, but being a novice in the profession I could not pinpoint the problem and make it explicit. I was seeking answers to the question, 'how can I improve the situation here?', 'How can I make a transformational change?' But I did not know exactly what I wanted to change, and how I would do it. I had no clarity concerning my values, but at the same time I believe values are central to human thought, emotions and behaviour (Hills, 2002).

At that time it was very difficult for me to say exactly how I knew what my values were and the source of their generation. I know now, after years of introspection, reflections and dialogue with like-minded people like Swaroop, that many of the values that I believe in were implicit within me. I grew up in Gujarat, the state of Gandhiji's [Gandhi] birth. In Gujarat we are brought up with stories from his life and his work. Values like honesty, truth and love for all people were ingrained in me. My mother too, is a great source of inspiration to me. I come from a humble background yet I have seen my mother share and give gifts to people more needy than us. For example every year on her birthday she distributed sweetmeats in my school.

I know my principles were in place. However, I could not problematise my value-tension; I could not make an enquiry based on reason. The teachers I worked with suggested that if the kids did what they were told, their future was assured (Taylor, 1996). Ramchandran (2005) suggests the teacher-student relationship in India is messy and one of the reasons it was created was because of the distance created by social attitudes and community prejudices. In addition it is acrimonious because of the abusive language used by some Government school teachers in rural areas when they communicate with children from vulnerable and minority-communities. The teachers have an insolent attitude while teaching 'untouchable' and marginalised children. My questions to them and all the teachers I saw around me are:

- 1) Are we creating slaves?
- 2) Are we going to oppress the already oppressed?
- 3) What are we doing?

Continuing the sightless journey

Excerpt from an email communication by me to a friend:

I am stuck in school. I don't know why but I dare not leave this job. Maybe I am getting accustomed to my monthly income. Though I like children I don't like my work. I dump information and ideas on them. They like my lessons but I am not satisfied. I am of the opinion that I pressurise them to be something other than what they are. On my part I am not clear. Why do I teach them these books and subjects? Some of them are very boring and irrelevant even to me. So how it will help or empower children?

Furthermore my colleagues' attitude is terrible. They just think these kids are so stupid they are born to be slaves! They think there is no need to empower them: if empowered they will trouble us teachers. It is so exasperating. How can teachers think like this? Their responsibility is the development of their students and instead they are pulling them down. They are playing with lives of the children and to me it's a crime.

On the other hand, considering the education system and textbooks they are not sound either. If we teach the kids by way of these methods and with these resources, it's pointless. I think it would be better not to teach them at all. The education style has left us mindless and heartless. It harms the children I see around me. It destroys their uniqueness. This system trains children not to use their minds but merely to follow people who are in power. These poor children, they are just trying to adjust and to fit in. They are so vulnerable. All the time they are trying to figure out what is happening to them. Teachers say something, parents say something and their own minds and hearts says something else. Whom should they listen to and whom should they follow? They are in a perplexing situation. So in the end they disregard everything, stop using their minds and hearts. They follow their elders as best they can, and slowly and steadily their minds and hearts die, useless they forget to listen to their own voices.

I think the system compels teachers to function in this shameful manner. Frankly, I am afraid that I too will become like that. These are the conflicts going on in me. I really need help to solve or understand these conflicts. I need one proper person who can guide me, who has experience both in the grounded reality and with the system. (Personal communication, March 13, 2005)

Freire (1994) wrote, 'Reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (p. 51). I had begun reflecting on the situation my students faced. However, there was no one in my circle who could scaffold my reflections I did not have a 'supportive learning environment' (Rawal, 2006) so I muddled on. The irony is that:

Administrators at the district level described a motivated teacher as one who was regular, did what she or he was told and was, by and large, compliant. Children were nowhere in the picture, nor were the teaching and learning processes. Learning was incidental to the mountain of data they gathered and fed into the system. Enrolment, attendance, mid-day-meal distribution and participation in training programmes and workshops – cold figures – has become the indicator of education. (Ramachandran (ed.), 2005, pp. 33-4)

Expansion of the education system, poor teaching skills, and the wide social distance between the teachers and the students in Government schools which cater to the poor, are some of the problems teachers face. Thus teacher-motivation is seldom seen and a few teachers who do love their students are uncommon. I lived in a lonely world as I had no champion to look up to and follow.

Confusions, conflicts and unanswered questions

Excerpt from email communication from me to a friend:

I write to you so I can reflect on my own thoughts and gain clarity. After one month's break I am going to school. This time I want to give it a new start. I think from last few months I have grumbled a lot and I have developed a habit of finding faults in the system and in others. During this vacation, when I was sitting alone, I realized that this is not the way to handle the situation. It will not change anything. It will just disturb me and harm my health.

