Newcastle University e-prints

Date deposited: 29th April 2010

Version of file: Author final

Peer Review Status: Peer reviewed

Citation for published item:

Todd L. A response to Billington: Liz Todd. *Psychology of Education Review* 2009,**33** 2 21-23.

Further information on publisher website:

http://www.bps.org.uk/

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Experience and Relationship are not Enough: A Response to Billington. Dr Liz Todd

Early research into the engagement of educational psychologists in seeking children's views and understandings, as part of their usual role in schools, suggested that, for children, not knowing what to say is not quite the same thing as having nothing to say:

> *'they asked me but I didn't say owt because I didn't know what to say'*
> (Armstrong, 1995, p90)

This young person's response raises questions in my mind about the messages that schools and external professionals, such as psychologists, give to children about who is allowed to speak and what is permitted to be said. And this leads me to inquire about the practices and assumptions that underpin the ways children, families and professionals interact in schools and services.

The psychological models and ideas drawn upon by psychologists working with children help produce, unwittingly, narrow conclusions about the identities of children, the nature of problems and ways to approach them. Tom Billington articulates clearly the deficit thinking underlying much work with children. Structuralist ideas of identity team up with Tom's technocratic notions of responsibilities and normalising understandings of psychology to produce practice based on assessment, objectivity and expertise rather than relationship. Tom Billington's conclusion, which I applaud, is that psychologists should see their role in terms of entering into a relationship with a child via for example different uses questions, in such a way that children's experiential knowledge, experience of living, can become more known and more available.

However, there is a danger in calling for a 're-configuration of theoretical and professional resources upon which professional practice is based' so that they are 'located in human relationships and experience'. Many psychologists are likely to agree to this call, but progress is unlikely unless thinking about *role as relationship* takes place in the context of a *re-theorising of psychology* and a consequent re-conceptualisation of role.

The focus on relationship can lead to more attention, on the part of practitioners, on their professional development in order to advance interpersonal skills and increase the range of interactional 'tools', in the belief that this is likely to encourage children to tell of experience. However, the exercise of smarter ways of talking do not obviate the exclusion of children's knowledges. The trappings of professional practice and

discourses of, for example, normality in schools can unintentionally privilege certain knowledges, and render irrelevant or disqualify others, and decide who is qualified to speak and under what circumstances. Children's views are narrated embodied, and enacted in the current political context – wrapped in a kind of discursive cellaphane (McClelland & Fine, 2008). It maybe difficult for children to speak, weighed down by dominant assumptions and panics, and our ears may be clogged with own dominant discourses. The focus on relationship therefore risks co-opting pupils into professional viewpoints.

The focus on 'experience' in work with children therefore makes possible the further oppression of children warned about by Tom Billington unless a critical psychology (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996, Daniels, 1993, Sloan, 2000) drives practice. Although Tom refers to this criticality in various ways throughout his paper, he does not make this a condition of his suggested way of conceptualising work with children. There is a need for practice that fully takes on board the crucial role of the context (of culture and society) in shaping thought, identity, and action, and, within this, the role of modern power in inciting us all to engage in surveillance (self and other) to bring our actions into harmony with assumed norms. At the very least, combining post-structuralism with socio-cultural ideas. And certainly an alternative to the current 'sweet-box' approach of educational psychology to psychological tools and theories that seems to assume none should be ruled out

Whilst there is a need to focus practice on knowledge and experience, and on different ways to think about the relationship between them with respect to working with children, there are problems in how we think about each that do not seem to be recognised by Tom Billington. Tom seems to suggest, I am sure unwittingly, we understand pupil voicings in terms of the "socially and unitary child" (Arnot and Reay, 2007, p317), when I would claim that we need to recognise that all voicing bring forward knowledges about social identities in the classroom (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Moore and Muller (Moore & Muller, 1999) go further than this and critique voice discourse as the reduction of knowledge to the single plane of experience. There is a need therefore for more sophisticated understandings about both knowledge and experience.

There is a hint of passivity about Tom Billingtons's ideas, which I would suspect are unintended. He says we may need to enter into a different relationship, engaging with a different kind of 'knowing' that comes from the 'quality of our questions', not one that comes from having answers. However, he does not say what this knowing is *for*. We hear that the concern for the psychologist with respect for Michael would be his needs, both care and education. However, the discourse of 'needs' calls for dependency, being defined and sorted out by expert others. A 'need' is hard to challenge. However, the purpose of entering into relationship with a child, for me as a psychologist, is to facilitating the expression of aspects of lived experience that have previously been neglected, and to re-story or deconstruct dominant accounts and the truths associated with these accounts.

It is this that defines the narrative practices that Tom Billington refers to. However, these practices have not arisen, as Tom suggests, from autobiography. The latter suggests a passive retelling. Narrative is active and purposeful and assumes the actions of an influential decentred practitioner. This approach encourages children (and adults) to recruit their lived experience, to stretch their minds, to exercise their imagination, and to employ their meaning-making resources. Children:

> *'become curious about, and fascinated with, previously neglected aspects of their lives and relationships, and as these conversations proceed, these alternative storylines thicken, become more significantly rooted in history, and provide children with a foundation for new initiatives in addressing the problems, predicaments, and dilemmas of their lives'. (White, 2007, p62).*

Finally, there is a need for caution in celebrating progress in recent initiatives where these are more likely to be embodiments of normalising discourse masquerading as advancement. There have indeed, as Tom Billington has pointed out, been positive developments both in qualitative research approaches that recognise the complexity of social situations. There have also been changes in the delivery of schools and children's services that result in more than lip-service being paid to individualised narratives of experience. However, there is even here a danger of seeing progress where danger loiters. For example, in qualitative research there is a danger in assumptions about the likely child-friendly nature of certain approaches and in the (already referred to) lack of attention to the constructed nature of the interpersonal communication and therefore of personal knowledge. In the arena of Children's Services and schools, in a climate of so many initiatives and so much change, there is a danger that 'progress' is assumed. The main hazard is that actions to achieve one objective might compromise others in unexpected ways. I talk (Todd, 2007) of the concentration in Children's Services on 'quick and easy referral' as being a 'systemic medical model' and so more likely to encourage professional models of working that construct children as problems than ones that find spaces for children's knowledges of living.

Tom Billington articulates with useful creativity what I view as the key contribution that educational psychologists make to children's services. The call for renewed interest in relationships and, through this, giving agency to children's knowledges is to be welcomed. However, a far greater criticality is needed to reconceptualise both psychology and the role of the educational psychologist otherwise, in attempts to seek knowledges, there is a risk of further disempowerment of children and young people.

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