

## Navigating Moments of Tension in a Waldorf Classroom

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**ABSTRACT.** How do we conceive of and encounter ‘moments of tension’ in our daily teaching practice? Using qualitative research methodologies, namely observation and interviewing, in a single classroom over a two-week period, the following paper explores the tensions that arise in the classroom context. Initially conceived of as the dissonance between the teacher’s lesson plan and the unpredictable reality of the classroom, the concept of ‘moments of tension’ changed to become more contextually-based, acknowledging the roles of both the teacher and students as responsible for its appearance, as well as its resolution. Using ‘possibility thinking’ and the imagination, ‘moments of tension’ can be re-imagined and used as a didactic tool to bring about learning and transformation. With a re-evaluation of these ‘moments of tension’, the question remains how we might further develop teacher education, to build the capacities of teachers to successfully encounter such moments, using them as tools for learning.

*Keywords:* Moments of tension, imagination, possibility thinking, classroom culture, classroom leadership

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG.** Wie begegnen wir „Spannungsmomenten“ in unserer täglichen Unterrichtsroutine? Die folgende Arbeit untersucht mit den qualitativen Forschungsmethoden Beobachtung und Interview über einen Zeitraum von zwei Wochen Spannungsmomente, die im Klassenzimmer entstehen. Das Konzept „Spannungsmomente“ wurde zunächst als Dissonanz zwischen dem Unterrichtsplan des Lehrers und der unberechenbaren Realität im Klassenzimmer wahrgenommen, änderte sich dann aber in eine kontextbasierte Betrachtungsweise, die sowohl die Rolle des Lehrers, als auch auf die der Schüler als verantwortlich für das Entstehen und die Auflösung von Anspannung zugrundelegt. Mit Vorstellungskraft und „Möglichkeitsdenken“ können die „Spannungsmomente“ neu verstanden und als didaktisches Werkzeug genutzt werden, um Lernen und Transformation zu bewirken. Mit einer Neubewertung dieser „Spannungsmomente“ bleibt die Frage bestehen, wie wir die Lehrerausbildung weiter entwickeln können, um die Fähigkeit von Lehrern zu stärken, solche Momente erfolgreich als Lernwerkzeuge einzusetzen.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Spannungsmomente, Vorstellungskraft, Möglichkeitsdenken, Kultur des Klassenzimmers, Führung im Klassenzimmer

### Introductory Note

Almost the entire first chapter of this research report was written *before* any of the actual in-the-field data collection had begun. This approach was chosen in order to enable the researcher to fully experience the complexities of constructing a research question and conceiving of an appropriate research design with the critical yet inquiring openness of a ‘beginner’s mind’. While we lacked the benefits of ‘writing in hindsight’, this process of real-time research planning and design, data collection and subsequent analysis reflects the complexities of conducting and producing a report based on qualitative research.

The report has been divided into three parts to reflect this process. Part One details the planning phase of constructing the research question and research design; Part Two is a review of the actual research process and a summary of the data collected while in the field, presented with as little of my own interpretation as possible; and Part Three offers an analysis of the data as well as reflections on the research and writing process.

Good qualitative research will not merely try and confirm the already established assumptions of the researcher, but will offer up new challenges and questions that may pave the way for future research and possibilities for new insights. This report is therefore representative of this ‘real world’ scenario – where the theoretical ideas, held assumptions, values and expectations of the qualitative researcher are challenged in the field.

## Part One: Research question and methods

*The teacher enters the classroom with a plan and a prayer. Her aims and objectives are stated neatly at the top of her lesson plan; how she will achieve these goals is detailed below. The children, each one with their own set of latent expectations, await their teacher’s initiative. The lesson has begun.*

Having recently embarked on a journey teaching adolescents, daily lessons have been punctuated with what I have started to call ‘moments of tension’: attempts to engage that meet blank stares; a room of restless students ready to mutiny; a-totally-off-topic inspiration breathing on us; an unanticipated question or remark inviting unpacking... or simply when it seems like our ship is way ‘off course’ and I find myself asking: *what next?*

Ruddock (1980) acknowledges a variety of factors underpinning such moments. The various roles a teacher is required to perform may be in conflict; a deeper exploration of *the relevance* of the content to be taught may detract from the lesson content actually being taught; individuals within the class may have needs that are in conflict with the majority of the group. Each situation requires that the teacher choose one course of action, at the expense of other possibilities. For Ruddock, this existential position creates tension.

My own daily reflections of such ‘moments of tension’ hinted that they announced, and at times even concealed, ‘a wide territory of unvisited possibilities’ (Ruddock, 1980, p. 41). I believe that these ‘moments’ are doorways through which ‘real learning’ can happen; that they are invitations into the unknown, holding potential for students and teacher to participate in co-creating a sense of what is meaningful and important, in that moment. Each day as I reflected upon lessons and moments such as these, I asked myself ‘How?’ How can such ‘moments of tension’ be unwrapped, unpacked and encountered as a gift of shared discovery by both teachers and students? I had a hunch that the answer to this question lay in the possibility-rich scope of the ‘Imagination’. In this contemplative mood the question for this research paper emerged:

*‘How does the teacher navigate ‘moments of tension’ in ways that enable or hinder learning?’*

As I had experienced it, this ‘tension’ was an internal feeling, and at times also existed in the relational dynamic between teacher and student. Practically, I questioned whether it would be possible, in the role of outside observer and researcher, to access these moments as well as understand their unfolding in the realities of students and teacher. Ruddock’s conceptualisation of such ‘moments’ seemed all-inclusive, portraying every possible decision taken by the teacher as one inviting an existential position of anxiety and guilt (Ruddock, 1980, p. 48).

These complexities, along with the brief timeframe allocated for in-classroom research (two weeks) led me to sharpen my definition of ‘moments of tension’ into what I believed to be an observable phenomenon. For the purposes of this research paper, ‘moments of tension’ will be defined as *the dissonance between what the teacher has planned for her lesson, how she imagines her lesson will unfold, and the moments where those plans and imaginings are thwarted and challenged by the unpredictable reality of the classroom context.*

The word ‘navigate’ covers a range of teacher responses that lie on a spectrum between passivity and activity. *Navigation* can be understood as simply ‘moving through’ a situation; or the ‘navigator’ can be more active in ‘finding a way’ perhaps by ‘directing’ the course of events. Given the multiplicity of roles a teacher

might fulfil (a learning mediator, care-giver, leader, administrator, researcher, to name just a few) the 'how' she 'navigates' a classroom situation would depend upon the role she has prioritised for herself as a teacher.

It is widely acknowledged that people learn differently and that 'learning' takes place over a lifetime. Seeds for learning may be planted in the classroom and may only bear fruit days or years later, often in contexts outside of the classroom. Given the short-term context of this research project, whether 'learning' has been enabled or hindered will be understood as the degree to which the 'moment of tension' has been navigated in a way that allows for 'the construction of something new' (Gajdamaschko, 2005, p. 16). Learning, or its frustration, occurs for the students *and* teacher, and it is my hope to examine the potential that these 'moments or tension' hold for both.

