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## Interdisciplinary, Praxis-focused Auto-ethnography: Using Autobiography and the Values Discussion to Build Capacity in Teachers.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is about what makes for resilience within a challenging profession. A teacher who has remained idealistic and positive throughout 42 years in education examines the psychological and practical sources of his personal positivity. The complex and bespoke methodology invented to answer the question, 'What sustains a fulfilling life in education' is offered as an approach to ethnography aimed at personal development, applicable to both education researchers and practitioners. The method, *Interdisciplinary, praxis focussed autoethnography*, is not just as a novel means of examining motivations in an individual but is presented as offering a new perspective on staff development in teaching and perhaps other caring professions. The powerful effect of this research on the researcher's practice is discussed in the context of its impact on the development of an approach to capacity building based upon values, creativity and friendship.

**Key words:** Methodology; autobiography; staff development; values; creativity; friendship; education.

### INTRODUCTION

I have been a teacher for 42 years. I have suffered the media criticism periodically aimed at teachers, the sudden changes in policy, the growing political interference, the increasing marketisation and bureaucracy that will be recognised by many. Like most teachers I have also encountered angry parents, difficult children, unsmiling inspectors and the denigration of many of the values I hold dear. Yet I have remained positive about education and teaching itself. I have felt sustained in the face of an unrelenting barrage of challenges and so thankfully have many others. The same story could be told by long serving health workers, those involved in social services, aspects of the justice system, caring or community work. What gives some people the resilience I have claimed? How can we help others get it? My decision to enter into auto-ethnographic study towards the end of a career was generated by such questions.

What sustains me and keeps me idealistic after a lifetime in education? I imagined that asking myself and others this question might provide answers that could help shape training and staff development for teachers in the future. I quickly, (and predictably) found my simple question very difficult to answer in any satisfactory way. The gulf between what others and I *knew* to be true and the words we had to express that knowledge, was too big and complex for mere words. This paper outlines my tentative and evolving attempts to find ways to answer questions about resilience – with *and beyond* the level of words. My methods are presented in the hope that aspects may be relevant to other practitioner/researchers where inclusive values like kindness, love, honesty, generosity, joy, equality, truth, beauty and justice still matter [1].

### **Inventing a methodology to answer a difficult question**

To answer my question adequately I had to accept that my knowledge was multi-layered, provisional, ultimately unknowable and probably more felt than understood. I needed to invent a method to describe the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of my enquiry and its direction towards self-change and practical action in the world. I called this method, *Interdisciplinary praxis-focussed auto-ethnography*. Interdisciplinary because as I looked back on my life I saw that sociology, psychology, philosophy, geography, music, art and education theory all had their impact. So too did experience, my friends and family and the accidents of time and place. The word praxis appears because the research had a political and moral focus in the daily reality of teaching in schools and universities and was aimed at changing my own and others' practice in classroom, staffroom and common room. The method was auto-ethnographic because it was generated from and founded upon systematic and deep examination of my own life. I believe the research method I developed offers new ways of understanding motivation and renewing teachers' energy to move forward. The methods are necessarily messy, they reflect the shifting sands of self-understanding, but I believe they may have resonance for all involved in 'caring' professions: those where the central aim is the social, psychological, intellectual, spiritual and physical well-being of people.

Values matter. My quest began with identification and systematic examination of the values that guide my actions in the world, my beliefs and approaches and their relationship with my sense of well-being, particularly of resilience and 'job-satisfaction'. Early tasks centred upon examining notions of personal meaning and purpose, and required evidence from multiple personal perspectives, many of which would not normally be available to others. As Denzin and Lincoln observe:

*We cannot study lived experience directly, because language, speech and systems of discourse mediate and define the very experience we attempt to describe. We study the representations of experience, not experience itself. [2, p.51]*

Such thoughts and Clough's [3] exhortation to look for alternative ways of knowing, led me beyond words. I sought truth in an archive of images painted, drawn and etched by myself, and in art works by others special to me. Music is important to me so I chose specific compositions, musical forms and metaphors to represent knowledge apprehended in other ways. The chosen images and musics were necessarily un-interpreted because words would blur their meaning. Worded evidence was confined to the written or spoken parts of my experience found in diaries, a number of personal autobiographies and interviews with others close to me. All were open to a number of different interpretations.

Discussing the interpretative paradigm Roth reminds us that auto-ethnography, reveals aspects of our culture just as much as it attempts to tell about a single life [4]. Autobiography also involves the biographies of others and meanings created and approximately shared between us. Attempting to understand others' interpretations and uses of words or metaphors therefore became fundamental to understanding mutual influences. I wanted to avoid, 'the false dichotomy opposing objectivism and subjectivism,' [4, p.6] and sought to establish what Roth calls an 'inter-subjectivity' between myself and those that influenced me. Thus the prolonged involvement throughout my research of those closest to me was required.

The findings and detailed conclusions of this research are not directly relevant to this discussion of methodology. The ways in which evidence was organised may however be helpful to others considering autoethnographic approaches to influence their and others' practice. In answering my overarching question on resilience I asked four subsidiary questions.

The wide range of evidence used to answer the questions came from the informal archive of collected letters, photos, objects, memories and conversations that clutter many homes and minds. The sources of data are summarised in the table (Figure 1) below:

<b>Overarching research question: What sustains a fulfilling life in education?</b>	
<b>Subsidiary research question</b>	<b>Sources consulted for answers</b>
1. What values, beliefs, educational approaches are important to me in education and why?	Diaries, autobiographies, letters, family conversations, my art works, re-visits to places, pictures and musics important to my story
2. What experiences have contributed to the resilience of my approach to education?	Art works produced by myself, diaries, autobiographies, letters, research notes, conversations with friends, musical structures.
3. How does my account relate to those of particular others?	Conversations with friends, reflection and reading on the art works of others, re-readings of personally influential literature
4. What implications does the exploration of the values and beliefs have for my present action in education?	Feedback/evaluation from 40 staff development courses 2002 - 2011, delivered by myself, diaries, letters, autobiographies, conversations with friends

**Figure 1: Organising the data to inform the research questions**

### **Choosing Autobiography**

Autobiography involves the written stories from my life. My own story is a resource to which of course I have deep, nuanced and privileged access. Auto-ethnography is the systematic study of aspects of that life story as the basis of research. Critics of auto-ethnography, like Delamont, characterise it as the, *'essentially lazy – literally lazy and intellectually lazy,...selfish and ultimately fatuous study [of]... uninteresting and inconsequential lives,'* (5, p.2). I argue however, that every life is consequential and interesting. I believe that systematic and self-critical, self-study can achieve great depth, relevance but also has a special usefulness in professions focussed on the lives of ordinary people. The more we understand ourselves the more we are able to develop empathy.