So have decided to do something. I have undertaken some agreements with myself:

- My classroom will be my experimental laboratory.
- My classroom will be my educational world; no matter what transpires in the outside world.
- 40 children are my target. I will worry about them. (I will not even think what happens to the other kids; because that makes me worry and I cannot work well).
- In my class I will fight the failings I have noticed in the system and in the teachers.
- I will give full freedom to the class, to speak, to express, to play, to question, to think.
- I will try to bridge a gap between me and my students in the sense of social and class-structure so that I can get the sense of where they're coming from.
- I will not complain about the system; if there is something wrong I will ignore it.
- I will not be influenced or disturbed by irresponsible teachers. I will not let them demoralise me. I will not say a word but I will try to influence other teachers by my actions.
- I will try to find positive features in every child.

You must be wondering how I am so confident that I will be able to apply all these changes. Who will let me do it? Will the system allow me to?

But you know what? For me the fact that I work in a government school is the biggest advantage and a quirk of fate because nobody cares to see what I am doing in my classroom. No one checks or inspects our classrooms, not even the Principal of the school. They just don't care. No timetables, no schedule, no planning. Just submit reports: that's all they want. And I will do exactly that, so nobody will trouble me. So with the full freedom to experiment, I am very excited as I draw on my new attitude in my school. (Personal communication, May 30, 2004)

I respond to this email with an explanation of my own learning. It was a huge leap I had taken when I made that agreement with myself. I am fascinated and drawn to the idea that a person, even an ordinary teacher, can create their living-educational-theory, which is the explanation of their educational influence in their own learning and in the learning of others' (Whitehead, 2011). It is an account of the 'description and explanation' of the professional's practice and educational development (Whitehead, 1989, p. 5). How do I improve my practice? How do I improve this process of education here? How do I live my values more fully in my practice? And at the same time I must keep 'the living 'I' at the centre of the enquiry.

Whitehead (1998) suggests we ask ourselves these questions. So, what should I do to prevent my classroom actions from becoming a mere academic exercise? This changed the enquiry from 'what is happening here?' to 'why should it be a problem for me?' During the process of asking this question and answering it I took the responsibility for my actions as I saw certain processes I adopted are negated in my practice. Whitehead (2000) outlines the process as follows: 'I experience a concern when my values are negated in practice; I imagine a way forward; I act; I evaluate; I modify my concerns, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations' (p. 93). However, for me the declaration of negation of values is not enough, nor are the actions taken by me to remedy the negations. The deepening of my values and the enhancement of my understanding of my values are a very important leap. The 'flow of life-affirming energy with values and understandings' (Whitehead) are significant in the growth of my educational explanation.

I had begun to understand my values of dialogical, democratic and negotiated learning (Rawal, 2006), which you can read in 'my agreement with myself' in the email dated May 30, 2005. And yet I was moving in circles. Greene (2000) suggests that, 'imagining things being otherwise may be the first step towards acting on beliefs that can be changed.' And Camus (1955, p. 13, cited in Greene 2000, p. 24) wrote, 'if there is to be a beginning out of weariness - and consequently active learning initiated by those who choose to learn - there has to be an interrogation.' So here I was imagining but not interrogating. My life was filled with so many contradictions! I realise now that it was only the first few steps of what Whitehead (2000) has defined that I was following: 'I experienced a concern when my values are negated in practice. I imagined a way forward. I acted.' However, there was no authentic evaluation.

Bringing in small changes

Excerpt from email communication from me to a friend:

So I tried out my promises in class. Nowadays I am slightly more relaxed. Now at least the behaviour of the other teachers doesn't perturb me anymore. On the contrary now they are nervous and unsure and that makes me happy.

For one lesson we made a trip to the village. It was a valuable experience because for the very first time I saw their homes and the community and living styles. I became acquainted with their backgrounds, environment and culture. The students and I grew closer to each other because besides the curriculum and textbooks they started sharing issues concerning their lives, habits, families and so on.

When I was teaching them Science I realised they knew more about plants than I did as they live closer to nature. So I used their elementary knowledge of plants and introduced them to the scientific names and species, started explaining the medicinal values, and where and when to grow each plant. I enlightened them about the proper scientific uses of the plants and taught them how plants breathe, how they make food and the role of sun, soil and water in the plants' life cycles.

Sometimes I feel lost, but the children are happy. I can see they are learning or relating to something. Exactly what, I don't know. I am without answers but feeling good. Now the rest

of teachers are worried and feel I will never be able to complete my syllabus. As if they finish theirs at all times!!

