



Notes for participants in the Big Wide Talk seminar, 'A new approach to educational disengagement?' 13th July, 11.00-13.00, Committee Room 18, The Palace of Westminster. Please note change of committee room.

Take part let children be the spark

Dear Participant,

Today you are taking part in a process of reflection and innovation started in Bristol in November 2010.

A Big Wide Talk Theatre of Learning was produced in Seamills Junior School for three weeks in November 2010. 2,500 children from local schools took part, delighting in the freedom they were given to choose what they wanted to do. It was made clear that they could touch everything but that there were two rules; they must not hurt each other and they must treat everyone with respect. The deal was struck and off they went.

The children's reactions were intense whether they were in their early years or at the end of primary. All of them rushed to explore, to touch, to examine, to experiment, to engage. Liveliest of all were the children aged 10 and 11 from years 5 and 6.

After the Theatre of Learning the year 5 children we have with us today reflected on their experience. Their insights were vivid and thought provoking. They told us that learning in the Theatre of Learning was exciting and enjoyable; that learning at school was not fun: that school thought learning had to be 'serious'. They said that they learned best when they could do things for themselves, things that they found compelling, like making each other laugh, cutting, chopping and juicing all manner of fruit and vegetables to make juice and 'stews', scattering hay, collecting things, pretending to be someone else.

They talked about wanting to cook. When asked why they thought they wouldn't be allowed to do that at school one boy, here with us today, shrugged his shoulders and said "Health and safety". When asked how they might persuade their school to let them cook they thought being school councillors might work and they all said they wanted to be one. They also said they would write interesting letters to the head based on their experiences.

From there the children went on to persuade their class teacher and the head to let them 'take over' the school kitchen for a day. What they learned on the back of this adventure is fascinating. Not only did they cook up a storm for their teachers, they researched ingredients, they

organised using spreadsheets, they calculated, they learned new techniques such as the 'bridge' method for cutting capsicums, they reported using power points. More importantly they **all** felt the thrill of achievement.

Right now, here today, they are learning to understand democracy through experience. When we talked to them about coming to the offices of parliament and their job to lead the seminar by speaking about what has happened, they asked, " Will we be on the news?" They know this is important.

They are learning by relating their experiences to their everyday lives. One boy had been speaking with his Dad about going to parliament. Billy who is with us today was able to tell me what a committee was; " My Dad says that in the Workman's, where he only ever has cups of tea since he gave up drinking, they move the furniture in the upstairs room and sit round to talk about what is best for the pub."

Having sought to convince other children and teachers in the school of the success of their '5s Noshery' they now see that they have the opportunity to speak with other children, their parents and teachers in other parts of the country. This is an experience these ten year olds will never forget. It is therefore incumbent on the adults taking part today to take time to understand the children's start points and to share the learning with them. Children know that learning is always a two way street.

So our agenda for today is that after an introduction by Julian Huppert MP at 11.00 the children from Avonmouth Primary and Big Wide Talk will share some of the filmed footage from The Bristol Theatre of Learning and reflect on their own experience from then to today. This will take about 30 minutes. Thereafter the chair will invite other participants in the seminar to ask questions and offer their own thoughts. The children from Avonmouth will continue as active participants throughout. At 12.45 Big Wide Talk will draw the seminar to a conclusion by inviting the children to reflect on what they have heard, what they have said and what they have learned. Participants will be able to add their comments at www.bigwidetalk.org It will be important to remember that educational disengagement is an adult construct and you should join the discussion in order to shine a light on your own understanding of this phenomenon.

NB All participants will be required to come through security at the Cromwell Green Visitor Entrance to The Palace of Westminster (number 6 on the map). Security checks can sometime involve a queue. Download a copy of the map here:

<http://www.bigwidetalk.org/files/documents/parliamentaryestate.pdf>