Autobiography as research has been the subject of academic controversy for many years. The term auto-ethnography was coined by Hayano [6] and developed as a research technique in the work of Ellis and Bochner [7], Denzin and Lincoln [8] and Roth [4] in the United States and by researchers like Mitchell, Weber and O'Reilly Scanlon, [9], Atkinson, [10] and Coffey, [11] in the United Kingdom. Its research significance is explored in the work of Bruner [12] Rogoff, [13] Clough, (4,14,15,16), West, [17] and Merrill [18]

I recognise Bruner's assertion that, *'we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives,'* [12, p. 694]. This reminds us of the crucial role of reflexivity in interpretative research. A life in caring professions of all kinds generates intense interactions with large numbers and a wide range of clients often in emotional circumstances. These exchanges often include demonstrations of the personal significance of life stories. In arguing for a *'culturally sensitive psychology,'* Bruner sees autobiography and biographical understandings as central. He suggests that our connections with people should seek to understand:

*... not only upon what people actually do but what they say they do and what they say caused them to do what they did... what they say others did and why. ... what people say their worlds are like. [19, p.16]*

I chose Auto-ethnography because it best allays my personal fears about the distancing tendencies of 'traditional' research. Ellingson and Ellis describe:

*...the alienating effects on both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by ... research practices... clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse [20, p. 450].*

A positivist approach would have been wholly inappropriate my study. I was dependent on interpretations, feelings, experiences and conversations and a desire to emphasise 'soft' values like caring, relationship, positivity and creativity. Research carried out in the sciences or humanities within their usual positivist paradigm rarely gives a justification for its stance. Neither did I feel the need to justify my interpretative approach further than articulating the claim that qualitative research was the only way I could answer my research questions. One cannot pretend objectivity in issues concerning oneself, one's friends and one's values.

The examination of values held my wide-ranging research together. Values are deeply held beliefs that act as guides, and provide life with direction and destination [21]. Initial autobiographical reflections isolated my use of hope as a key element of resilience. Lengthy self-analysis during friendly conversation helped me understand the ways that I used my tendency to hope in the face of pressures towards despair. Autobiography and auto-ethnography helped uncover the early roots (usually pre-adolescent) of other assaulted and demeaned values like love, honesty, fairness, kindness and faith. But autobiographical thinking and writing also revealed complex layers of self [22]. It revealed its vulnerability to disintegration and reintegration, its inconsistencies, but at the same time constantly reaffirmed the special role of values.

My research made me aware of '*many versions of self*,' (23, p.115). Our current understanding of self tends to direct responses across all aspects of life. Conclusions in psychiatric, psychological, sociological studies hold to the belief that what others report about themselves is a suitable starting point for research. Health professionals frequently rely upon personally reported feelings to guide treatment decisions. Self-report, however, is unaccountably considered suspect by many education researchers. '*We have been taught to treat such said accounts as untrustworthy, even...untrue*', Bruner remarks [12, p.16]. Experience has persuaded me that the reported world of child and adult merits serious consideration because like Rembrandt's self-portraits they are real at the time. Although denial, repression, avoidance, unconscious motivation and deliberate lies may also be part of what is reported we can as researchers seek out and test alternative perspectives to support judgements about verity.

Autobiographical conversations are probably crucial in the creation of identity. They may have important social functions too. Shared opportunities to express autobiographical fragments, key stories or longer narratives, help us establish sustainable and sustaining communities. A mature understanding of self is key to what Goleman [24] calls the 'emotionally intelligent' individual, valued in many post-industrial societies. Yet in a society that apparently prizes individuality, I note little time in education or education research is devoted to understanding how identity is constructed and sustained. Equally, whilst children appear highly interested in their developing selfhood (25, 26, 27), adult awareness of this interest has had little impact on the curriculum children receive.

My experience is that self-understanding helps us develop a fuller understanding of others. For a teacher, self-knowledge is particularly important in heightening sensitivity to the emerging selves of children. Bruner reminds us of the complexity of understanding selfhood however:

*Selves are not isolated nuclei of consciousness locked in the head, but are “distributed” interpersonally. Nor do selves arise rootless in response only to the present; they take meaning as well from the historical circumstances that gave shape to the culture of which they are an expression. (19, p. 138)*

Autobiography is often used to validate our choices. As Bruner suggests, ‘The self as narrator not only recounts but justifies’ (*ibid* p. 121). One of the dangers of auto-ethnography therefore is the tendency to weave events into a romanticised, self-congratulatory story. If the written story of my life was to be of use in discovering personal, emotional and spiritual meaning, then I had to allow meanings to emerge, rather than cast them into a mould. I also needed to be aware of the impact of the cultures that continually limited my choices. Analysis of individual experiences showed for example that minute internal or external influences sent life in unpredictable directions and pretending there was one, preordained or planned route in life was disingenuous. The examination of other lives showed me that my life shared the fragility and uncertainties of every life story.

### **Why I Chose Close Friends**

Friends are important to us. They are people in a long term and positive relationship with me; who know me well in private and professional life. I wanted to study the life stories of close friends who had remained in education, in order to compare accounts of my resilience with their explanations. Friends became research subjects because early in the analysis of my own story it became clear that my resilience depended heavily on their support. The nine friends represented in my study had been in this relationship with me for more than 20 years. Their relationships cut across my professional, personal, spiritual, playful, social, intellectual and private lives. But even they occupied other cultures, saw and experienced things differently from me. Aspects of their lives and views therefore provided contradiction, additional data and depth to answer my study.

Each friend was, in their own estimation and the opinion of their colleagues, successful as a teacher and expressed high degrees of life-satisfaction. ‘Successful’ in this context means that they were satisfied with the contributions they had made to the learning of others, still energised and idealistic about their work and conscious of a positive impact on a wider audience.