Anyway I have stopped taking my lunch with them during class hours. Though I am alone I take a break at the designated time only. They tried to convince me, but I was firm and so after 15 days they have started imitating me. That is because they noticed the change in my students. If the news spreads in village, they may get into trouble. I feel like a huge success.

Yes, one thing I realized is I cannot go on like this forever. I need to discover more techniques in teaching. I need to update myself; need to know and learn new learning-styles. How? When? I have no idea.

Some pictures for you.



Image 1. and Image 2. A field visit with my school children

(Personal Communication, July 2, 2005)

A concerned contribution

Excerpt from an email communication to a friend:

Guess what? I cleared one exam and now I am a member of a state resource group (SRG). I am going to write the Science textbook for the Gujarat examination-board. They have selected 20 teachers from all over Gujarat and I am one of them. This is exciting... Now I will be a part of the system, so I may come to know how they work and how they plan the syllabus. I think I will learn about their approaches to curriculum-planning. I also may be able to share my views and ideas about my experiences with kids. (Personal communication, August 30, 2005)

This was the first time I saw a teacher as a researcher but these were feelings that were implicit in my value system. My intuition made me perceive that teachers have a part to play in drawing up an effective improvement agenda in the curriculum and textbook writing. I believe that if teachers are to be the end-users of the books they teach then they have to be at the centre of the endeavour. This is important as I believe teachers are, “the

'developers' and the 'evaluators' as well as the 'facilitators' of their pupils' learning'' (D'Arcy, 1994, p. 293). Teachers should welcome new scenarios and become active learners themselves if they wish to be empowered teachers (Rodgers, 2002) to make sense of 'the complexity of their world and their work of teaching' (Smyth, 1999, p. 70).

With this view in mind I was thrilled to be a part of the state resource group. I felt I could really make a change by creating text books that were teachable for the teacher and learnable for the students. I had taken a concrete step towards trying to improve the schooling system in Gujarat.

Disturbing conflicts...values negations

Excerpt from an email communication to a friend:

The group I am involved with has written an excellent Science textbook. I say this because the former book was black and white, with few illustrations, overtly informative using laborious language, and remote from practical and daily use, whereas ours was based on the '3 Hs-Education for heart, head and hand' philosophy. For each activity we offered several experiments. Those that were suggested enabled students to do them on their own, taking advantage of local and easily available material for the experiments. The content was student-friendly so they could relate their real-life experiences to it. With the aid of colourful pictures and simple, interactive language, our textbook 'talked' to the reader.

We have visited different towns and villages in Gujarat during the process of the textbook, writing workshops to train the teachers on how they should use this book. Teachers find the book challenging but the kids love it. When we go for monitoring, we insist that students should be in 'action-form' and the teachers should be in 'silent mode'.

I have to spend one more year in this process. Though I learn a lot here and enjoy the company of the resource group, something disturbs me. I feel disconnected from my students because this year I was out of school. I feel it's not fair to my class that their teacher is not in the classroom for two years. I feel I am responsible for wasting their time. Yes, here also I am working for the school children of Gujarat, but it's not a good excuse for my own children. Something seems false, but what I don't know. (Personal communication, July 7, 2006)

It was a compelling experience but nonetheless I was not confident. I was in a passive mode while facilitating the teacher training. Something was missing. I wanted to see children's real reactions because when we carry out monitoring, everything is superficial. It seems as if it's staged to please us because we are the authors. I wanted to try the books in 'real' classrooms, with my students. I wanted to see if they are really learning something, absorbing knowledge or just pretending? This was very disturbing to me. Additionally I was neglecting my own students. There is a huge contradiction here. On the one hand I was doing some good work but my students were being neglected by me. It was a contradiction I could not resolve. I had to choose what was more important to me, my students' learning or the textbook-workshops.

A contradiction experienced in the teaching-learning style

Excerpt from email communication me to a friend:

I have left the state resource group.

I have issues with the system as it pressurises the teachers a lot. They don't know the fundamental realities. They don't know their children's needs. They snatch the teacher's and the children's freedom. I do not agree with them. They think they are on a higher plane so they are right. For me again it's a problem of the hierarchical system. They want teachers to follow the system blindly whether it's right or not. Now it's a matter of my freedom. They claim that the child is at the centre of the education system but NO ...the fact is that administration, paper work and high success-rate is more important than the child. That has nothing to do with a child's needs, feelings, enjoyment, etc.. Just mould a child as the system requires. Like making a product in a factory.