### *'Imagination'*

Kieren Egan defines imagination as 'the ability to think of things as possible' (van Alphen, 2011, p. 17). For Rudolf Steiner, it is what emerges 'from perception by means of the senses' giving rise to what he terms 'living pictures' (van Alphen, 2011, p. 17). For both, the essential quality of imagination is that of *flexibility* - the 'pictures in the mind' or 'thoughts' are liberated from the here-and-now of the sense world. In the first definition the imagination is that which creates a bridge between 'what is' and 'what could be'; and in the second it is the faculty that allows our concepts of reality to remain flexible, able to be transformed by new experiences as we grow. Both conceptions have informed my thinking around the usefulness of imagination as a tool to navigate moments of tension in the classroom.

In his famous public talks on creativity for children and adults alike, Sir Ken Robinson states that 'creativity is as important in education as literacy' (2006). For Robinson, in our 'fast-paced world of economic and technological change' (Nielsen et al., 2010, p. 9) there is 'an urgent need' (Nielsen et al., 2010, p. 9) for people who are creative – people who will not merely do and think as they have been told or as generations have done before. People who are able to embrace 'other ways of knowing' (Nielsen et al., 2010, p. 8) are better equipped to offer a 'positive and valuable contribution towards a more sustainable future' (Nielsen et al., 2010, p. 8). Scharmer believes that it is the imagination that facilitates the ability to 'connect with our best future possibility and to realise it' (Nielsen et al., 2010, p. 10) and thus is the key to both personal growth and organisational change. While these ideas are beyond the scope of this paper, comprising on their own an entire field of research called 'Imaginative Education' (Nielsen et al., 2010), they have reaffirmed the importance of imagination (not only in education) in my own life as a teacher, as well as in any endeavour that aspires to transformation and growth.

In Piaget's framework, conceptual thought is said to develop throughout maturation, gradually replacing imaginative thought in adulthood. Gajdamaschko critiques this notion, which places imagination and conceptual thought on opposite ends of the spectrum of cognitive development. She argues that these studies understand 'creativity' in terms of 'distance from reality' and are therefore unable to show teachers how they 'can have a real impact on the development of children's imagination' (Gajdamaschko, 2005, p. 16). She presents Vygotsky's theoretical position as more useful: imagination and thinking processes may appear to be opposites, yet in their development and practice they are inseparable. Vygotsky said that language enables the child to represent and think about an object that is not present to the senses, and that it is the imaginative faculty that facilitates this ability. Hence the faculties of speech, imagination, and thinking develop together and are the tools with which the child will make sense of the world and his experiences (Gajdamaschko, 2005, p. 17). Seen in this light, the imagination is indeed a tool that can be used to connect, integrate and deepen classroom moments as well as cognitive development.

The subtle yet profound potential for its use in the classroom can be illustrated by the following anecdote observed from my first week in the classroom: *At the Waldorf school that is my research site, in the absence of a school uniform, the dress-code prohibits garments containing visible writing or brand names. It was Valentine's Day and a boy was wearing a T-shirt with the iconic 'I love NY' logo. In place of the heart, however, was an apple. During the regular morning 'clothes check' and turning inside-out of T-shirts that did not abide by this rule, the teacher came to the boy, reading his shirt aloud: 'I love NY'. "It's an apple!" he defensively insisted, to which the*

teacher replied, thoughtfully, “Yes, and the shape of an apple is very much like the shape of a heart. Have you noticed this?” For a brief moment there was absolute silence in the classroom, a kind of awed silence. New light had been shed on ‘the apple’.

Importantly, both Egan and Steiner maintain that in order for students to be motivated to learn ‘they need to *connect* with the subject material’ (van Alphen, 2011, p. 16). Referred to as a ‘heightened form of cognition’ (van Alphen, 2011, p. 16) the imagination draws together the emotions and the intellectual faculty, allowing a fuller connection to learning. From this it could be understood that often when students are disruptive or unresponsive it is because they have not properly connected to the lesson material or manner of presentation.

Egan’s educational theory is informed by the nineteenth-century theory of recapitulation proposing that the way children learn to think mirrors the development of human civilisation, as well as Vygotsky’s idea of ‘culturally mediated tools’, which suggests that children gradually internalise the social and cultural ‘tools’ in their cultural environment such as language (van Alphen, 2011, p. 17). As they increase in their sophistication, Egan suggests that these cultural tools become ‘cognitive tools’, in that each new ‘tool’ enables a new, and more complex understanding (van Alphen, 2011, p. 18). These ‘cognitive tools’ include stories, metaphor, mental imagery, humour, puzzles and a sense of mystery (van Alphen, 2011, p. 19). According to Egan this development happens through the use of language, reflecting human development from an oral culture to literacy, into a more abstract form that develops into the capacity for reflexive language use (van Alphen, 2011, p. 18). I found this thinking useful because it offers a more nuanced, expanded idea about what imagination is and how it may be used. Egan’s ‘cognitive tools’ are practical ways in which, through the use of language, teachers can *not only* engage the imagination of their students, ‘making knowledge in the curriculum vivid and meaningful’ (IERG, 2008), but can also develop and build upon these tools enabling children to make better sense of the world.

### *Research methods*

‘In order to understand any human phenomenon we must investigate it as part of the context within which it lies’ (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 68). As the research theme deals with ‘Imagination in the Primary School Classroom’, the research site is a single primary school class, taught by one teacher. Qualitative research has been chosen as the most appropriate approach as the research question itself is primarily concerned with understanding human interaction, the way in which action or non-action impacts a classroom dynamic or individual learning experience. Selected for their appropriateness for such small-scale research, I will make use of the following qualitative research methodologies:

#### *Observation*

Robson (1993) describes three types of observation: *participant observation* where the researcher takes part in the events being studied; *systematic observation* where an ‘observation instrument’ is used; and *simple observation* where the researcher remains unobtrusive and engages in passive observation. In the field I will draw on all three of these techniques. As a training teacher my host-teacher may request my involvement in certain teaching activities and in this way I will gain deeper insight into her experience. I will make use of an observation guide to aid my investigation while in the classroom and for the most part I will engage in ‘simple observation’.

#### *Interviewing*

I will draw upon different types of interview strategies, as each type of interview is suited to different situations. *Open-ended interviews* (Robson, 1993, p. 159) or *unstructured interviews* (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 81) are essentially informal conversations, unscripted ahead of time, yet can be skilfully guided as the researcher asks questions pertaining to the study as opportunities arise (Maykut & Morehouse, 1993, p. 82). For the purpose of this research they will be useful to establish initial rapport with research subjects, to

introduce myself and the area of research interest, and to provide a starting point from which I can design more specific questions for further interviews. *Focused interviews* (Robson, 1993, p. 159) make use of an interview guide containing key topics and even possible questions, however they are not fixed in an order nor is the researcher limited to these questions in the interview. I have chosen to use these interview strategies because of their flexibility – unplanned conversations and questions can emerge ‘in the moment’ and they are also easily adaptable to the busy schedule of the research subject – the teacher.