Using close friends as research subjects was justified for a number of other reasons:

1. Only close friends could be asked to sustain the commitments of time and interest and tolerate the persistent, personal questions I planned to ask
2. They offered relative ease of access over what was to be a long research period (10 years)
3. The empathy and frankness they had already shown, gave me confidence that they would answer my questions ‘honestly’
4. Being dominant characters themselves my friends are resistant to my attempts to dominate, and used to being sceptical and critical in their responses to me

5. My friends are well aware of the details of my private life and therefore it is more difficult to romanticise or 'get away with' obfuscation, deception and hypocrisy
6. I like my friends and I believe they like me, therefore I felt that the interactive aspects of my research would be mutually pleasurable and perhaps helpful
7. In daily encounters friends often challenge my unsafe conclusions. Whilst shared meanings may arise from similar beliefs or experiences we come from different cultural backgrounds; meanings need not be consistent, conclusions and emphases are likely to be different
8. My friends specifically resist the generalisations I make about them and their values. They are willing to return to disagreements because of the long term and mutually supportive nature of our relationships.

Each reason for the choice of friends as research participants raised questions. Would friends be as tolerant as I expected? Could I do justice to them as individuals in a context focussed so much on me? Would they stay around to be interviewed many times over? Would they indeed be honest or could our friendship be based upon mutual glossing over of disagreements? Would the criticality I expected manifest itself? The means of answering these questions are outlined later in this paper.

Asking others about their values requires trust and flexibility. Researching the 'psychology of discovery and invention', Csikszentmihalyi interviewed 92 Nobel Prize winners and other creative leaders about their lives and values [28]. He used a framework of open questions followed by opportunities for subjects to write answers at length - 'freely' communicating what mattered most to them on the subject of creativity. He then combed the responses for themes, continua and commonalities that often expressed core values. I sought similar opportunities for friends to talk about their values over a much longer period. I planned to examine whether these extended conversations might provide evidence to support the formulation of theory and suggest proposals designed positively to impact upon the lives and work of others.

Drawing information from the reports of others involves risks. We know that unconscious factors affect recall, selection, recording and theorising from conversations. Denzin [29] reminds us that we are likely to respond disproportionately to resonances from our own past, or arrive at unsound conclusions when reported relationships or feelings seem similar to our own. However, West's assertion that, *all* minds are partly composed of the continuing influence of the lives around us [17] (and I would add, those we have never met) meant that I interrogated their reports by applying alternative explanations (see explanation of the use of Sonata-form below).

### **The Ethics of Using Self and Friends as Research Subjects**

Ethics are an issue even when the subject of study is oneself. As my study deepened it became clear that I had to decide how far aspects of personal privacy should be made public. There are places therefore, that I avoided because they involved others and aspects of self I wished to remain private. I chose to minimise details of the huge impact of my wife and children in order to preserve their privacy. On the other hand I decided to accept the risk that public honesty about myself may destabilise a positive self-image since integrity and personal honesty were important to my thesis.

Submitting my research plans for ethical review resulted in questions as to the ways in which I would counter any tendencies to dominate conversations and interpretations. These concerns I answered to the satisfaction of the ethics committee and summarise below.

I began researching the lives of my friends with an email. I asked each friend if they could join me in the quest to find out what sustained us in education. After receiving assent, I telephoned each with further enquiries about anonymity. Every friend and family member represented in this research wanted me to refer to them by name because they wanted to be identified with the personal journey involved in the research; they did not require confidentiality. Examining their beliefs, values, passions and attitudes, however, presented a unique set of ethical problems.

My questions were intrusive. Whilst my data was to arise from biographical conversations rather than full biographies, I informed participant friends that my research needed to include systematic, though incomplete, explorations of aspects of their life histories to establish the sources of beliefs, values and attitudes. Questions were therefore likely require time, calm and confidence in me. Each conversation began by reminding friends that control had to be truly in their hands in order for the outcomes to be worthy of analysis. I believe accepting this assurance is easier between friends than strangers. If recalling the past conjured up distressing or uncomfortable feelings (as happened a number of times) friends needed reassurance that our friendship, not the research, would prevail and I would stop the questions and simply be a friend. As an interrogator of personal beliefs maintaining a relaxed manner and avoiding the distant mantle of 'researcher' was important. I was careful to avoid the misunderstandings, lack of rapport and discomfort warned against by many ethnographers (for example 30, 31). Environmental conditions for conversations were chosen to be secure, relaxing and free from distraction.

Conversations took place in conditions of high mutual confidence. We usually met in the homes or cars of my friends or my own home. I explained the nature of my research and my focus on beliefs, values and approaches to education. Conversations inevitably involved our shared interests in creativity and its possible relationship with values. My friends were not surprised at these foci, but each individually expressed enthusiasm to participate in deeper dialogue. My planned questions were brief and general. I used a simple framework to ensure comparability between accounts and preserve a conversational feel to interactions. Since research subjects were close friends, frank conversations were already common and friendship granted more freedom to delve into past motives and to challenge them. It is possible to abuse friendship however, and my research participants were reminded that they could stop, withdraw or change the subject at any time. I recognised that I continued to be mediator and narrator of my friends' stories [23], but through the verbatim use of their words, and opportunities to correct written transcripts I attempted to honour their voice. Questions were not asked in any particular order and not always in the same form, but all conversations addressed the following:

- their values
- definition(s) of values
- the sources of values
- how values were sustained, expressed, compromised, lost and perhaps re-found
- lifelong interests
- views on teaching and education in general
- views on creativity.



Only personal, persistent and long-term conversations could begin to uncover satisfactory understandings of these complex and dynamic issues. I asked each friend again whether they wanted me to anonymise their names and each answered, ‘no’. We agreed however, that though their names would be used throughout, people they referred to would be anonymised, by change of name and fictionalisation of their relationship.. Each friend received the transcripts soon after our conversations knowing they could amend and return or destroy them. My own search for honesty with myself has ethical ramifications for those closest to me. Reading of my ever-deepening self-questioning may have proved uncomfortable for my family and so I gave my wife and children opportunities to read and question every aspect of my research before finalising it.

### METHODS OF RESEARCH

The detail of my approach to interdisciplinary praxis-focussed auto-ethnography, now needs explaining. Below I outline the wide range of methods and approaches I used to justify the term, but this mix of data sources and means of analysis is specific only to the understanding my life story (see Figure 2). Each auto-ethnography requires a bespoke collection of worded and unworded sources; each form of story suggests its own form of analysis.