I am irritated and planning to quit my job. (Personal communication, March 12, 2008)

The Educational departments and administrators continue to promote a lifeless curriculum (Dash, 2004). In spite of my initial euphoria I still see the system as oppressing the students and teachers. The irony was that I was a part of that system. Like Rawal (2006) I experienced contradictions in my practice. As she saw the contradiction in her approach in her life-skills curriculum (Rawal, 2006, p. 139) I saw the contradiction in the way I approached teaching. I, too, was approaching the education of my students in an ad hoc manner. There was a gap between what I believed about my 'espoused' beliefs (Newman, 1998a, in Rawal, 2006) and what my actions were conveying. I needed to reappraise my assumptions.

On the one hand I criticized rote-learning, the, 'anti-dialogical banking education' (Freire, 1970, p. 74) polices of our culture. I believed, 'dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguer engage[s] in critical thinking' (Freire, 1970, p. 73). 'Freire suggests that words without action is verbalism. Transformation cannot happen without action. At the same time transformation is also impossible with empty action without reflection. Only action and reflection (praxis) enables transformation' (Rawal, 2006, p. 34). Yet my actions did not suggest I was carrying out an accurate realization of my values. I realise I am coming down very hard on myself, but in my defence I can only say I did not know how to achieve what I wanted to achieve. My training was weak; my contact with diverse and varied educational theories and achievements of great thinkers was next to nothing and what made it worse was that I was not trying to learn. I actually did not know where to go or whom to approach.

Meeting a 'critical' friend

Excerpt from email communication me to a friend:

After quitting as a SRG, I started working with children and I am still struggling to get connected to them. I am trying hard to find a nice way to be their friend. Now it seems more difficult because I have gained lots of so-called 'knowledge' from SRG experience but I have lost the ability to listen to my students.

Guess what? I found that the GCERT (Gujarat Council for Educational Research and Training) has introduced a new program named “Life Skills Through Drama” (LSTD). This name itself is unique and it attracts me. The other thing that draws me is the facilitator Dr. Swaroop Sampat-Rawal, the actress and former Miss India. I attended her lecture and I am totally in awe. Her method of conducting the workshop, knowledge of education, and her philosophy about learning processes are excellent. She is a pure educationist I feel connected with her thoughts. And she is bold and very truthful. She knows the basic reality better than those so-called big educationists in Gujarat’s education world. This is the first time in my life I have listened to someone without reservations. Why? I still need to figure it out.

One advantage of the way the program is designed is that after we learn we have to go back to our schools and teach our children, then come back for the next session with our experiences and work on our mistakes and successes; a bit like an action research method.

Isn’t it amazing? It’s exactly the opposite of the SRG workshop. I will be learning and will still continue teaching my students. I will directly be able to see the effect of this program on my students. After that I have the scope to discuss my problems in the next session and additionally I can find solutions from the group-members and the facilitator.

I see light at the end of the deep dark tunnel. (Personal communication, August 15, 2008)

I believe I have found my guru. Who is a guru? The true meaning of Guru is one who dispels darkness of ignorance. ‘Gu’ means ‘the darkness of ignorance’ and ‘Ru’ means ‘one who removes’. Another meaning for Guru is, someone who reveals the Guri (target) to the disciple. S/he does this by removing the darkness of ignorance.

Swaroop gave light and direction to my educational journey and at the same time her guidance cleared my vision about my role as a teacher. Her style and philosophy about life and education have played a powerful role in my journey. Her energy is a great inspiration for me. From this point I will share my conversations and e-mail with Swaroop.

I hesitated to write her, even though she herself invited everybody to feel free to write to her and ask any questions. She said, “Write to me I would love to reply”. I was not sure because of my frame of mind and the experiences I had had before that told me not to believe words expressed in a group. Those words are just words to speak but the speaker doesn’t mean it at all. All facilitators whom I had met before promised to reply but mostly they didn’t bother. Their assistants usually replied and that never satisfied me as I never got the answers to the questions I asked.

However, she seemed different so I took a chance. To my surprise the conversation, which started in 2008, still continues today. These conversations are so powerful that I can’t imagine I am writing a paper on it (see Appendix 2).

For the first time I learnt the importance of a critical friend. From the onset our relationship was that of ‘co-truth-seekers’; she never imposed her thoughts, views or ideas on me. If she had it would have stifled my creativity and brought my rebellious nature to the fore. She modelled the values that she believed in like truth, equality, empowerment to name but a few. This in turn encouraged me to believe and ‘model’ my values.

Realising the results of small changes

Excerpt from email communication from me to Swaroop:

The kids enjoy the LSTD class. Every day their demand is for an LSTD class. We planned – ‘we’ means the students and I – that every day we would play one LSTD game for 10 minutes after calling the register. For me it’s big change because beforehand I was at a loss to know how to teach, but now I finding my footing. Equality is one of my strongest values. I hate hierarchy. In my class, thanks to LSTD, this hierarchy is broken. Now my students and I are equal. We take decisions together. A wall is broken...