### *Threats to validity*

It could be argued that because I am a single researcher collecting data using the methods described, the only way to ‘collect’ this data is through my own biases, my own filters. Indeed, it was my personal interest (in theory and practice) that gave rise to this research question. As such, it could be argued that because these two lenses are the same (those of the asker and the answerer), there is no way to collect data that is objectively valid, nor interpret data in an objective way. Being aware of these arguments throughout the research process will prevent me from *claiming* objectivity, but will however keep me striving for *validity*. Through rigorous observation, justifying my interpretations of the data with ‘evidence’ from collected data, and using interviews and observations to validate each other I will strive to represent both my research experience and the perspectives of the research subject with a validity that is cogent, credible and authentic to our subjective realities (Millar, 2013).

## **Part Two: Research process and data summary**

As an observer, I positioned myself in an unobtrusive position towards the back of the class. I ensured that the teacher and of each of the children were in view (even if only from the side or back), and that I could see some of their faces. I divided my field journal pages in two sections: one side for brief notes of everything that happened in the class, and a side column for keywords that might inform my interpretations. Frequently I had to remind myself to focus on the research question, and not all the other classroom incidents.

When conducting a more ‘participatory’ type of observation where I assisted the teacher by helping individual students with their work (mathematics), I came closer to experiencing and understanding the tasks and the challenges facing my research subject.

My teacher-subject was warm and welcoming, and spoke easily and willingly with me at the end of each lesson. While engaging in observation I was able to note down any questions I had for the teacher, and in this way felt better equipped for these unstructured interviews. After class she openly reflected on the lesson and to my surprise, many of the questions I had written down were answered before I could even ask them. After leaving the class I typed up my field notes as well as the conversations I had had with my host teacher.

For the focused interviews, I had a guiding list of questions that I referred to when necessary. This allowed for freedom in the conversation without losing the opportunity to ask more focused questions. Because we had had so many unstructured interviews prior to the more focused interviews, I was able to develop a variety of relevant questions that grouped together into similar categories for ease of reference. Permission to record the interview was granted and the recording was transcribed soon after.

### *Evaluation of research techniques*

Initially, I found ‘observation’ a challenging method to yield empirical data about ‘moments of tension’. These moments were rather phenomena that could be *felt*, and then reflected upon in retrospective conversation with the teacher. In the second week, I reviewed my field notes alongside the observation guide to see how I might create a more useful list of categories for observation and to my surprise found that the ‘moments of tension’ I had recorded did indeed correlate with where I had anticipated ‘seeing’ them in the guide. This highlights that the researcher needs to use her own embodied *experience* as a research instrument, as well as her observations. The abstract nature of my research question explains why *observation* as a research



tool was limited, and could really only be fruitfully used in a way that ensures validity, in conjunction with interviewing.

In my case, interviews would usually deepen, clarify or confirm observations, as opposed to negating or contradicting them. In the beginning stages of the research I felt awkward and tentative during unstructured interviews, especially when it came to referring to particular 'moments' in which I had sensed a kind of tension – I felt that the teacher might be offended. Luckily this was not the case and as my teacher became more familiar with my area of interest it became easier to dialogue about 'tension' in a more direct and open way. Another challenge for me as a novice interviewer was knowing *which* nuances to pick up on to probe and question further. After listening to recorded interviews I became aware of dozens of alternative questions I might have asked in response to the interviewee's answers, which might have yielded other kinds of data. This was a 'tension' for me as a researcher – similar to the kind of existential tension described by Ruddock (mentioned in Part One) that exists for teachers.

In unstructured as well as focused interviews, I encountered what anthropologists might call 'the problem of the familiar'. I am a student of the same educational philosophy to which my teacher subscribes. Because of this there were often times when she used terms relating to ideas particular to the Waldorf pedagogy. This was a potential danger, in that I might have assumed that we shared an identical understanding of these terms, so where necessary I asked for clarification or listened carefully to understand my teacher's particular worldview.

While her views and pedagogical practices, as well as understanding and interpretation of the 'moments of tension' were indeed framed to an extent by our shared pedagogical background of Steiner's educational philosophy, my teacher is also someone who has had over forty years of classroom experience. Moreover, she not only brings her teaching experience to the classroom, but her varied life experiences. For my teacher the work of teaching is not just what occurs in the classroom, but is very much integrated with the rest of her life. In a similar way, I came to realise that a 'moment of tension' was also part of a broader context.

### *Evaluation and evolution of research question*

In my discussion of 'moments of tension' in Part One, I had narrowed my definition to mean *the dissonance between what the teacher has planned for her lesson, how she imagines her lesson will unfold, and the moments where those plans and imaginings are thwarted and challenged by the unpredictable reality of the classroom context*. I realised early on that for my purposes, a discussion of the lesson plan before *and* after the lesson would aid my 'real time' collection of data through observation. For the most part this was not practically possible; also I felt that asking the teacher to discuss her plan with me prior to the lesson might influence her natural way of conducting the lesson and perhaps interfere with her spontaneity.

From observing 'moments of tension' play out in the classroom, the way in which my teacher 'navigated' these moments, as well as her interpretation of them gauged in subsequent interviews, I realised that my initial definition of 'moments of tension' had extracted 'tension' out of its very real, fluid and human context.

Very rarely was there 'the plan', followed by the arising of tension when 'the plan' met 'the unpredictable', followed by 'the navigation' or manner in which the teacher dealt with the tension. This rather linear, overly simplistic and almost mechanical view of a classroom scenario was something I had expected to find, but in my second week of research I realised I had to broaden my understanding of 'moments of tension' to something that was more nuanced, complex and contextual.

While there were moments of tension arising from the unpredictable nature of the classroom situation, the narrow definition offered in Part One was of limited usefulness when carrying out observation and interviewing techniques. I have learnt that tension is a part of human interaction. It is therefore inseparable from the specificity of the context out of which it arises and it is also dynamic. Moreover, I have come to see that the teacher is not the only agent who 'navigates' these moments so that the pupils can learn; but that the pupils are also a part of this dynamic, and share a responsibility with the teacher as agents in the 'navigation' process.

In Part Three I will use the data to analyse the role of these ‘moments of tension’ in the classroom context as well as discuss the relationship between the various actors and such moments. For now it is necessary to present a summary of the data collected during the research process, using both observation and interviewing techniques, and attempting to restrict interpretation to a minimum.

### *Summary of Research Data*

What follows is a summary of the data collected over a two-week period of research in one classroom with one teacher. While I am aware that I have framed this summary using my own conceptual categories for organisation, I have attempted to present the data in a way that limits my own interpretation thereof as much as possible. To this end I have based the first section, entitled ‘Anecdotes of tension’, on my observations in the classroom. The following section entitled ‘Interview data’ is a summary of data gleaned from the two focused interviews I conducted with my host teacher.