Data	Analysis	Action
6 Autobiographies written at different times in different moods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Grounded theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Sonata form</i></li> <li>• <i>Conversations with family</i></li> <li>• <i>Reading in the light of the biographies of friends</i></li> </ul>	A. Identification of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• friendship,</li> <li>• values congruence</li> <li>• opportunities to find, use and develop personal creative strengths.</li> </ul> As significant factors in building resilience amongst teachers.  B. sharing these findings and activities connected to them with colleagues through staff development courses in 40 educational institutions  C. Collecting and responses to staff development courses to feed back into research
Diaries, sketchbooks and letters 1967 - 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Grounded theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Sonata form</i></li> </ul>	
Paintings, drawing and etchings by me 1965 - 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>By the reader</i></li> </ul>	
Specific pieces of music and special places that marked significant changes in my life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>By the reader</i></li> </ul>	
The work of famous artists special to me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>By the reader</i></li> <li>• <i>By comparing ‘expert’ opinions</i></li> </ul>	
Books and articles that have been personally influential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Literature review</i></li> </ul>	
Semi structured biographical conversations with close friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Reading and re reading many times</i></li> <li>• <i>Grounded theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Further conversations/feedback</i></li> <li>• <i>Sonata form</i></li> </ul>	
Round table discussion with groups of participating friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Grounded theory</i></li> </ul>	
Questionnaires sent to 9 participating friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Comparison with semi-structured conversation analysis</i></li> </ul>	

**Figure 2: The research approaches used in Inter-disciplinary, praxis focussed auto-ethnography and their practical outcome in education.**

## Using Autobiography

Autobiographies change. Within a few weeks of an accepted PhD proposal in 2002 I completed a detailed autobiography. Without reference to academic literature, indeed referring to no other autobiography, I naively assumed that these 35,000 words constituted a more or less accurate summary of my life so far. It seemed an *honest* examination of the sources of my current values in education and life. Looking back on this first attempt I saw it was a misleading and rather 'posed' examination - not intentionally deceitful, but ignorant of the complexity and differing layers of influence which colour memory on a day to day basis. Newly-conscious of the ways in which oft-repeated personal stories are embellished and subtly altered to conform to the psychological, social and pragmatic needs of the present, I was shocked at re-reading it some six months later. I rewrote my story with what I saw as a new honesty.

Awareness of the shifting nature of memory materialised as I added significant, darker and not-to-be-published material to my life story at the suggestion of my supervisor in 2004. My more sombre mood awoke negative memories missed at almost every milestone of my first two autobiographies. I first interpreted these forgotten memories as 'glossed over' aspects of my past, obscured by a tendency to be over-generous and optimistic.

Adding new detail on becoming a grandfather in 2005, and in both 2006 and 2007, I repeated the process and again found that different aspects of my past came into focus. Rather than amend the pre-existing autobiographies I decided to save each 'new' account in different colour font to capture changes in autobiographical understanding. Six autobiographies, significantly different, but written within four years of each other, reminded me that memory was not static or absolute but fluid, multi-layered and reactive like the shifting sands of consciousness itself.

I read and re-read the autobiographies and my diaries many times. Using a Grounded Theory [39] approach, I noted themes like values and beliefs dominated even the diaries written when I was sixteen. I highlighted what appeared to be values and then isolated references to beliefs, attitudes, and lifelong interests. When a category I called 'Key Stories' emerged from the data, I found that properties like people, places and objects occurred in each of them. Remembered autobiographical detail was cross-referenced with people who shared events with me, matched against and contrasted with the evidence of diaries, letters and art works contemporary with events. Each autobiography was also re-read in the light of the biographical conversations with friends.

## Using Diaries, Letters, Sketch Books And Research Notes

*Diaries:* Three diaries survive from my teenage years. From these it appeared that some values have remained relatively consistent through life. Those teen values conformed to memories of the pre-teenage me. With the help of my parents and sister I traced examples of values-related actions to my single-figure years. Additional to the colour-font autobiographies of 2002/3, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007, I used the diaries of 1967-69, 1974 -1975 and 1983-1984. Those from the 1960s are handwritten, un-illustrated, highly personal, emotionally 'charged' reflections on events and people. The diaries of the 1970s are paralleled by contemporaneous letters to my wife and parents. The last full diary documents travels throughout south-east Asia and was partly illustrated. Much shorter diary entries date from travels: Canada (1995 and 2000), Tanzania, (1999 and 2002) Greece and India (1999 - 2009). In these later diaries illustrations gradually replace words. Each source provided corroboration of the consistency or fragility of my values. I read these narratives mostly for the first time since they were

written and selected and transcribed entries related to the values identified from autobiographical analysis.

### Using Biographical Conversations

We learn about others through sharing biographies. The biographical/ethnographic methods most appropriate for analysing conversations were formally developed through the work of the Chicago School led by social researchers like Mead [32] and Park [33] who were described as key influences on the thinking of Bruner [34, 35]. Mead argued that individual minds, '*can only exist in relation to other minds with shared meanings,*' (32, p. 5), and that there was, '*no mind or thought without language,*' (ibid. p. 191). Park introduced the term 'ecology' into social-psychology linking each life with the social, natural, made and imagined world that surrounded it. Mead's biographical methods were incorporated by psychoanalysts like Rogers [36] and Buhler [37, 38]. The complex qualitative approach called 'grounded research' established by Glaser and Strauss [39] arose from this background and became an essential tool in analysing the biographies of my friends and my own autobiographies.

Interactions with friends is more informal than a semi-structured interview, we had conversations. These were special conversations however, in which I tried to say as little as possible, so I coined the term, *semi-structured conversations* to express their directional nature and referred to Denzin [29] for a suitable framework to guide them. Our conversations took place on car journeys, in the sitting room of my house in front of the fire, in friend's chosen rooms or in one case the deserted lounge of a quiet hotel.

I recorded 18 semi-structured conversations. Each conversation took about ninety minutes and appeared to flow easily. They were characterised by friendly assumptions, implicit knowledge, humorous and personal asides and reference to family stories 'off stage.' These enriched the quality and depth of the genre but at times need explanation. There were times when the stories became highly moving, even distressing, such as when one friend spoke of his depression. At these times it was necessary to depart from the context and sympathise, gently attempting to cradle the friend down from the pain of memory without denying or trivialising it. At other times the answers to questions seemed vague or difficult to understand, these required supplementary or exploratory questions or were returned to in subsequent conversations.

