

Learning Through Values

Practitioner Perspective

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Building values literacy through real world connections

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During 2013 I was involved in a pioneering project that reframed the way I understood Literacy. The project, Leading Through Values, was a pilot for an emerging pedagogy that has since become Learning Through Values (LTV) and is supported by a growing body of work. The pilot project involved Lifeworlds practitioners (including myself) working as action researchers alongside school leaders, teachers and learners, to build bridges between classrooms and communities that had not been there before and to consider issues that we defined as Bigger Than Self, all whilst boosting literacy learning.

I am always seeking ways to create innovative, relevant learning sessions that embed literacy skills for life through rich stimuli. Previously this has involved supporting children to 'Build-a-Book' with a real author, or engaging them with picture books and stories from around the world that challenge their stereotypes. I was determined to bring this element of our Lifeworlds work into the pilot project and explore the potential of a values-led approach to whole school improvement and change. Literacy, in its broadest sense, was considered a central driver to this, as it is essential to an understanding of values and issues, and core to the improvement of any school community.

Defining Values

Values, like many abstract nouns, are slippery concepts to define, let alone understand. This in itself provides a great opportunity for adults and children alike to brush up their language skills discussing together what they understand by 'peace', 'being healthy' or 'protecting the environment'. Some would call this literacy, others philosophy! Using examples to pin down these values, and identifying people's values from their actions, built children's ability to reason and argue competently, as well as their inference skills. Teachers involved in the project commented on progress in learners' speaking and listening skills during dialogic sessions, and then afterwards on their progress in writing based on the discussions.

We found that language was crucial to our understanding of values, and developed the concept of Values Literacy: understanding values and developing a shared values language to be able to communicate more effectively about, and with, values.

Teachers reflected that understanding the world, and coping with it, was a meaningful and critical kind of literacy, but was often not given time within the school. We trialled a variety of learning sessions to bring values and Bigger Than Self issues into normal learning time (including literacy time-slots) using team-teaching, practitioner-led workshops and supporting teachers to plan and deliver sessions. There were literacy objectives and outcomes, whether speaking and listening,

reading or writing, as well as values outcomes. It was the values focus that often engaged learners in the literacy; they wanted to speak, listen, read and write as they felt that the topics under consideration were important, as were their views.

So what Bigger Than Self Issues did we learn about?

The list below shares just a few of the issues and learning methods that were used within the pilot project and resulted in highly engaged learners. The literacy potential in each example is easy to identify:

- consultation - children worked in groups thinking about issues and problems in the world that concerned them and recorded their thoughts;
- using picture books as a whole class to introduce and discuss complex issues such as human rights, conflict and social justice;
- Philosophy for Children (P4C) enquiries on issues including security, resilience, bullying and prejudice, where the community of enquiry vote on a question to discuss and probe in more depth;
- formal debate on wind turbines and the protest movement in Egypt, where groups took on opposing roles, with a debrief afterwards to analyse their learning;
- writing activities arguing for or against the HS2 railway development;
- values starters where the abstract noun and its meaning is reviewed and discussed using examples;
- drama enacting evacuees' experiences and comparing their values as they might have been with children's own, through discussion and writing.