... My reflections:

Negotiated learning was put into practice in my classroom with the application of drama in education. The children were genuinely involved in decision-making, albeit at a very basic level. The children enjoyed playing drama games so we agreed that they would choose the games and we would play and then start our studies.

Negotiated learning means sharing power. In India the teacher is always in the powerful position, but I did not accept that as true. I negated the contradiction of my values of democracy and equality by introducing negotiation into my classroom.

E-mail continued:

...As a teacher I see eye to eye with this idea because of its practicability: 10 minutes spent in playing games is reasonable. They enjoy it and it is a good start to the day. They get into learning mode easily after that.

Surprisingly, after practicing it for a week I can see a huge change in students.

- They are being much more innovative, creative.
- They are not feeling shy anymore.
- They share crazy ideas in class.

Even average and below average students get the class’s attention. So they feel good. They feel their presence in class is also important.

They also feel special while playing the game. I notice many talented students blossoming during games. It has never happened before.

Every child matters to me. For me this ‘equality’ and giving importance to each one’s uniqueness is a great advantage. Suddenly I was realising the values that were missing in my classroom, and why I was not feeling fulfilled before. Additionally the drama games broke down the wall between teacher and students and we were now in an equal position. The element of fun was an added bonus. (Personal communication, October 27, 2008)

My reflections:

Drama made learning an enjoyable experience for my students and now they could achieve more in the classroom; they became motivated learners (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When children enjoy whatever they are doing, they are going through what Csikszentmihalyi

(1990) calls a 'flow experience'. A flow experience is an experiential state that distinguishes an enjoyable moment from the rest of life...

E-mail continued:

... I video their crazy moments while they are playing games in class:



Video 1. <https://youtu.be/yZcuntVqZ88> **Video 2.** https://youtu.be/syvC_wsyq30

In these two links the children had to act as if they were eating something, and the others had to guess what they were eating.



Video 3. <https://youtu.be/l9zmyHEhipA>

In this video a child shares an incident while learning - the emotions we experience – 'one day, while he was taking a bath his mother opened the door, so he felt embarrassed.' (Personal communication, October 27, 2008).

My inquiries with myself

Excerpt from email communication from me to Swaroop:

I want to share about 'my inquiries with myself'. I have been doing it for a long time or maybe even from childhood. After your lecture "Reflection and Diary writing" I can see its importance. I can see writing and reflecting on our actions, behaviour, and all that makes gain clarity. I was doing it randomly but now, after your lecture, I do it in a proper way. I use my writing to reflect and can also now visit 'the reflections' whenever I want. Now I am learning to reflect and act in a scientific way.

Through reflections I realise that as a teacher I need to empower kids to trust themselves. Using the current education style, teachers demoralise the children. For example, if a child cannot write or read properly, that doesn't mean s/he cannot think properly, that doesn't mean their observation power is less than other children's. But we doubt and judge their intelligence. We try to force them to focus their reading- writing skills. Never allow them or create an environment in which they can share their brilliant ideas in the classroom. There is not a single chance for fair communication for those kids whose reading and writing skills are poor. We treat them as stupid. Slowly other classmates and schoolmates start judging them and treat them same as the teachers. Then we say that if s/he can't read or write that means s/he is not good at anything. Day by day their confidence goes down.

Previously, I too suggested to the well-informed children that their experiences, their culture were not correct, but what I taught from the textbook was correct. I didn't allow them to trust themselves. I forced them to trust the textbooks, and conveyed to them that their observation of their environment and society was not correct but only the textbooks. Their culture is stupid and what 'education' and I as the teacher state, is culture and only that is final and they should become that. I didn't allow them to dream, and if they dreamt, I didn't give them space and support to share the dreams. I was so blind in my so-called wisdom that I didn't see their real intelligence which rests inside them. I didn't allow that intelligence to peep out; if it did I called it misbehaviour.

This kind of attitude had developed due to the 'teachers training centre', and I trained for two years to accumulate this kind of disgusting attitude! It prevented me from reaching out to my students and being approachable and friendly and caring towards them.

Now I realise this has all been detrimental. That's why before, my students and I had no strong connections. Now when I practice LSTD and DiE [drama in education] in class, I can see a change and real learning on both sides, in my students and in me. We spend happy times together. We share crazy things. They are freed and can share their family talks and their backgrounds, funny incidents and most importantly, their crazy dreams. Now I feel as if the education world is more pleasant, more beautiful and I can see the real me. Thanks to DiE and LSTD I have gained the capacity to see and understand real education. The more I practice the more meaningful it becomes. I feel as if I am falling in love with teaching.