There were a few commonalities between my friends' life stories. Unexpectedly all expressed confidence that many of their core values had developed in childhood – largely between 7 and 15 years. One assigned their value for honesty to a single event remembered in fine detail from their third year of life.

Through the analysis of their stories and conversations my friends became like strangers. Previous assumptions were challenged, meanings of commonly shared words were disputed, even shared events provoked different memories. When I noticed for example, that one had not offered a very profound reason for deciding to become a teacher I wrote, 'pragmatic?' in the margin. I returned and re-read transcripts of the other conversations and found that indeed another 'born teacher' and another and another had also expressed less than idealistic reasons for joining the profession. They too offered prosaic motives - far from the idealistic aims I had assigned them. I *expected* similar non-idealistic motivations by the time my last interviewee related her story, and was not surprised when this excellent teacher related she had become one because she couldn't be an actress. In this light I re-read my autobiographical justifications for entering the profession and remembered motivations far less uplifting than those I usually gave.

There were unanticipated reawakenings of memories too. On reading one friend's exposition on compassion I suddenly remembered an embarrassed rush to the privacy of the toilet at age 15 to hide my tears after being profoundly moved by Gregory Peck's demonstration of compassion in Robert Mulligan's 1962 film of Harper Lee's *'To Kill a Mockingbird.'* Perhaps I felt being public about such sympathy was somehow unacceptable. Re-reading and re-thinking my own autobiography in the light of other's stories was highly enlightening and I believe an original contribution to auto-ethnographic research in education.

### **Using Grounded Research**

Grounded research describes a method for, '*... developing a perspective on behaviour – a stance to be taken towards data...*', [39, p.3], that arises from the data itself. The method used to interrogate both my own autobiography and the conversations with friends provided themes, categories and properties that were, '*intimately linked to the data*' (39, p.4); influenced neither by my expectations nor other research methodologies. The outcomes of my research [40] conform to grounded research theory in that they:

- closely fit the context in which they will be used;
- are understandable by anyone involved in the area of education;
- are general enough '*to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations*';
- allow any user significant control over the process so that they may fit, '*situations as they change through time*,' [39, p. 237].

*Themes:* On first reading of approved transcriptions I analysed them to identify recurring aspects. Glaser and Strauss suggested identifying themes, categories and properties. Common themes – distinguished by being 'big issues' in the minds of friends and myself- were highlighted in different colours. The themes that emerged were:

- Family (raised by all)
- Friendship (raised by all)
- Love (raised by all)
- The arts (raised by all)
- Vocation (raised by 6 friends)
- Religion (raised by 5 friends)
- Politics (raised by 4 friends)
- Suffering (raised by 4 friends).

Other values-related issues like sex and war were not represented - my questions did not take us there.

*Categories and their properties:* The themes above were raised in different contexts and I identified these contexts as 'categories' in Glaser and Strauss's terms. I noted the following 'categories' with some common properties in the margins of the transcripts the categories and properties were:

1. **Values** - which included properties like principles and the lifelong interests and educational approaches that expressed them
2. **Beliefs** – including properties like attitudes and faith
3. **Key stories** – including properties like important times of life, special places and events of childhood
4. **Key people** – including properties like influential groups mentors, family, friends , inspiring individuals

## 5. Key concepts – like happiness, creativity, affirmation, well-being/health

### Other Ethnographic Methods

A range of other approaches influenced both style and substance of enquiry (see 9 and 7). I refer to methods used by Csikszentmihalyi [28], Davies, [42], Fischman, et al, [43], Merrill and West, [18], Stige et al [44] and Catling [45]. West's psychoanalytically-inspired work led me to understand that even the most exhaustive examination of biographies and autobiography would/could not provide definitive answers to my questions. The very complexity of every human life meant that suggestions towards temporarily meaningful answers were the most I could achieve. I did not find this insight dispiriting. My research led me to suspect that personal and collegiate growth, perhaps even aspects of fulfilment, can arise from *attempts* to find answers rather than the answers themselves.

*Multiple re-examination of transcripts:* The need for repeated and critical re-reading of the manuscripts revealed many new and unpredicted characteristics. Unanticipated properties from one conversation led me to re-examine (again), previous and different conversations for missed signs of additional themes, like suffering and conflict. On rereading three or four times, deeper levels of complexity revealed themselves. Returning to earlier transcripts I noted in myself a subtly changed viewpoint and each time found myself looking for slightly different things.

It was only through repeated analysis for example that I found distinct links between personally held values and my life-long interests and educational approaches. Similar links were evident in the biographical conversations with others. Re-readings of autobiographical writings in the frame of mind engendered by particular friend's stories resulted in new properties under the headings of beliefs, values, stories, and people. The *un-principled*, *pragmatic*, or *casual* routes into education emerged and so too did the way that *values-conflict* often resulted in changes of job. One person's relating of a time she felt '*out of control*' seemed similar to an other's description of a time of '*lack of engagement*,' and in conversation between the two of them we established that both described a disconnect between their most cherished values and those dominant in the institution where they worked. Other emerging properties of concerning values included:

- The loss of values,
- The rediscovery of values,
- Multi-functional key stories capturing the source or illustration of core values,
- Psychological survival tools,
- Mutual support between friends and sometimes colleagues

*Using key stories:* Ethnography values stories. Accounts of significant life incidents, containing very specific detail, communicate meaningful aspects of our worldview. Social scientists frequently gather such personal stories to, '*epitomise some of life's main features*,' finding them *both meaningful and acceptable*', [46, p. 46]. Ellis and Bochner, use the term 'evocative narratives' to describe these personal tales most important to us, Robinson and Aronica [47] (2009) refer to them as 'epiphany stories' I have called them 'key stories'. They were characterised in the accounts of my friends by being, first person, short, descriptive of single events, fluent, well-rehearsed and easily comprehensible. Life stories can consist of a string of such anecdotes. Bruner suggests these stories are fundamental to an individual's identity and that they emerge from family ritual, unexpected event, treasured moments, influential relationships, and powerful experiences [19].

