

How can I use my own values and my experience of schools in South Africa to influence my own education and the education of others?

An action research project by
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this project is my experience of South African education. A visit with a group of colleagues in February 2002 had great personal significance for me. It led to me examining my own educational values and the extent to which I fully live them out. It spurred me on to learn more and to influence others to act with me in establishing a link with a black township school. This is the story of my learning and the learning of others as I began the process of establishing the link.

CONTENTS

	Page
My South African Experience	4
Living Out My Values As An Educator	6
From Reflection To Action	9
Analysis Of My Presentation	13
Spreading The Word	16
Conclusions And Next Steps	21
References	23
Appendices	

My South African Experience

Just occasionally in life experiences occur that have a deep impact and lead you to re-examine your own values. Such an experience was my visit to South African schools in February 2002. Born from a leaflet placed in my tray by my Headteacher, the experience led me to consider my role as an educator¹

I had visited Africa once before and had experienced something of the schools, but nothing had prepared me for the reality that is South African schooling. As a political activist in the 1980's I had been supportive of the anti-apartheid movement and like most celebrated the end of apartheid in 1989, only to find that, in the words of the poet Tatamkhulu Afrika, "*Nothing's Changed*"².

Brash with glass,
name flaring like a flag,
it squats
in the grass and weeds,
incipient Port Jackson trees:
new, up-market, haute cuisine
guard at the gatepost,
whites only inn.

No sign says it:
but we know where we belong.

I press my nose
to the clear panes, know,
before I see them, there will be
crushed ice white glass
linen falls,
the single rose.

Down the road,
working man's café sells
bunny chows.
Take it with you, eat
it at a plastic table's top,
wipe your fingers on your jeans,
spit a little on the floor:
it's in the bone

¹ South Africans refer to all people involved in education: administrators, assistants as well as teachers, as educators.

² Tatamkhulu Afrika – *Nothing's Changed*

I back from the glass,
boy again,
leaving small mean O
of small, mean mouth.
Hands burn
for a stone, a bomb,
to shiver down the glass.
Nothing's changed.

(Afrika 1990 lines 17 to 48 – See Appendix 1)



Perhaps it was the optimism that I felt as I spoke with this 17 year old student of Economics about his aspirations to go on to College and be an accountant, followed by the sadness as I spoke afterwards to his teacher who told me that there was no prospect of this because the family was too poor to pay the College fees. In my mind I thought of the opportunities lying ahead of the children in the well-resourced schools that I had seen during my visit. That was the source of the anger that I felt.

What I experienced in South Africa is well captured in the poem. There are enormous inequalities between rich and poor. The legacy of the divisive

apartheid regime remains and the lack of educational opportunities for the black majority, hampered by first political and now economic disadvantage, has led to anger. The black townships are areas of mass poverty with the Aids epidemic sweeping through them and killing thousands. The black government is seeking to transform society and:

Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.

Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person.
(Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996) ³

They are hampered by a lack of resources. I desire social justice for the black majority and as an educator, with a firm belief in the value of education I want to make a contribution to improving opportunities for some of the students in a black township. I was truly inspired by a black Principal of a township School⁴ who addressed our group. He echoed my own beliefs in the ability of education to transform individual lives and transform society.

“Even if conditions are poor we must educate” (Themba Mthembu 2002)

Living Out My Values as an Educator

Themba made me reflect on my own reasons for being an educator and how I live out my values as an educator. I started my career as an educator in Bootle on Merseyside in the early 1980's. The anger expressed in the poem, that desire to throw stones, it is exactly what I had felt as a young man growing up in Merseyside, watching the Conservative Government implement economic policies that destroyed the jobs and livelihoods of the people around me. Now I was re-visiting those emotions as I reflected on my experience of South African schools. It violated my personal values of justice

³ Act 108 of 1996

and equity, values that I have tried to live as an educator. In Merseyside I had wanted to act to promote social justice for the poor and had worked as a Youth Worker in the belief that through education youngsters could escape the poverty trap. I am not sure of the extent to which I succeeded in this.

The extent to which I was living out my belief in social justice for the poor and promoting equal opportunities for all was challenged by my experiences in South Africa. I recognised that my work as an educator with less able students in my School, raising their expectations of themselves and pushing them on to develop skills that will equip them for progression to higher courses was in line with my values as an educator. Through my teaching of Economics, I promoted the values of social justice and equity. As Deputy Head, I had led Assemblies that raised student's awareness of these values. However, missing from my experience as an educator before my trip to South Africa, and therefore from the education of my students, was an awareness of the severity of the adverse conditions faced by poorer students in other countries.