As mentioned, my observation guide became a useful way to ‘detect’ these moments as they arose, and subsequent conversations with my teacher helped me to gain insight into her perspectives on what was happening in the class. Through the section ‘Anecdotes of tension’, it is my intention to provide snapshots of some of the ‘moments of tension’ I observed in the classroom. These observations were shaped by my broadened understanding of tension in the classroom, mentioned above and discussed in more detail in Part Three. The categories for selection that informed the observation guide (i.e. instances I thought would be ‘moments of tension’) all pertained to instances of interaction between teacher and child. I looked for things like the change of noise levels within the class (silence/chaos); the children’s response to questions from the teacher, and the way in which she introduced challenging topics (academic and social).

To further contextualise these moments as part of a shared dynamic between teacher, learners and researcher, I have included data from conversations with my teacher that took place after each lesson or pertained to the incident mentioned.

## **Anecdotes of tension**

### *The slap in the face*

Before beginning research in the classroom, my teacher had informed me of an incident that had occurred months before that was still a source of consternation. There had been a ‘trend’ of slapping one another across the face, allegedly as part of a game of ‘truth or dare’. While she had not witnessed these instances, reports had reached her from aggrieved parents, and she had addressed the issue with the class a number of times. The children responded that they had been ‘only joking’. The aforementioned incident occurred out of the context of the game; the report from a parent via her son being that he had been slapped hard across the face by one of the girls in the class, leaving a red mark across his cheek. According to my teacher, there had been an underlying tension in the class – between the pupils and within the teacher – as the issue had felt unresolved; the truth of the story was still unclear and neither admissions nor apologies had been made.

I was privy to a meeting between the school councillor and my teacher, as they discussed how best to deal with the situation, once and for all. Carrying the stress of the situation for both the child who had been slapped and his parent (expressed in a letter she held in her hand), my teacher said to me: ‘While I want to get rid of it (the issue), we also need to *do* it... It’s not *what* you do, it’s: do you want them to *imitate* you?’ They decided to facilitate a ‘sharing circle’, where a ‘talking stick’ would be passed around giving each person the opportunity to share what his or her ‘no joke zone’ was (i.e. what he or she would feel hurt or humiliated by, and could not accept as a joke). The intention was that the truth around the slapping incident would come out and be resolved by the children themselves.

The following day the social worker facilitated the intervention: the children, their teacher, the social worker and I all sat in a circle in the hall. The social worker introduced the circle and almost immediately there was a palpable tension in the big room. The children shifted uncomfortably in their seats, some giggled

when it was their turn to talk, others made a joke of the situation and many passed the stick on without saying anything. The talking stick went round and round, each time the teacher or social worker encouraging a deeper kind of sharing and leading by their own example. Although the children felt uncomfortable, after a few rounds some were able to address some deep-seated sources of unhappiness aggravated by their classmates. 'I don't like being called a nerd,' one boy said; 'I don't like being called fat,' said another. However, it seemed like we were not getting closer resolving 'the slap issue', so my teacher stood up and addressed it directly, asking who of the children had been slapped. There was a buzz of whispering and one girl spoke out, explaining that it was part of a game of 'truth or dare' that they no longer played. The atmosphere relaxed and the children spoke about the various incidents with greater ease, reporting their various versions of what they had seen, but still the specific incident my teacher wanted resolved remained unspoken. After much probing by the teacher, the truth about the incident came out: the boy had called the girl 'fat', and another boy had chanted 'slap him, slap him!' She did; and in retaliation he chased her around the school... The above process had taken over an hour; but eventually the true story emerged, both the boy and the girl apologised to each other and the atmosphere in the classroom was lighter thereafter and the teacher felt relieved to be able to leave the issue behind.

### *The 'rough books' lecture*

At the start of the day my teacher stood in front of the class and said: 'Children, I'm very sad, I was up until one o' clock this morning marking your books. Now I know these are your 'rough' books, but please people; they are still your work.' Her tone was stern and serious. She went on to show them some of the books to demonstrate the 'dog-eared, pages falling out, work not neatly laid out'. There was silence in the room and an atmosphere of solemnity. She then asked, 'Can you give me seven ways these books can be improved?' The children gingerly broke the silence; one by one they raised their hands, respectfully giving suggestions. They came up with at least fifteen, and the suggestions started coming more easily, becoming lightly humorous, while still genuine. The mood relaxed and teacher and children laughed together. Before moving on she said (praising the outside presentation of the books): 'You can celebrate that you've got nice covers; now please can you make the inside the same'.

### *'I didn't plan any of this'*

The above quotation comes from a conversation with my teacher directly after a lesson. Showing me her detailed notes for the lesson, she told me that she had planned to start teaching the class about 'simple interest' in mathematics. She began the class with a personal anecdote about going to the shops and checking the till slip afterwards, noticing that the total amount seemed to be more than the sum of individual items. Sharing her confusion with the class, she told them that she had asked her husband who had given an enlightening explanation about 'value added tax'. Her story sparked an excited barrage of questions from the children: one child asked if he had to pay tax when buying a bar of chocolate; another asked if farmers who grow crops have to pay tax; or whether children have to pay tax. The teacher echoed their enthusiasm, engaging with their stream of questions. She then asked them why 'percentage' is always present when talking about taxes, attempting to draw the conversation closer to her planned lesson. The room fell into silence. Only three children offered explanations. Their teacher then described a scenario and, writing on the blackboard, created a series of 'story sums' for the children to work out using the concept of 'percentage'.

After the lesson my teacher explained to me that she had veered from her plan because she could tell by the questions the children had asked that they were not totally comfortable with the concept of taxes or percentage. 'I better go back a step', was her thinking; but she expressed that she felt pressured because she would have to 'make up time' and 'take time from other lessons to catch up what we still need to do'. She reinforced her rationale, saying that, 'I had to give them time. They need to feel comfortable in where we're at in order to move on... It gives them a sense of safety'.



### *The tension of 'consequences'*

The following day my car wouldn't start. After solving the problem I arrived forty-five minutes late and found the class quietly at work, as they had been all lesson. The blackboard was full of writing, and on the bench at the front of the class were several piles of notes. There was a mood I had not yet encountered and my teacher spoke only when spoken to, albeit in a brusque and almost curt manner. There was an element of uneasiness – the children moved and spoke in a way that was hushed – and they kept their heads down, focused on the piles of work that had been assigned for them to do.

Once again, my teacher had planned to introduce simple interest however two teachers had reported that the class had misbehaved in their lessons the day before. My teacher told me that after thinking about how to deal with the situation, she had come at 11 o'clock that evening to write the notes on the board and prepare to dish out the consequences for their behaviour. She told me after the lesson that there had been no 'lecture'; she wanted them to feel what it was like to 'be ignored' as they had done to the two teachers the day before; and whenever a child asked her a question she responded, 'You get on with it, you can do it,' and maintained stern tone for the whole lesson.