*Group discussions:* None of the properties above were initially named as significant in my conversations, so I needed to take care not to take the evidence too far. I therefore twice

brought my research subject friends together for an evening meal during which my tentative headings of categories and properties were unveiled and opened up for discussion around a table. The following week we joined in a second discussion in the workplace of one friend. The lively conversations were recorded and transcribed with additional comments on remembered body language and tone of voice. Group discussions were intended to ascertain if individuals could recognise the properties that had arisen from the analysis of their individual conversations, felt that new ones needed to be added or definitions clarified. I also wanted them to decide whether as a focus group, comprising half the interviewees, we could agree on the significance of values themselves in impacting on our education and life decisions.

*The values and attitudes of friends:* Finding a research methodology suitable to analyse reported aspects of the lives of friends presented special opportunities. As Moore reminds us, general life story research is likely to be, '*characterised by struggle, uncertainty and multiple confusions,*' (in 23, p.63). Researching aspects of the lives of friends may however, reduce the variety of such uncertainties and confusions and allow me in Moore's words to:

*'...hold on to personally valued principles, to take the most open and honest and collaborative approach possible to finding out about [...] experience, and to seek to effect positive social change as part of the process. (ibid. p.63)*

It seemed likely that the biographies of friends were as subject to constant re-evaluation and re-remembering as my own. These biographies were therefore interrogated for inconsistency as well as common themes. Since relationships with friends are characterised by familiarity, mutual and general affection, support, trust and frequent co-operation, I was able to return many times to untangle confusions.

### **Using Questionnaires**

Conversations rarely covered all the ground intended. Indeed no conversations addressed exactly the same set of themes because, in the manner of free flowing dialogue, they followed wandering courses, despite my planned questions. This was a limitation of my interviewing technique perhaps inevitable when talking with friends. I forgot on occasions, to ask for specific stories or examples of general points made. I sometimes omitted to probe influential details of schooling or family life. Realising this I decided to issue a short questionnaire, based upon one devised by Catling, [45]. Responses would provide a degree of common ground and a comparable base for later interpretations.

The recipients were given a month to respond and answers were to be interrogated for evidence of specific values, key stories, people, places and times. I hoped that, consistent with my own experience, different things might be highlighted in this contrasting format and wondered if being asked similar questions on a different day might provoke different answers.

I followed this by issuing a second questionnaire, specifically on values three years later. It consisted of a table of values compiled by Gardner and student associates and part of the 'Good Work' project in 2004 [43]. Friends were asked to choose the ten most significant values to them from a list and place them in order. They were also given opportunity to state values missing from those offered.

### **Using Musical and Geographical Metaphors**

Teaching music and music has been of lifetime importance to me. Music is a love common to all the friends represented in this research. Music can itself be seen as a metaphor, it can

wordlessly stand for a feeling, often even creating or recreating approximations joy or sadness, awe, loneliness or fear. Some pieces of music, like Messiaen's *Dieu parmi nous*, and Bach's *Concerto for two violins*, have had a lifelong influence upon me. In my thesis I occasionally called upon musical ideas and elements to express thoughts and feelings too deep for words.

My diaries in particular dwell in detail upon certain landscapes, especially in Kenya India and Indonesia where humans have worked in harmony with nature for millennia. I see these landscapes as metaphors of human life. My relationship with other places, churches, castles, museums, art galleries, Victorian streets and medieval town centres, has also been significant. Such places are named as metaphors of culture, belonging, stability, continuity or security.

### **Using Art Works By Myself**

Not everything felt and thought can put into words. Human experience across all cultures is captured through image, movement and abstract sound, perhaps even in smell, taste and touch [48]. My belief in the parity of the worded and the wordless ways of expressing experience was corroborated by many conversations held during my research. Honouring the wordless aspects of existence is an enduring principle in my teaching and a core theme of my thesis. I therefore chose to represent my story partly through my paintings, drawings and etchings, placed chronologically throughout the thesis (see Figures 3 – 7). This archive of over forty years' work addresses some of the 'silences' in my diaries.

The art works cover the period from 1967 to 2011. They represent geographical aspects of a life story but also many lifelong themes and values. My pictures are open to a variety of literal and metaphorical interpretations, just as my words are. At times the experiences, feelings and realities expressed in painting and drawing may convey my story more precisely than words.

I deliberately avoided explanation or interpretation of my artworks. If art is a means of communication then it should speak for itself. The titles on each image simply recorded the date, place and medium. In bringing these images together however I noted themes that overlapped with the written themes and stories of my autobiography. Specifically:

- Places
- Buildings
- People
- Sounds
- Colours
- The exotic
- The Spiritual

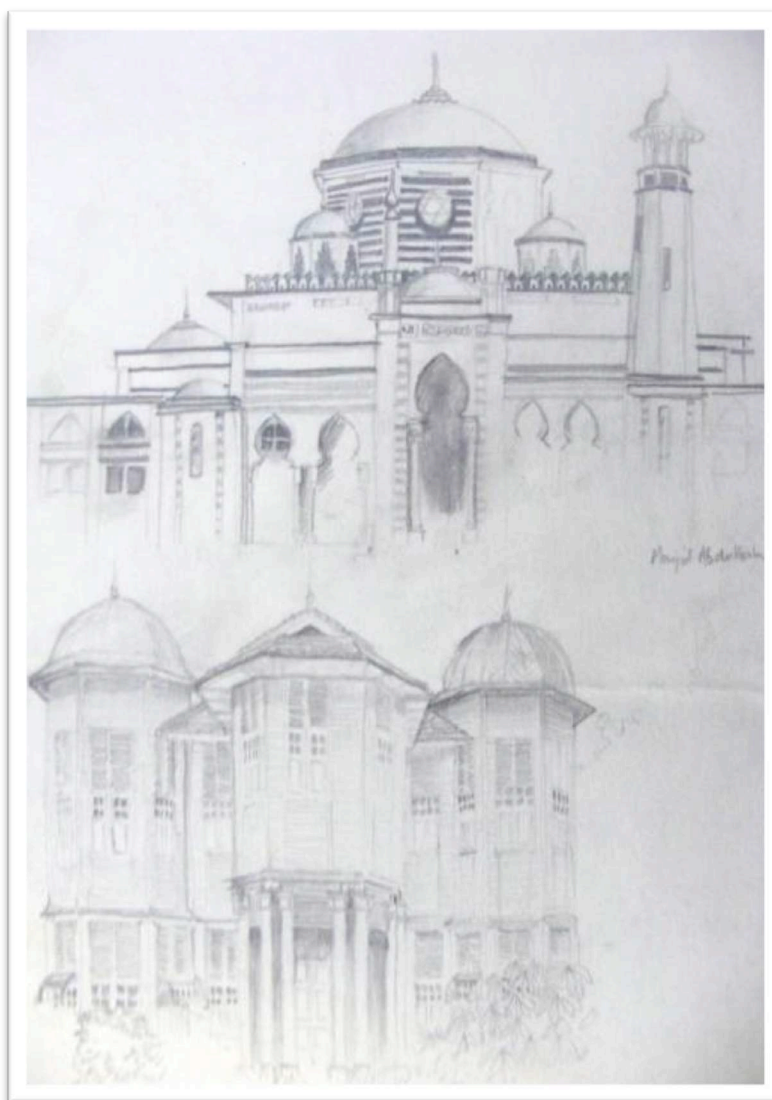


Figure 3: Drawings made in Malaysia, 1983.

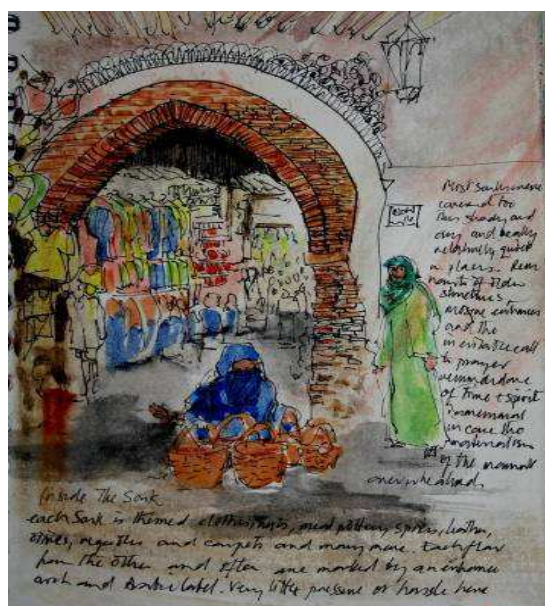




Figure 4; Diary page from Morocco, 1996

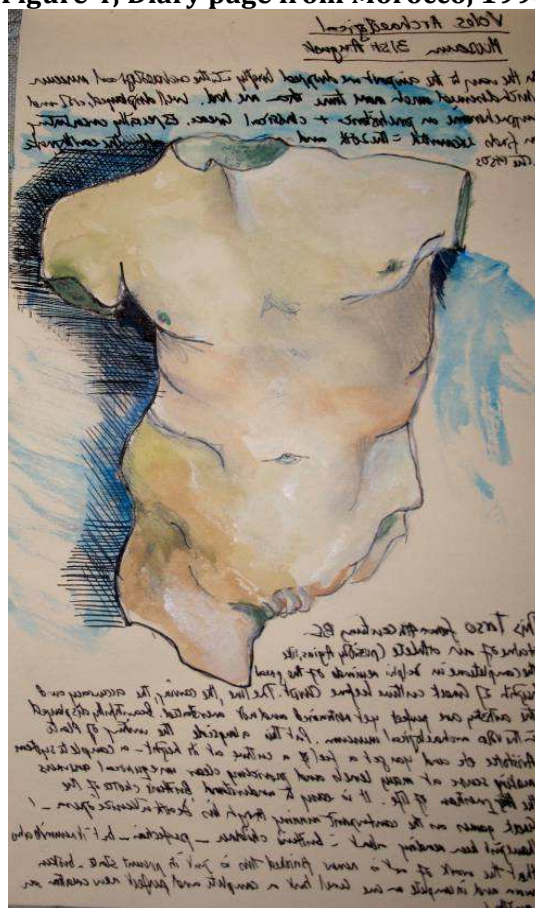


Figure 5: Diary page from Greece, 1997



Figure 6: Diary page from India; 2003



**Figure 7: Etching Canterbury Cathedral interior, 2007**

### **Analysing Personally Influential Writings**

Until themes and categories arose from interviews and autobiographies I avoided consulting academic literature on auto/biographical research, values and memory. My literature review therefore took on the autobiographical nature of the whole thesis. It dwelt on books that had most powerfully influenced my values and attitudes. Books from my childhood, my teens and my early adulthood were re-located and re-read. Those from my later life as an teacher educator were re-assessed seeking sources of my pressing and current concerns in education. These books required systematic and critical analysis in my search for an honest appraisal of my values and actions. Reappriasing the work of others became part of my quest for intellectual and emotional honesty and was reviewed under headings arranged in overlapping pairs that emerged from comparison with my autobiographies:

- Hope and faith
- Family and love

- Friendship and kindness
- Equality and inclusion
- Creativity and wordlessness
- Culture and Communication
- Happiness/Joy

Classifying academic literature under headings arising from my research confirmed its grounded nature and added to the journey of discovery generated by many authors. Confining a literature review to personally influential books was also a pragmatic decision. Each theme is already subject to extensive academic endeavour well beyond the scope of this thesis, but I wished to illustrate the eclectic and inter-disciplinary nature of my influences. Therefore I restricted the review to a critical outline of the pedagogical, psychological, sociological, philosophical and neuroscientific arguments that have influenced my beliefs. The wisdom of others, of friends and personal reflections ensured the creative element of chance that matched my observations on the unpredictable nature of character and values-formation.

### Other Research Devices Used

In seeking validity I also adopted a number of unusual research devices. Three are in keeping with my interest in wordless ways of knowing:

- The concept of the 'red thread' of values
- The use of sonata-form analysis
- The use of pictorial metaphors

*The red thread:* In a number of cultures the image of a single, apparently stray thread that appears and disappears throughout a woven fabric has been used as a metaphor. Richhart uses this weaving metaphor to represent the ways in which core values constantly and sometimes unpredictably surface throughout the life of an individual [49]. In my research I referred to this metaphor a number of times to highlight the resilience of particular values in the lives of friends.