I reflected, through dialogue with my friends and colleagues, on my experience in South Africa and how I could use it to influence others. Raelin highlights the importance of reflection⁵:

“Reflection is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one’s immediate environment about what has recently transpired. It illuminates what has been experienced by both self and others, providing a basis for future action” (Raelin 2001)

I recognised the stages of Kolb's (David Kolb 1984) learning cycle as I had experienced, reflected, conceptualised and now wanted to plan some actions.⁶ I was experiencing, in Jack Whitehead's terms, myself as a living contradiction and as Jack states,

⁴ Themba Mthembu: Principal of Zwelibanzi Senior Secondary School, Durban. Taken from a speech given to English educators in Durban in February 2002. For my notes see Appendix 2.

⁵ From his article in Management Learning. See References.

⁶ David Kolb (1984) identified a Learning Cycle that applies to individuals, teams and organisations. It has four stages. See References.

“Flowing from the experience of living contradiction the desire to live our values more fully in practice stimulates our imaginations (our originality of mind) to create possible ways of acting that might satisfy this desire”
(Whitehead 2002)

Alternatively, I was seeking to develop the highest order skill in Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives in the affective domain, namely:

“Acting consistently with internalised and integrated values which characterise the person.” (Bloom 1960)⁷

It was during a tutorial session, through expressing what I wanted to achieve in the project, that a colleague, Stuart Jones⁸, suggested that I was looking at my own educative values and he was so right. I reflected on his comments and formulated a title that I then emailed to Jack Whitehead, my tutor, for comment⁹. His response strengthened my enquiry.¹⁰ I could see how important it was that I included an account of how the experience had influenced my own education. I could also see how I could benefit from focussing on how I have influenced the education of others, rather than their

Experiencing – at this stage individuals, teams or organisations are emerged in the task. There is little or no time for reflection; the intention is to complete the task assigned
Reflecting – at this stage those involved review what has been experienced.
Conceptualising – at this stage those involved interpret the events, try to assign meaning and to understand the interconnecting relationships.
Planning – new understanding results and actions are taken to refine and improve the way the task is handled.

⁷ See References

⁸ Stuart is Deputy Head responsible for The Quality of Teaching at Westwood St Thomas School

⁹ The title that I suggested was “How can I use my own values and my experience of schools in South Africa to influence the thinking of others about their own educational values” This puts the focus on their (others) educational values and how my video and commentary make them reflect on these values and voice them. Alternatively, I could drop the word "educational" and consider the influence on their values, educational or otherwise.

¹⁰ Jack’s response was:

I like your question - I'm wondering whether 'How can I use my own values and my experience of schools in South Africa to influence my own education and the education of others?' - might enable you to focus on education as a value-laden practical activity - sometimes the word thinking becomes disconnected with action and loses some of its potential to influence the world for good. (See Appendix 3)

thinking, as it was action that I wished to inspire, not just thought. As Yusuf Sayed says with reference to South African experience:

For all our pontification about values, we behave in ways that often devastate young people and their futures. (Sayed 2001)

This left me with the question as to how I could demonstrate my influence on my own education and the education of others.

From Reflection to Action – Influencing Myself and Others

My intention to act upon what I had seen was stated publicly in the piece that I wrote as my own evaluation of the visit for the group report required by the organisers.

“As a reflective practitioner, I want my visit to South Africa to influence my practice and lead to change in what I do. This is probably true of all the participants. The way that I intend to make it so for me is to work with people at my school, students and staff, and beyond it, to analyse the influence that I can have in changing my practice as a result of the visit. This will entail using the video footage that I shot whilst there and analysing the responses of people to it. I am in the fortunate position of being able to make it the focus of my next unit for my Masters Degree. Through the processes of action research and guided by my tutor, I intend to show whether or not the visit has influenced my practice and that of others. I will analyse the extent to which what I experienced challenged or reinforced my own educational values. One of the intended outcomes of this is the establishment of a sustainable link with a South African school. Another is to further the education of students about the situation in South Africa by showing video footage in Assemblies and discussing it and then working closely with a small group of interested students.” (Potts - April 2002)¹¹

¹¹ This is an extract from my individual analysis and conclusion to the group report put together during and after the South African visit. The government as part of the Teachers International Professional Development scheme funded the visit. (See Appendix 4)

I took a digital camcorder with me to South Africa and took footage of the townships, the schools and the people¹².