At one point in the lesson, while walking past me, my teacher rolled her eyes at me saying, 'I hate this'. In a subsequent conversation she explained this statement: 'I didn't like doing it at all because it's cold and impersonal'.

### *The tension of questions*

*There were plenty of incidents where tension arose from the teacher asking questions, either to the class collectively, or to an individual learner. Below is one example of such a moment (depicted in some detail to follow the process of teacher and learners as closely as possible). In Part Three I shall discuss the role of questions and their relationship to tension in more detail.*

This was the day of finally introducing the equation for 'simple interest'. The teacher began by writing a simple and familiar equation on the board:  $6 = 2 * 3$ . 'Would this be a true statement?' she asked the class. All the children were watching the board, alert, nodding and agreeing verbally. She repeated this process a number of times, changing the operations around (i.e.  $6/2 = 3$  and  $6/3 = 2$ ) and each time asked if the statement was true. She then erased one of the numbers, placing a shape in its place (i.e.  $6 = 2 * \_$ ) and asked the children how they would find the missing number. She then made the equation more complex:  $12 = 3 * 2 * 2$ , and drew a different shape around each of the numbers. Finally, in those same shapes, just below this longer equation, she wrote:  $I = P * R * T$ . The instruction for the children was to draw the shapes on a page and write the letters inside, as well as make two multiply, divide and equals signs, and cut them all out. Then, they were to get into pairs, find a place to sit outside and work out – using the letters and symbols – the equations to represent the values of P, R and T.

After such quiet and attentive engagement there was a brief eruption of confusion – the children flooded their teacher with questions as they were unsure what to do. Once she had explained again, I accompanied them outside to observe their work and assist where needed. Most children required assistance. They found working with letters as opposed to numbers challenging. I observed several strategies for working through the task: some pairs remained inside the classroom feeling more secure with the presence of their teacher and able to ask her for help; others immediately asked me to come and help them. I noticed a pair laughing and joking, distracting another pair that was sitting close by. When I approached these boys they told me, 'We can't do this', and seemed frustrated.

After the children had worked in smaller groups for about 25 minutes they were called back inside. There was restlessness and whispering amongst the children. It was almost time for break and the atmosphere in the class was tense – most had struggled with the task and had not succeeded in working it out. Demanding silence their teacher reiterated the question. She then sent them out to lunch and I noticed the children got their lunch and left the classroom in a slower, more subdued way than they had on previous days.

After the lesson I spoke to the teacher. 'I don't know if it's going to work, but at least it got them thinking', she told me. She admitted that she had not expected them to feel comfortable with this concept – yet – but that in about a day or two they would start to 'get it'. She understood that it had been challenging for them, but told me that it was a necessary part of the learning process. She said: 'If they're just given the answer, they won't ever be able to work it out. If I've given them the security of trial and error, they'll be able to work it out. We've taken the risk together'.

## Interview data

I have organised the data from the two focused interviews I had with my teacher into themes that are relevant to the research question. I have amalgamated the data (initially from many questions) into several main questions below.

### *How do you plan for the year's lessons?*

For my teacher, the December holiday period is an essential part of her year's planning. Over this time she does a lot of reading, all of which pertains to the lessons she will teach for the year. There is a deeper side to this planning process however, it's not merely to collect 'content' to convey to the children. She told me: 'It's not to give me a bunch of facts. It's to create a place where I can begin to generate what I need to teach'. She used the metaphor of the planning process being a canvas, and the content being the colours that fill the canvas. The *form* of the 'painting' (the lessons) would emerge from the use of these colours.

She expressed this in another way, saying, 'You need to get to a point where you can say, in one or two sentences, this is the gesture for the year, this is what it's about'. Using another metaphor, she called this 'gesture' the 'guiding star for the whole year'. Beyond the reading and researching, she said that this 'gesture' comes from 'the feelings that you have, from the things that you encounter when you are not in front of the children particularly'. However, my teacher admitted that this time of holiday planning was usually filled with 'angst', particularly because the 'form' that the lessons themselves would take was so unknown.

### *How do you plan your daily lessons?*

She explained that from the overall year plan, smaller three- to four-week 'blocks' emerged. The outcome or end product for each 'block' is worked out by the teacher as well as how she might introduce it, but the day-to-day progression of reaching those outcomes are more of an organic process. She expressed that it could feel uncomfortable and pressurising when there was an outcome to move towards but that the process to get there was taking too long.

### *How has your way of planning changed over time?*

It was not always this 'organic'; my teacher mentioned that when she first started teaching, 'I planned every single lesson, I wrote a book like the children were going to write their book... I think that was my government training'. She said that while this had been a good exercise, she could not rely on what she had done in previous lessons to support her planning from year to year. She acknowledged that *part* of the content is still valid, but said that she had to be prepared to rework the *manner* in which the content is delivered anew each time.

### *What motivates you to find the best way to bring your lessons across?*

Emphatically, my teacher expressed that it is because *she wants them to 'get it'*, that she will do whatever she can to enable them to learn. My teacher said that when she herself works hard at thinking through and engaging with the material, learning becomes easier for the children.

### *How do you define 'learning'?*

'I think learning is different for everyone, certainly for a younger or an older child'. My teacher expressed learning for the primary school child as when the learning 'seeps into them, and after a day or two or three there is *some* consciousness of what has been taught'. More than merely being able to 'remember ten facts', she said it is about developing a capacity to think and that the lesson content or subject provides a *tool* for the unlocking of new ways of thinking.

Another important 'tool' for learning is in the interaction that occurs: 'The interaction can happen between pupil and pupil, pupil and parent, parent and teacher, pupil and teacher... that's what it's all about. If there's no interaction you haven't learnt anything you've just gathered information... There is no learning that can take place without another human being. I learn about myself through you'.

### *How do you see the role of the teacher?*

In highlighting the importance of social interaction, my teacher acknowledged that while spelling, reading and times-tables need to be learnt by the child, an essential part of the teacher's role is to teach in a manner of 'complete interest'. This 'complete interest' from the teacher (in the children, in what she is teaching) is what generates interest from the children; it 'warms them so that they can carry on practicing and becoming excellent at whatever it is they're doing'.

The primary school teacher is allowed 'poetic license' in order to generate interest within her students. She must be competent in her subject and know the facts that she must bring across to her students, however in order that the pupils become interested, more than just the bare facts are needed. The teacher needs to express the content creatively. In this way she is also planting the seeds for the development of 'imaginative thinking', which my teacher explained as 'possibility thinking': that 'there is a solution, but it's not necessarily the answer that I think it might be, and I'm not going to get to it the way I think I might get to it'.

### *How do you create a situation for learning?*

'I had to quickly adapt what I wanted to work with to suit the situation there and then'. My teacher gave the example (cited above) of when she had intended to introduce 'simple interest' to the class. She reiterated that as she had started speaking she realised that the children 'needed to be taken a step back... I realised that they needed a bit more practice'. She admitted that while she had felt uncomfortable with this unpredicted change and had not taken the time to think about it beforehand, the children came up with the relevant examples to work on, through their own questions.