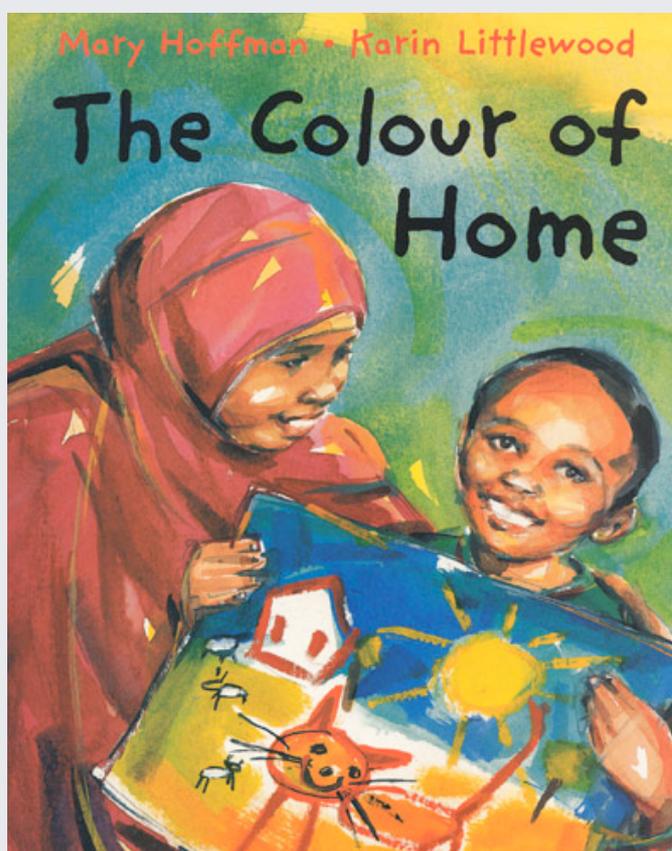
A Case Study: P4C and Picture Books

Year 6 learners read *The Colour of Home* with their teacher as a stimulus to forming questions. After sharing each others questions they then voted on:

"If you had to leave behind everything you'd ever had, and everything you'd ever known, how would you feel?"

The discussion that emerged probed into ideas of safety, fear, trauma and how to cope with challenging experiences.

Some of their first and last thoughts follow, and it is possible to see how the topic and dialogic approach allowed them to articulate their views, their values, and their responses to the text:



First thoughts

- scared.
- heartbroken.
- angry at the killing.
- he used his feelings in the painting.
- you would have coped better when you could make yourself understood.

Last thoughts

- I just don't think anyone should have to go through that.
- I think another way to cope is don't think of the past, think of the future.
- He should just let his feelings out.
- I think all death is natural but death from old age, just passing on, is different to killing and murdering - the pain is different.

Values identified:

- being healthy and safe
- resilience
- friendship
- family safety

Community learning

The pilot project enabled learners and teachers to connect their classroom learning with Bigger Than Self issues at a global scale, but importantly to also explore these issues (and associated values) at the local community scale. When community stakeholders were asked what they thought was important for their children, and what concerned them, many identified the wider world and their children's understanding of and ability to tackle global issues as a key priority.

Moreover the issues and concerns identified by community members were remarkably similar to those of teachers and learners; community members spoke of engaging in the topics firsthand as children brought the learning and discussions home throughout the project. Some teachers reported that children engaged in more talk at home as a result of the learning. They also reported higher levels of engagement in TV and radio news, where it touched on the issues that they were studying, or values that they thought were important, such as peace, kindness or being healthy and safe.

Fostering literate communities

We have found that Learning Through Values using Bigger Than Self issues as stimuli engages learners; inspires teachers to support learning; and connects the hopes and challenges of the surrounding community more directly into the classroom. More than this, it began a dialogue between these three groups, and allowed them all to look outward to places beyond the school community, such as Egypt, Somalia, or even the next town, in order to learn more about others and themselves. Outcomes included increased engagement in reading and writing around the issues, increased confidence in forming responses and opinions, and some impacts on the emotional aspects of learning also.

The dialogic methods and critical pedagogies involved allowed teachers and learners to learn together about issues they really cared about (as did the community), and supported learners to express their ideas and responses. Literacy skills were central to this, enabling learners to participate and express their opinions as is their right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Teachers expressed that giving learners opportunities to talk about war, peace, justice, government, environment and community, through appropriate means allowed them to demonstrate their abilities and to progress more rapidly against conventional measures. The experience made me believe that using literacy skills and techniques to develop values literacy within schools can help us to build communities together around what we think is important locally and globally.

To read more about the Pilot Project visit the project pages of the Learning Through Values website at www.learningthroughvalues.org where you can also find out about current initiatives, other useful resources and professional development opportunities for your own teaching and learning.

Rosie Wilson is a Practitioner at Lifeworlds Learning as well as one of its Co-Directors. She also works part time as a primary teacher in Staffordshire and was formerly a Secondary English teacher in Birmingham. Rosie takes a lead on the development of literacy support from Lifeworlds and is particularly interested in developing broader understandings of literacy to empower young people to critically navigate their world.

Note: This Practitioner Perspective is based upon a piece initially requested and published by the National Literacy Trust (NLT) Literacy Professionals Network in March 2014.