It was the power of these visual images that persuaded me to reflect on the relationship between my own values and my experiences in South Africa. There they were caught on tape. I edited the video footage to create a story, my own story, my interpretation of the new South Africa. I decided to make a commentary to go with it and use the tape to enter in to dialogue with a range of people to create a basis for action, for as Raelin says:

“Reflective practice occurs in the midst of practice and may be shared in the presence of others. Taylor (1997) even suggests that without the medium of relationships, reflection can be impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth behavioural change” (Raelin 2001)

¹² See Appendix 5

It is an in-depth behavioural change that I am seeking to bring about.

I was invited by my tutor, Jack Whitehead to show the video to my fellow researchers on the Westwood St Thomas Research Group at a meeting at Bath University. Jack recorded the session on video and I was able to analyse my own delivery of the information and the reaction of my colleagues to it¹³.

Whilst planning the session I decided that I wanted to put the video in to a national context. On a visit to the University of Natal we had been given a paper by Jonathan Jansen and Yusuf Sayed (2001) called “Implementing education policies: the South African experience”¹⁴. This paper transformed my learning by putting my own experiences in to context. I was able to make sense of what I had heard and seen about South African education. It gave me insight in to how transformation of South African education was being pursued. Jansen and Sayed talk about the need for a “paradigm shift”

Table 1¹⁵

Old South African education	New South African education
Top-down	Democratic
Hierarchical	Collegial
Bureaucratic	Responsive
Centralised	Decentralised
Disempowering	Empowering
Fragmented	Integrated
Rigid	Flexible
Lack of ownership by participants	Stakeholder Ownership
Conservative	Creative
Controlling	Transformative
Closed	Open
Discriminatory	Inclusive

¹³ This session took place on Saturday 11th May at Bath University.

¹⁴ See Appendix 6

¹⁵ P 177

I recognised the values expressed as those of the new South African education, as ones that I adhere to in my own teaching. Through my involvement in vocational and skills based learning, I have sought to empower students to take responsibility for their own learning and give them ownership of their own learning. Reading this paper transformed my own understanding of my role as an educator and made me consider how I can live out more fully these values in my teaching.

I also recognised the relationship between the transformation of education and the political transformation already achieved and the socio-economic transformation still to come. This leads me to conclude that the title of the poem *Nothings Changed* does not accurately describe the political situation in South Africa, however it does concur with the situation regarding the living conditions of many black South Africans.

Empowering educators and students to take responsibility for their own learning is a crucial step in socio-economic transformation. This transformation of education is also necessary to cement the political transformation of South Africa. My desire to use my South African experience to influence others and myself stems from a belief that it is possible to help this transformation process. As Jansen and Sayed (2001) say

“The help that is sought is not esoteric knowledge but ways to implement policy at a very practical level”¹⁶

This gives me reason to believe that I and my colleagues and students can make a difference. I find my belief in my own transformatory capacity as an action researcher reinforced by Jean McNiff.

“If you can improve what you are doing (at least improve your understanding of what you are doing), there is a good chance you will influence the situation you are working in.” (McNiff 2002)¹⁷

¹⁶ P181 See References

¹⁷ See References

I therefore set out to raise the awareness of colleagues and students that we have a duty as fellow human beings to support the transformation process. I presented extracts from the paper and the video footage that I had shot in South African schools to my colleagues.

Analysis of my presentation¹⁸

Influence on my own education

Watching the video of my session at Bath University with a critical friend enabled me to draw out the influence that the South African experience had had on my own education. It brought to the surface most powerfully my own educational values.¹⁹ My analysis²⁰ shows that:

- I have a deepened knowledge of South African education and the values on which it is based.
- I feel the South African education system is unjust and that we ought to be helping in some way to transform the system.
- I value resources highly and believe that improved resources can have a real impact on learning.
- I believe that poor social conditions cause crime and have an impact on educational standards.
- I believe that we as a School can do something to help the transformation process.
- I do not value a didactic approach to teaching as much as a more student-centred approach.
- I am inclusive in as much as I value the reactions of my audience.
- I believe in equal rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

My own values have been shaped by my experience as an educator for twenty years in comprehensive schools in the UK. I have been able to live out my values by teaching pupils from a wide range of social backgrounds. I have

¹⁸ For my notes analysing the video footage see Appendix 8

¹⁹ The video of my session is Included as Appendix 7

been delighted when I have contributed to a pupil succeeding by going on to further education or in to a good job. This enables me to live out my belief in equal opportunities. My South African experience challenged me to live out more fully my belief in equal opportunities.