I must say lots of thanks to you. I feel grateful to you for introducing me to these skills. Within me the image of a teacher has transformed. Now I can say proudly that I am a teacher. I have the capacity to bring about the changes. Now I dream to be a role model of a good teacher just like you.



Image 3. Enjoying teaching

(Personal communication, June 4, 2009)

Learning to read...reading to learn

Excerpt from email communication from Swaroop to me:

I will also send you stuff to read... Don't worry, if you do not understand at first... re-read it slowly. First, it would be in English, which is not your mother tongue. Secondly, it is 'thinking' kind of stuff. Enjoy it while you read, do not read it like exams. Relax. I want to send you stuff so you can know more about beautiful thoughts, beautiful work done elsewhere in the world, beautiful just like you. KEEP writing. (Personal communication, June 10, 2009)

Excerpt from email communication from Swaroop to me:

I gift you a book on your birthday as usual. I am sure you will love it because Dorothy Heathcote is one of the best teachers I have read. You will like her thoughts and qualities. Sorry, but again I am sending you something to read (Personal communication, June 30, 2010)

A view of excellence in teaching

Excerpt from email communication to Swaroop:

Thank you very much for the very sensitive book "Dorothy Heathcote: Education and Collected Writings on Education and Drama". You have gifted me an ideal book at the perfect time. That's why I insist on to calling you my guru. I must say the complete book is very powerful but these lines attract me, they have touched me and now I want to share it with all the teachers in Gujarat:

Relating to People: 'What do we mean when we say, that is an excellent teacher?'
For me, an excellent teacher is one who knows the difference between relating to

things and relating to people. Both need great skill, but the greatest skill lies in how we relate to people.

If I am to aspire to excellence as a teacher, I must be able to see my pupils as they really are. I must not discourage them - I must accept them. This means adjusting myself to my pupils, and seeing them from another standpoint.

I must also preserve an interest in my students and, in this way, grasp something of their potential. I must see what they are in the process of becoming. When children come to us with labels – this is a slow learner, this is a non-reader – We tend to shut our mind to change: but the ability to preserve an interest in children prevents teachers from stereotyping them in all sorts of ways [Heathcote (1984) p, 18].

This paragraph provides me with answers to my questions. These are the qualities I wanted to improve in myself as a teacher. I got the exact words for my beliefs. There are many things in this book that sharpen my thoughts, behaviour and attitudes towards children, which I am now trying to absorb and implement in my practice.

And yes, I taught the Digestive System and Respiratory Systems through DiE and the children learned it so well and were filled with joy in Science class. As of now, no more boring lessons. You can see this links:



Video 4. <https://youtu.be/fxaY4UjHtDw> **Video 5.** https://youtu.be/3_93REVyNAs

In these two videos children learn about the digestive system and its process through drama. They then present it in a group and explain the process of digestion with the use of scientific names of the organs. Both the links are on the same topic and same content but it is presented by two different groups.



Video 6. My classroom practice <https://youtu.be/RKNkeEwgxdc>

In this link the children share their observations about a temple and then work in groups to make statues. They learnt how to work in a group and share ideas confidently. (Personal communication, July 15, 2010)

Returning from a drama workshop (in November 2010) conducted by Swaroop assisted by me, in Rajpur, I learnt a lot about my values concerning democracy, dialogue and negotiated learning. In India while teaching Civics (Sociology) we only teach the ‘facts’ of democracy – voting, the three branches of Government, and so on (see for example Sarva Shiksha Abhyaan (SSA) Gujarat (2010)). However, in the workshop I learnt that Democracy has deep moral dimensions involving issues of justice and goodness (Noddings, 1992). While teaching I also learnt that drama was helpful in clarifying and transforming my values. I learnt how to negate the contradictions of my values in practice. When Swaroop asked the children, ‘What is freedom? What are our Rights?’ I learnt that if we, the students and teachers and also the community, accept our freedoms without a thought or care, then are we really free? If we have our rights then we have our responsibilities too. Rights, Freedom, Democracy are only words; the meaning comes when we put them into practice every day. The drama-workshop enabled the children to understand social justice, to work for a common good and cultural appreciation. Most importantly I learnt about a value that was deeply hidden in me called empathy. The workshop and the life-skills classes (Rawal, 2006, Chapter 8) enabled me to realise my values of equality, and democracy.

After the workshop I started to practice democracy in my classroom. I negated the contradiction of my value in practice: before I did not involve the children in any kind of decision-making. By setting the rules we would follow in class with the children I democratised my classroom (also See Rawal, 2006, pp. 103-108). Additionally some of the rules we made engaged with the idea of equality. The following are some of the rules we made:

- We will keep our surroundings clean.
- Everybody will listen when someone speaks or shares an idea.
- Every morning we will set a goal for the day, like what subject or topic we will learn and how we will try to achieve one target a day.