I asked my teacher if there was something like a 'recipe' for creating a space for learning to happen. Her response was: 'I don't think there's a 'recipe' but there are 'ingredients''. She listed these as:

I want to move towards a certain goal or point; I want the children to partake in reaching that point as much as possible; I have really worked with the material that I want to convey; I am open to letting it roll as it rolls; I want absolutely no one to get left by the wayside; every child has to be stretched; I want them all to be able to come back (the next day) nourished with something to offer.

### *When do you feel you have learned as the teacher?*

'When I'm open to the possibility of what might come out of a situation once I've done my very best to present it in a way that I think is creative'. According to my teacher's experience, it's 'always in the in-between that are the lessons': how to move from one lesson to another, from one concept to another. For my teacher, it is in the in-between spaces, like the gap between concepts, where the imagination lies. Using a metaphor of a river, she said that learning and the capacity for imagination is not necessarily found on either of the riverbanks, but in the space between the banks; in the journey from one bank to the other. It is the imagination that facilitates this journey.

## Reflections from the researcher

Part Two has documented and given expression to many various instances of ‘moments of tension’ that exist in the classroom context – for the individuals that are part of that environment, as well as *between* them as part of a social interaction that is dynamic. As a researcher there were times when I was a part of this dynamic. I experienced angst with the children when an unanswered question met a choked silence in the room; I felt the wilful determination the teacher feels in trying to explain a concept to an individual child, and the challenge of having to try again and again when she does not ‘get it’.

The writing process has contained tensions of its own, in the selecting of data relevant to the question and its presentation. The task of Part Two has been to present a summary of the data with as little interpretation as possible. Of course, the selection of data is a kind of interpretation – however I have continually referred to my research question to inform my data selection. Where pertinent quotations were recorded that echoed my ideas for interpretation of the data (instead of speaking directly to the research question) I have included those in Part Three. In this way, my analysis of the research data in Part Three will draw on and dialogue with data presented above, as well as include other anecdotes and quotations where they enrich my analysis.

## Part Three: Analysis and conclusions. A discussion of the research question

The research question arose from recognising and experiencing a kind of tension that arises when the expectations and educational aims of the teacher are thwarted in the unpredictable reality that is the classroom context. I wanted to explore the ways that a (more experienced) teacher navigates these moments in ways that enable or hinder the learning processes of the children in her class.

In Part Two I suggested that defining tension in such a narrow way was overly simplistic and because it extracted the ‘moment of tension’ from the context in which it had arisen it was also of limited usefulness in my attempts to understand what was really going on. Moreover, I encountered many different *kinds* of ‘tension’ arising from contexts that did not correspond to my initial definition but instead seemed to have undercurrents of their own. I realised that a ‘moment of tension’ was not merely a symptom of a structural dissonance between ‘the lesson plan’ and ‘the lesson in reality’, but an inescapable part of the educational endeavour, which, both my teacher and I agreed is inherently ‘human’: shaped and informed by the context of human relationships.

In my observation guide, I had anticipated finding tension in instances of human interaction: the teacher poses a difficult question; broaches an uncomfortable topic of conversation or spontaneously changes the direction of the lesson. These arise out of the context of the relationships between the teacher, the children, and the lesson material - relationships which are dynamic; as opposed to arising exclusively from the teacher or the lesson structure.

From my observations, interviews and subsequent reading I learned that the tension that arises in these situations is not necessarily a ‘block’ to the process of learning and teaching, nor is it necessarily a negative factor inducing anxiety (as might conventionally be assumed). To my surprise I learned that the tension itself could be a kind of a ‘tool’: to be engaged with, utilised and even created (by teacher and students) to facilitate ‘the construction of something new’ (Vygotsky in Gajdamaschko, 2005, p. 16).

The research question can be answered superficially if taken at face value. Descriptive in nature it asks: *How* does the teacher respond to moments of tension, and what is the impact of her response on the learning processes of the children in her class? In Part Two I have presented a data summary that recounts my observations of these moments, as well as the responses of the teacher and children in the class.

In light of my broadened understanding of ‘moments of tension’ I have found it useful for my analysis to separate the data interpretation into three interrelated aspects that together will form the analysis and conclusion of the research report. The first part explores the various ‘sources’ of tension as gleaned from my research; the second investigates the ‘role’ of the tension in the learning environment while the third part

seeks to re-think the concept of 'moments of tension' as a useful tool to unlock possibilities for learning in the classroom environment.

## Sources of tension

In the case of the class in which I conducted my research, the 'life phase' of the pupils was a source of tension in itself. Most children were age twelve turning thirteen and are thus on the cusp of puberty. The very first time I spoke with my teacher about doing research in her classroom she told me that her students' passions, desires, social and self-awareness were prominent features of their daily experiences and that 'academic learning' had taken a backseat. In these circumstances she expressed how challenging it was to get through a small amount of work and how she had to adapt her own teaching to 'meet' the children in a way that was appropriate for their specific life phase.

This 'meeting' of the children happened not only by adapting her teaching methodologies, but also through the *material* that was selected and could be brought as 'a lesson', albeit of a different kind. Often such 'lessons' would emerge from challenging situations, where the teacher had to deal with the relevant sensitive topics that involved the prevailing interpersonal dynamics of the class. For this class, delicate situations involving social dynamics were an example of a source of tension.

An example from the data is the anecdote entitled '*The slap in the face*'. Due to this unresolved issue, for weeks there had been an undercurrent of tension involving the teacher, a set of parents and the pupils involved in the incident. For my teacher, sensitive and acutely aware of the dynamics between the members of her class, she said that this underlying tension had been affecting the otherwise harmonious flow of teaching, learning and interaction in the classroom environment.

Another kind of tension emerged when my teacher lectured the class about the condition of their 'rough books'. This time, tension was *created* through *directly* dealing with the issue (just as a similar tension had been intentionally created in the 'sharing circle' to resolve the 'slapping' incident). It was a source of tension for the teacher, her pupils and between them. The teacher's expectations of her pupils were confounded by her encounter with their books, and the pupils felt disappointed in themselves for letting their teacher down, and could feel their teacher's discontentment. The timing and manner in which the teacher dealt with the issue were of importance when shaping it as a 'moment of tension': it was the very first interaction of the day between teacher and class; the teacher was stern and visibly displayed her agitation in tone of voice and body language; she viscerally included the children in this dynamic by showing examples of their books and by then asking them how they were going to improve on their work.