I believe the video evidence shows me developing my spiritual intelligence as I address issues of meaning and value. I am developing values that colleagues can agree with and support. I am providing direction and moral purpose. Zohar and Marshall (2000)²¹ talk about spiritual intelligence as being the ultimate form of intelligence and they define it as follows:

“The intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence with which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context, the intelligence with which we can assess that one course of action or one life-path is more meaningful than another.”

A response from a colleague about the limitations of the video made me reflect on the transformation in my own learning brought about by my visit to South Africa. Experiencing the situation first hand had not only given me a far better knowledge and understanding of South Africa but had enabled me to analyse the situation and formulate a very powerful personal emotional response. As she said:

“The video omits the emotion compared to being there” (Hosey 2002)²²

Through being there I had established an emotional engagement with the people of the country. The challenge for me was to use my experience to engage others and spur them to action.

²⁰ My rough notes on my analysis of the video footage are included as Appendix

²¹ See References

My Influence on the Education of Others

The reaction of colleagues tells me a great deal about how the session influenced them. One colleague drew connections with her own experience of the education system in Bangladesh. For her the factor that had stood out the most was the inequality. Another colleague says that she had witnessed similar inequalities in schools in Germany. Both of these contributions indicate that colleagues were reflecting on their own experiences in the light of what they had just seen and were making public what they already knew and generating new knowledge. As McNiff says:

“New knowledge can most effectively be generated through dialogue with others who are equally interested in the process of learning” (McNiff 2002)

Another colleague draws on his knowledge of South African literature and the poem *Nothings Changed* by Tatamkhulu Afrika.²³ He suggests that for him the video provides evidence that little has changed in the South African educational system and that the transformation process in education will be very difficult to achieve without a transformation in the social conditions. This is an opposite viewpoint to that expressed by Jansen and Sayed and Themba Mthembu, who regard the transformation of education as the key to transforming South African society.

For one colleague the video left him with this image:

“The powerful image of glowing black faces of humanity and then you think of the context of the conditions in which the students are living and it is corrupted”

The use of emotive language in his response indicates the deep impression made by the video.

²² Kate Hosey is a teacher and member of the Westwood St Thomas research group. The comment was made in response to my presentation at Bath University.

²³ See Pages 3-4.

Another educator said that she had learned from the video footage and my commentary how Schools are products of their own community and are influenced by them. She drew parallels with her own School and how it is influenced by its catchment area, the most socially deprived ward in Wiltshire. This same educator later approached me to offer her help and that of her tutor group in establishing a link and fundraising.

Spreading the Word

Having reflected on the session at Bath, I decided that I needed an ambitious, yet achievable goal that would inspire others and myself to action. I decided that my goal would be to build a team of educators and students that would work to establish a link with Nqabakazulu School in the black township of Kwamashu in Durban. Our aim would be to raise sufficient funds to equip a room with a network of ten computers with up to date software. A team of educators and students could then visit the School to help to install the system and advise on its' use. This would enable us to establish email links with students in the School and, together with training, help to transform teaching and learning in the School. I decided to put this idea to the group at our next meeting on Wednesday 15th May and to the Year 12 students in an Assembly.

In discussing my idea with others, I came to recognise that I was in danger of contradicting my own deeply held values and those of the new South African education system. The values of inclusiveness, responsiveness and openness are inconsistent with an imposed idea of how to establish the link. As my wife, one student and one colleague subsequently pointed out, how did I know that what Nqabakazulu School wants is a suite of networked computers? Do they have other priorities that we could contribute to? This made me realise that the process of establishing the link is as important as the outcomes from the link.