- We will not make fun of someone's crazy idea; we will see impossible targets in a positive way.
- During 'team work time' we will work together and nobody will dominate another.

We wrote them down and stuck it on the board. At the end of the day during the reflection meetings we talked about the learning of the day. Who broke which rule? What did we like best and what didn't we like in the day and what changes we should make for the next day's class?

Once I was teaching them the different festivals in Gujarat. It is one of the topics of environment subject of Standard 4th. Before LSTD and DiE I used to transfer information from textbooks and thrust on them my knowledge about the celebration of festivals in urban India. I drew on posters and used the internet to show them different images of festivals but never asked them how they celebrated in their village. Attempting to understand their experiences and culture was not my task. After LSTD and DiE training when I taught the same topic again, I asked them to make statues of "Holi celebrations" (see Glossary). A few of them made unique statues of the rituals they follow in their village according to their traditions, those that were not described in textbooks but were celebrated traditionally. Even though I had been teaching in that same village for the past five years I did not know of these traditions. I merely followed the textbook blindly. Here I experienced the importance of the LSTD and DiE method. I realised what real education was and got more confidence.

Through reflection and dialogue my students could now participate in brainstorming, work creatively and exchange ideas in a group without my prompting. An interesting example of this was when one of my students came up with a brilliant idea. It was remarkable yet challenging to me. He asked me why only the teacher was allowed to give out homework? Why couldn't a student give homework to the teacher? I was shocked and shaken to hear his questions. My teacher's ego was upset and at the same time I realised my value-conflict. On the one hand I was working with the idea of creating a negotiated classroom and when I was confronted with a unique idea that put me in a defensive position, I was not able to cooperate. At that moment I diverted the boy with another discussion, but after some time my values overpowered my defensiveness. I negated the contradiction and I agreed to accept the homework given by students.

The students decided every Saturday they would give me homework. I was so happy when they gave me homework; it was very interesting that they always gave me homework to make drawings about their imaginations, birds, toys and so on. Sometimes it was hard and challenging for me but I must confess it was a process of great learning for me. I learnt to draw, to reflect, to be more empathetic but most importantly, I learnt from them how to give interesting homework.

The democratic teacher provides a security to the children and enables them to communicate their ideas, problems and perspectives. A democratic teacher also listens with empathy and is non-judgmental. This is because the democratic teacher is not an authoritarian and didactic one. Now I could fully understand my value of a wish to draw on 'anti-dialogical banking education' (see earlier about Freire), now that there was a certain unambiguousness in how I wanted to teach. Additionally, my transformation enabled me to

do a value-check on the spot. It was similar to reflection-in-action-on-action (Schön, 1987, p. 4). I could negate the contradiction I experienced then and there. Like 'reflection-ON-reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1987, p. 4) it is an intellectual act. I believe negating the contradiction I experienced on the spot, united doing and thinking, practice and theory and it comes from practice.



Image 4. The 1st homework given to me by my students; they had asked me to complete one drawing which depicted Day-Night and had the Sun, the Moon and the Earth

And now...

Excerpt from email communication from me to Swaroop, Cc (carbon copy) from me to a friend:

Today I join my new post as the Principal. I smile when I think of that girl who hated teaching is going to become a Principal of a school, with 600 students and a staff of 15 teachers.

When I look back at the 8 years from 2008 to 2016 (we met in 2008) or 12 years from 2004 to 2016 (since I started teaching) I see my journey from novice to proficiency. I see an absolutely transformed, reformed teacher. In 2004, I hated teachers and the job. Now, in 2016 I take pride in being a teacher. Confidently, my students and I feel I am one of the better teachers.

I want to share those changes which took place, by and by, within me. You have played a big role in this transformation. I saw my values and qualities in you and your work. Something I was seeking from the first day. You just embodied them and gave them names, in a way I could connect with and implement. (Personal communication, March 23, 2015)

My reflections: This email was to share my good news but, most importantly, to share how I negated the contradictions I experienced in my practice. In my reflections I focus

on the contradictions, which were experienced by me as I violated my spiritual value of creating a caring society. From day one I kept saying, 'I will quit...I hate this job...I hate the situation I am in', ad nauseum. My failure was in not trying to negate my contradictions. However, with time, experience and after meeting people who inspired me to reflect on my actions I learnt that I could do something. I took steps to change myself and thus changed my practice and the teaching and learning in my school.