That same day my teacher had to diverge from her lesson plan, 'backtracking' as she called it, to ensure that all the children in her class were 'ready' to engage with the new material she had planned to teach. At the end of the lesson she said, 'I didn't plan any of this', and admitted that she indeed felt pressurised for teaching time because of this necessary diversion. The sources of tension inherent in this scenario are manifold. That the lesson plan had shifted course and would impact on the sequencing of and material brought in subsequent lessons was a real source of tension for the teacher, albeit superficial. Underpinning this tension (and indeed a source of tension itself) is the uncompromising willingness of the teacher to properly 'meet' the children: that the whole class is 'ready' to move forward together and that (in her own words), 'No-one is left by the wayside'. Implicit in this striving are two sources of tension: one is created by the dissonance between the children's current abilities and the teacher's goal in the extension of those abilities. The second is due to the fact that the children *in the class* are of different abilities – some further away from where the teacher needs them to be (in order to teach a lesson in which 'no one is left by the wayside') than others.

In educational literature the 'gap' between what the child *can do* and what the child *cannot do* is referred to using Vygotsky's term: the 'zone of proximal development' (Davydov & Kerr, 1995, p. 18). This in-between space, the 'zone of proximal development', could refer to physical tasks as well as cognitive abilities that are not yet independently within the child's grasp but could be accomplished with the guidance of a



more capable peer or the teacher. In my classroom experiences, as the above example highlights, I found this in-between space to be a key area of tension.

The aforementioned example necessitated that the teacher remained open to the possibility for the lesson plan to change. This speaks to a further tension that is central to the teaching profession, articulated by Fullan and Hargreaves as: 'The ability to make informed judgments in the rapidly shifting environment of the classroom' (1992, p. 28). In this example the children responded enthusiastically, connecting to the 'new direction' of the lesson with relevant and exploratory questions.

In contrast, in the anecdote entitled '*The tension of consequences*', the teacher changed her plan for the lesson as a didactic *and* punitive response to the children's behaviour on the previous day. For the teacher, the tension came from consciously creating a classroom environment that contradicted her educational ideals.

When it came to asking and answering questions, there was often a tension in the room in the space between the question and answer. The 'question' signals a latent expectation for the answerer to meet and the students responded to this in various ways that usually depended on the level of difficulty of the question. Simpler questions were met with eager answers, while more challenging ones (in the form of a task as presented in Part Two) were tackled with active concentration; avoided by giggling and joking; met with cheeky retorts or 'given up' on with expressions like 'I can't'. In this particular example, the children were thrust into the 'zone of proximal development', tasked with answering a question beyond their means of independent problem solving. My teacher was aware that this was the effect that some of her questions had, expressing that she felt it was important that the children 'be stretched'; that they 'struggle with something'.

As is evident from the data collected in interviews with my teacher, there is indeed tension in the process of planning a lesson. The teacher plans to bring the most relevant and appropriate material to her children and to engage them by presenting lessons in a way that is fitting and is also as creative as possible. However, she is aware of the inevitable unpredictability of the lessons as they occur in real time; thus in order to achieve her aims she plans with the knowledge of and openness to the potential that these plans could change.

This situation of tension is similar to the existential state a teacher might experience as described by Ruddock in Part One. In this investigation, contrary to what might be expected, instead of being debilitating, the 'moments of tension', the teacher's navigation of these moments, as well as her openness to change (arguably a possible *source of tension*), were moments that held potential for the 'construction of something new' (Vygotsky in Gajdamaschko, 2005, p. 16). In the following section I will offer an interpretation as to why this was the case.

## Exploring the 'role' of tension in the classroom

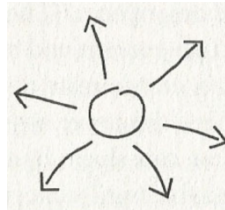
I was fascinated by the way in which my teacher 'navigated' the tension in her classroom, how she sometimes even welcomed and *created* tension. In one of our first discussions where the 'sharing circle' (to deal with 'the slap in the face') was planned, I became aware that my teacher did not merely welcome tension for its own sake, but that she was able to use it as a didactic tool.

Knowing that there was a difficult social issue that needed to be dealt with in order to restore the social harmony in her class brought a feeling of discomfort, but it alerted her to the fact that 'all was not well' in the social life of the members of her class. In this way, tension could be viewed as an 'indicator' for the teacher, a signpost that there is something beneath the social fabric of the class that requires attention.

The intention of the intervention was not merely to bring about a resolution to the problem. If this had been the case the teacher might have chosen to facilitate a private meeting with the individuals involved in order to mediate the conflict. However as my teacher told me, 'It's not just about finding the solution to the problem; it's the process to do whatever it takes'. The underlying tension had impacted the social fabric of the entire class. The children lacked the experience and maturity to grapple with the issue independently and the teacher was aware that: 'They don't know how; they have to see how. They need practice'.

The sharing circle was indeed a prolonged moment of tension, evident by the nervous giggles and other body language indicating a shared discomfort amongst the children. It was carried out at length, beyond the point when it seemed like nothing would come of it because my teacher believed that, 'If you end a process you've started half way between then you've failed because you haven't found all the possibilities'.

On two occasions, in unstructured conversations and a more formal interview, my teacher drew the following diagram that she had seen in a book, *The Art of Possibility*, by Benjamin and Rosamund Stone Zander (2000):



*Diagram depicting 'being with the way things are...into the realm of possibility,' from The Art of Possibility by Benjamin and Rosamund Stone Zander (2000, p. 110)*

The philosophies described in the book – accompanied by 'practices' to learn 'the art of possibility' – influenced the way in which my teacher faced moments of tension in the class. They were neither resisted nor seen as obstacles, but faced 'simply (as) *present conditions*', (Zander, 2000, p. 109) a way of being that, according to the authors, 'allows us to alight in a place of openness' (*ibid.* p. 111). My teacher used the above diagram to illustrate the fact that there are always myriad possibilities when it comes to solving a problem; that one can stand in the middle of the circle (the 'problem') and all around him or her will be possibilities not yet thought of, not yet attempted. In this way she demonstrated her commitment to, as she said: 'doing whatever it takes' to find solutions to challenges in her class, from exploring all the possibilities.

In the instance of the 'sharing circle', the tension eventually became relief; the children and their teacher resolved the issue together. The 'role' of the tension was dual: it brought the children together in a shared experience of a process that was tangible, leading everyone to take responsibility to find a resolution together. Secondly, through creating a forum to address the issue in a visible manner the teacher was able to 'model' a way in which to work through an uncomfortable situation to find a resolution. From this experience the children saw that even though a situation is tense, a resolution can come out of it if one perseveres.

Related to this 'life lesson' is that through the experience of tension, there is the potential for 'release' on the other side. An example my teacher spoke about is 'the Ah-ha moment': when a child has worked through a problem and eventually finds the solution on his own. This is a breakthrough moment vital for the child's sense of self-confidence. Although there is a struggle the outcome is often a feeling of achievement. I observed that through asking questions that were just beyond what the students could do on their own – within their 'zone of proximal development' - my teacher created such opportunities for learning and growth. The outcome (for example that a cognitive ability was grasped, a task correctly completed, a concept understood) was important, but just as important was the ability of the child to *actively work towards* achieving that outcome. I found the metaphor my teacher used to express this idea illuminating. Merely giving the children the answers to questions is like attempting to nourish them with pre-digested food. In order to develop the capacity to function optimally, as well as imbibe the nutrients from the food, the metabolic system needs the substance of whole food material to enable the effective breaking down and assimilating what is needed and eliminating what is not needed.