*Sonata-form analysis:* In building my thesis on verbal self-portraits I was In Jessica Davis' terms, '*...constructing and communicating [my] understanding [of myself and others] for the reconstruction and reinterpretation of the reader.*' (42, p. 261). To give the research structure and rigour and make it, '*...more than a compilation of random reflections, personal views and interactions with sites.*' (*Ibid.*, p. 263), I adopted an analytical structure that follows what musicians know as Sonata-form:

Sonata-form in music represents a major achievement of western civilisation. Using the invention of tonality, eight note scales in different keys and major and minor modes, a composer may construct, sustain and develop a complex argument using sound only. In a classic sonata a musical statement – (a tune, musical pattern or series of harmonies) in one key, is elaborated and extended – this is called the *First subject*. This leads on to the introduction of a *Second or Counter subject* that deliberately challenges the first subject and sets up a musical argument between them. This musical confrontation is called the *Development* section and may involve frequent key (mood) changes, apparent departure from the central ideas, growing tension, discord, even confusion, but eventually the composer, unites the two themes in a *Recapitulation* and resolves the sonic argument with a concluding *Coda*. Composers like Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven achieve this musical battle skilfully, combining surprise, profundity, ingenuity with balance. They translate a worded concept like a disagreement, into pure sound, accessible and comprehensible across time and culture. The resolutions such composers invent can leave audiences and individuals inspired and illuminated - yet not a word has been spoken.

I applied this musical structure to my analysis substituting worded claims, counterclaims, arguments, collisions and resolutions for musical ones. The first subject conformed to the given interpretation of the sources of a particular value. The counter subject was an invented alternative explanation. As in a musical sonata the two themes were designed to collide. The ensuing argument was long and involved as in the development section of a musical sonata, but these worded disagreements were not always resolved. I had to accept this risk as part of the rigour of honest research. The imperative of a countersubject forced me to seek other possibilities and problematise remembered experience or the reported experience of others. The search for resolution or a transformed recapitulation sometimes challenged existing beliefs to the point where former beliefs had to be abandoned.

Using sonata-form for analysis has advantages and disadvantages. The choice arose from my desire to emphasise a wordless structure to frame worded arguments. Sonata-form offered a repeatable formula with which to state, cross-examine and summarise important themes and arrive at a balance. The multiple justifications of narrative, however, cannot always be squeezed into a contrived pattern and often I had to depart from full expression of the form. But the framework of statement, counter statement, argument, synthesis and summary provided a helpful research tool.

*Pictorial metaphors* Reproductions of paintings made by established artists were used as visual metaphors. These artworks, distinct in accomplishment and purpose from the paintings, drawings and etchings of my own, provided a silent counterpoint to my writing. The paintings became metaphors in that they succinctly made key statements about analysis. Rembrandt's self portraits, like my diaries represented truth at the time of their construction, never intended as a linked narrative of a life. Kneller's remarkably similar portraits of friends in the Kit Kat club, (1720) (see figures 8 – 13) demonstrated the dangers in attempting honestly to represent friends – they easily become variations on oneself.

**Figures 8 – 13 Portraits of members of the Kit Kat Club by Godfrey Kneller.**



*Fig. 8, Samuel Garth*

© The National Portrait  
Gallery, London

*Fig. 9, Joseph Addison*

© The National Portrait  
Gallery, London.

*Fig.10, Joseph Temple*

© The National Portrait  
Gallery, London.



Fig 11, John Vanbrugh © The National Portrait Gallery, London. Fig. 12, William Congreve © The National Portrait Gallery, London. Fig. 13, Charles Fitzroy © The National Portrait Gallery, London.

A photo-montage of Hockney's mother expressed the inevitably fragmentary nature of the biography of even the closest to us. Two images (before and after X-ray imaging) of the same painting by Rembrandt show how research can reveal deeper more interesting truths than an anodyne surface might suggest. An illustration of a medieval religious triptych was used to represent the importance of coherent and openly expressed values in building virtuous communities.

### Arriving at an Approach to Staff Development

Analysis of ten life stories and the values contained within them resulted in three commonalities. We each felt at our happiest when our personal values matched those of the institution within which we worked. We each depended upon the support and nurture of friends and family and we all continually sought opportunities to develop the areas where we felt most able to be creative. These were the common sources of the resilience that carried us through a life in education. Critical analysis of autobiography and biographical conversations generated original theory applicable to personal and professional development in schools. My theory about what sustains a life in education is expressed in 3 hypotheses:

1. If staff development consisted of active opportunities to express, develop and share values, schools would quickly become more positive places for children and teachers. Values literacy would result in a shared *direction* for resilient behaviour.
2. If staff development provided plentiful opportunities for teachers to find and develop their own areas of creativity this would enhance their personal sense of well-being. Awareness of their unique creative strengths would provide teachers with the personal *motivation* for resilience.
3. The enhanced well-being resulting from sharing values and discovering creativity can promote deepened relationships amongst friends and colleagues. Positive relationships provide vital *support* to sustain us through times of change, challenge and criticism.

My emerging findings were held alongside the values underpinning current education policy and practice and found to be incongruent. I was motivated to address the dissonance by applying my findings to staff development and made this action part of my research. Values are central to all progress. Analysis and experience led me repeatedly to the conclusion that the *values discussion* itself was a worthwhile activity. Friends commented that the semi-structured conversations centring on values left them feeling positive, honoured and empowered. These

observations generated my first hypothesis. My second proposition arose from evaluations and experience of 40 staff development courses conducted by myself between 2002 and 2012 and designed to support colleagues discover or develop their creative strengths. Identified areas of creativity were distinctly not confined to the arts, but included relationships, problem-solving, building, organising, rethinking and possibility-thinking (Craft, 2005). My third proposal results from combining my understanding of the literature on well-being and observing the social and personal impact on staff working with each other on creative projects – they often became more friends than colleagues.

Humans have the capacity to develop at every stage of life. My experience in taking my research findings to schools, colleges and universities suggest that the values discussion, finding and exercising personal creativity and deepening friendships changed the nature of the settings in which teachers worked. Colleagues in forty institutions consistently spoke of 'renewed energy', remembering 'what they entered teaching for', *new ideas*, *new collaborations*, *new friends*, a sense of *solidarity*, relief at the reaffirmation of *core values*, *surprise* at hearing words like *love*, *truth*, *beauty* and *joy* and of being *moved* by the opportunity to 'talk about *what really, really matters*.' In times of continual and values-challenging change, the caring professions need to embrace and re-establish the language of caring values. It is only through such personal and emotional responses – often wordless; often felt - that sustainable, morally defensible development can be built.

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