I learnt to facilitate freedom with the children and to be creative without forcing my ideas on them. I learnt how to use drama in education and how to enable children to reflect. Through DiE and my reflections I learnt that education should be dialogical. I uncovered an important value, which was in my make up but I did not know how to use in practice: I learnt to be forthright, yet challenging, respect the students and acknowledge that learning is not the transmission of knowledge. I had put this value into practice when I made my commitment to myself but later I learnt the significance of the value of democracy and dialogue. This, I believe, is the confluence of my implicit values, my living theory and my practice.



Image 5. Making the rules we will follow in class

2009 Drama camp at Rajpur



Image 6. At a drama camp; explaining a statue-game to the students

Every last child matters: when Swaroop worked with the street child I realised that the so-called dirty kids are not dirty. I learnt to see the person, not their caste or religion. I negated the contradiction, which I experienced when I said, 'I will leave'. I stopped being a pretender and realised the role teachers play in supporting unjust social structures in schools. I took steps to negate this contradiction by visiting their homes and understanding their culture, and by making a personal commitment to creating a just and caring society.

2010 Drama camp: Democracy and Citizenship



Image 7. At the Democracy and Citizenship drama camp

I saw a real democratic classroom and the real method of democratic learning. Freedom and Rights and Responsibilities come hand-in-hand; democracy and equality are only words in our rural societies and culture. My classroom practice negated such conflicting values when I created a progressive culture in my class. To begin with I 'modelled' my democratic behaviour when I agreed to take homework assignments from my students. I did not place any child above another and, in fact, I did not even place myself above them. Step by step we moved towards equality. I am deeply critical of 'anti-dialogical banking education' (Freire, 1970, p. 74). Today, I can proudly say we have no hierarchy in my class and the teacher is not the only authority on knowledge.

2012 Helen O'Grady International Workshop



Image 8. Helen O'Grady International conference; my talk on innovative teaching ideas

Language is not a barrier if your work and values are real and solid. I remember Swaroop encouraging me to present before an only English-speaking audience. I reinforced my values of the teacher as a researcher.

2013: Drama camp – Dandi March



Image 9. Learning to read English

When I saw the tribal girls trying to read the English press cuttings Swaroop had put

up on the wall, I realised that it was an ingenious touch of hers, to subtly persuade them to carry out a task which was extremely difficult for them. I learnt that teachers must build on the knowledge and experience which pupils bring with them to the class. They must value their children's views more than their own and develop their lessons on the already learnt skills of their students.

2015. Teacher-training in collaboration with SSA (Sarva Siksha Abhiyan) in Gujarat:

If one has carried out sound work at the grassroots-level then one should set off confidently:

You can change the world. If you build trust and faith in yourself and your values, then others will trust you and follow you. My values of being a change maker were achieved here. Something I could not achieve when I wrote the textbooks with SRGs was realised in the SSA workshop for 2.5 lakh¹ teachers of Gujarat (Rawal, 2014).

I see myself as 'a living contradiction' (Whitehead, 2000, p. 93) and keeping that in mind I want to befriend the teachers I will work with in the role of a Principal and be an empathetic listener. I don't want to alienate them as I did when I started teaching. I will make it possible for them to ask, 'how can I improve my practice?' and more importantly how to see themselves as living contradictions, because my value of social justice, equality and democracy means that I must enable their voices to be heard. If I don't, I will be negating my values in practice. Here are a few pictures of our teacher-training workshops for our memories.



Image 10. With the core team, learning about action research

¹ A lakh is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to one hundred thousand (100,000; scientific notation: 10^5). In the Indian convention of digit grouping, it is written as 1,00,000.



Image 11. Inauguration of the 2.5 lakh teacher-training workshop



Image 12. A snapshot of the video recording of the training



Image 13. With the master trainers; carrying out preparation at 11:30 pm



Image 14. Proofreading the manual for the 2.5 teacher-training workshop
(Personal communication)

A continuing ending

This is the story of my journey. However, no story, no journey can ever be complete nor absolutely resolve the frightening chaos and cacophony in education and social ‘enhancements’. I am left with my questions about my practice, learning and education. Living Educational Theory (Whitehead, 2000) enables me at every step to question my practice and leads me on to a never-ending quest. There will always be the questions, ‘Why? What do I do when I experience my values being negated in practice?’ There will always be questions to answer when I experience opposition, hear diverse voices and contradictory versions of what learning is. Love has given me the power to reach out to each child and to try to understand their multiple realities. Imagination has given me the capacity to be different and find a way to negate my contractions and value conflicts and envision a better world for my students and myself. My journey does not end here, but continues because I have the courage to rebel and transform.

Glossary

LSTD = Life Skills Through Drama

SRG = State Resource Group

GCERT = Gujarat Council for Educational Research and Training

DiE = Drama in Education

Holi celebrations = Holi is a Hindu spring festival in India

SSA= Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan

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