Seen in this light, a 'moment of tension', when confronted with an open mind and a willingness to encounter it, can be a tool for transformation. I noticed how, when the teacher posed a challenging question, the mood in the class became alert, almost more 'awake' than just moments before. I also noticed that on occasion the teacher repeated such questions and these hung in the mounting silence, creating a sense of

mystery that invited discovery and engagement from the children. The tension created through this method of questioning brought a common focus and concentration in the class and acted as a springboard from which to delve into tackling problems.

That the process of lesson planning is a site of tension may be particular to the Waldorf context where teachers are not directed by a rigid syllabus but instead are able to create their own, based upon the recommendations of their curriculum. Underscoring this tension is the understanding that the curriculum is not just there as ‘information to be learnt’, but also as a *tool* to nurture and develop capacities within the child, if brought across at the right time and in the appropriate manner by the teacher. This ‘open-endedness’ brings with it at once a sense of freedom as well as a feeling of tension. Almost counter-intuitively, there is a peculiar sense of ‘electricity’ in this kind of tension, an aliveness that exists, which in spite of oneself, propels the teacher towards the unknown, ever closer to the moment where the lesson plan will meet the children in real-time and the unpredictable magic of learning can happen.

By framing ‘tension’ as a tool, it is not my intention to propose that teachers become aggressive or controversial, nor that they attempt to create an atmosphere of tension in the class arbitrarily. Neither do I mean to suggest that tension will inevitably lead to a situation of learning, a feeling of ‘release’ or transformation. What I would like to suggest is that ‘tension’ can be re-imagined as a useful tool in the classroom context, particularly where our expectations and plans are thwarted. With awareness and skilful navigation, tension can be used to transform and elicit, discipline and illuminate, as well as act as a ‘signpost’ to alert us that an issue needs addressing or that the content or delivery method could be altered to meet the needs of the class in a given moment more effectively.

### *Tension re-imagined*

Whenever we attempt to meet a set of expectations (set by ourselves or others) there is a tension between our actions – what we do in order to meet those expectations – and the achievement of their fulfilment. The tension arises in the space containing the unknown outcome of our efforts. It is not unusual that, when we do *not* meet the expectations, there is a feeling of disappointment that accompanies a perceived failure. From my observations in the classroom I noticed that when the children were chastised about the state of their ‘rough books’ they felt immensely disappointed and yet, from out of that disappointment emerged a sense of lightness, the possibility for creativity and to explore a new set of expectations.

I was astonished by this transformation of what had been, just moments earlier, a very tense classroom environment. I wondered how the teacher had so successfully transformed what had been not only a strained interpersonal dynamic between her and the children, but also a prevailing atmosphere in the classroom, which she had in fact *created*. For me the key to the successful navigation of tension in the classroom is what my teacher called ‘possibility thinking’.

For example, when posed with a challenging task or question, the child is thrust into the space between the question and answer, the ‘zone of proximal development’. As I observed in my research, the children have many various ways of ‘coping’ with the challenge of being in this space – the space where they are asked to meet an expectation. The teacher might be aiming at a specific goal or point to reach via her task or question, however it is her openness and valuation of the *process* it takes to get there that is the key to both teacher and learner’s successful navigation of this site of tension.

The ‘zone of proximal development’ is necessarily uncomfortable. It can also be exciting – a realm of potential for new learning has been entered – and both teacher and pupil share this tension. The child is stretched beyond his comfort zone, asked to move towards a goal that he cannot quite yet comprehend or imagine achieving. The teacher is aware of the goal to be reached, and yet the journey that the child will take to get there is as unpredictable as the discoveries he might make along the way.

If the *process* of grappling with the task or question, of engaging with and participating in their own process of learning is seen as an end in itself, many more possibilities for learning can be realised, both

beyond and including the particular aims the teacher might have imagined in her plan. It is the teacher's valuation of this process that creates the possibility for the 'moment of tension' to be transformed, indeed for the 'zone of proximal development' to feel a *safe* enough space to explore.

All too often a child will become frustrated or give up on a task because he feels overwhelmed by the pressure and potential for disappointment if he 'gets it wrong'. The teacher, who feels her own sense of frustration at not being able to help the child adequately, exacerbates this tension, and thus the 'zone of proximal development' can become debilitating instead of enabling.

What makes this space enabling for the child and teacher? My teacher said that it is important for the teacher to 'learn to carry the tension' of the learning process and model behaviour that shows a determination and tenacity to engage and discover. She said that this was fundamental in helping the children develop 'possibility thinking'. Possibility thinking acknowledges that there *is* a solution, but that it's not necessarily the answer that one thinks it might be; nor is it arrived at in the way one might imagine at the outset. Illustrative of this point, and regarding her own pedagogical questions, my teacher stated: 'The answers often come in the bath'. Holding, being with and *allowing* the tension intrinsic to this kind of 'learning journey' allows the potential for that space of tension to be a place of discovery and exploration, instead of a space of fear and failure

One of the ways in which the teacher models and practices 'possibility thinking' could be in the context of her own planning and execution of lesson plans. Although it may seem contradictory in the context of this discussion, the more deeply the teacher has explored her teaching material, the more open she can remain to the possibilities for change as they arise. This does not mean that whenever the teacher's envisaged lesson plan is obstructed that she must change her course entirely, but that beneath the 'moment of tension' there may be the potential for something new to arise, different and perhaps complementary to what she had envisaged. As the students see their teacher searching and learning in the realm of the unknown, they too will be inspired – and feel 'safe' – to do the same.

On more than one occasion my teacher stated: 'I'm not teaching them for now, I'm teaching them for the future'. By *creating* moments of tension and providing a 'safe space' where that tension could be engaged and explored, she was striving to enable her class to learn how *they* might successfully navigate moments of tension in their own lives at school and beyond.

This speaks to what is at the heart of the educational endeavour. In an article entitled 'Education and the Presence of the Unknown', Craig Holdrege asks how we, as educators, might 'craft educational programs that help students develop capacities for creating a future that we can't see' (2012, p. 18) Complementing this question is the equally complex issue of developing such capacities within *teachers*. The development of imaginative and experiential resources 'to help them understand what teaching is or *could* be' (my emphasis) is what Fettes calls 'the primary task of teacher education' (Fettes, 2005, p. 2). He suggests that for transformation to take place, teacher-trainees' 'images of teaching, and of themselves as teachers, may have to be brought into conscious *opposition* to experience' (Fettes, 2005, p. 5). Within the classroom context 'moments of tension', if adequately respected and understood, could be useful 'tools' or 'springboards' for such transformation.

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