I had thought through the benefits in my own mind prior to making the suggestion but these responses made me think again. I decided to go ahead with the suggestion and publicly state my reasoning for suggesting this as a goal. I reasoned it as follows:

- It would capture the imagination of Thiris, the teacher with whom I was in email contact with, an ICT teacher. I had talked to him in South Africa and he had struck me as someone who shared my educational values.
- It would enable us to develop the link more fully through email between staff and students, once the network was up and running. The link would then be broadened and deepened.
- ICT is an area in which we have considerable expertise as a School, both amongst staff and students. We could draw on that expertise to establish the system.
- I believe that ICT has a major role to play in education. Establishment of a network of computers, together with INSET on teaching and learning using ICT, would give students at Nqabakazulu School a real opportunity to develop skills that they are unable to access at the moment. As a believer in the value of vocational education, it would enhance the student's job prospects.
- It would, I think capture the imagination of our own staff and student body.

The reaction from the Year 12 students and of my staff colleagues was very enthusiastic and led to an impromptu Staff Room discussion about possible fundraising events and how to buy the computers at lowest possible cost. One sixth form student said that his father builds computers at home at a fraction of the cost that they retail for and that he would discuss with him how to make it work at the lowest possible cost.

Despite this rationale, I decided that if I am to really live my values to the full, I would need to seek the views of the South African School, through Thiris my email contact. The comments by my wife and others had led me to re-examine my motives for developing the link. I needed to take a more

democratic approach to the establishment of a link and see it as more of a two way process seeking to empower them to make decisions about how to take it forward. An email to Thiris followed:

Date: 21 May 2002

From: Mark Potts

To: Thiris Arumugam (Nqabakazulu School – South Africa)

In the past few weeks I have been showing students and staff at my School in England, Westwood St Thomas' School, the video footage that I took in South African Schools and telling them about my experience there. It has had a big impact on those who have seen it and I have a proposal to make. My School would like to establish a long-term link with yours and we would like to this link to be fruitful for both Schools. One way in which we could establish this link is that we could raise funds to pay for some new computers for your School and send some staff and students out to your School to set up the computers and install the latest software on them. If we could do this it would allow our staff and students to communicate through email with your staff and students and we could enrich each others lives. I fully realise that your School may have other priorities for development and we may be able to help with those instead. Perhaps you could discuss this idea with your Headteacher and reply to me. Or else, the Headteacher may prefer me to contact him directly and I will then write a letter to him. Please let me know the best way to proceed with this.

My family are very well and I hope that yours are too.

Love

Mark

A response followed:

Hello Mark and greetings from all at Nqabakazulu Sec Kwa Mashu South Africa, I printed a copy of your message and distributed it all around school and the principal together with the staff are extremely excited about your proposal.

We cannot contain our excitement and waiting for this project to materialise. Children from our school will be on-line with children from your school. We also look forward to creating a link between your

institution and ours and also the visiting of both learners and teachers from both countries.

We are excited and hope to hear from you soon.

My principal has delegated me to be in charge of this electronic medium of conversation and I hope to hear from you soon.

T. Arumugam (H.O.D Technology)
(Thiru)

God bless you Mark

I was delighted with this response and spurred on to establish a link that would influence learners in both countries. There was a shared recognition of the potential benefits to be gained. It was an emotional response and I was mindful of the expectations that I had raised. I had to be committed to fulfilling these expectations.

Having validated my claim to influence my own learning and the learning of others through my analysis of the video evidence of my presentation at Bath University, I now wanted to influence others.

An English teacher colleague of mine, Simon, had seen the video at Bath and suggested that we might use it to give his Year 11 GCSE English students an insight in to the culture of South Africa. They had been studying the poem Nothings Changed, and could benefit from seeing the social conditions that gave rise to it.

We planned the session carefully with Simon doing another read through of the poem, followed by me commenting on the video footage. The process of action research has made me very aware of the need to provide evidence of my influence on learning and therefore the session was captured on digital camcorder and the footage is attached as Appendix 9.²⁴ The lesson was their second to last English lesson and they were leaving School the next day.

²⁴ I recorder the section that shows Simon teaching the lesson and Simon recorded my part of the lesson.

There was an excited and celebratory atmosphere in the room. The video recording shows that my commentary and video footage held their attention for twenty minutes. I wanted them to reflect on what they had seen in the video and heard in my commentary and consider how it related to the poem. I also wanted them to empathise with the situation of the black children and perceive the injustice and inequality that colleagues at Bath had seen. Again, mindful of the need to validate my claims to influence, I designed a sheet with some prompts for paired discussion to record their thoughts on²⁵.

From the responses I conclude that the teacher and students gained a deeper knowledge of South African society and the context in which the poem was written. They felt a sense of connection with the different people as they recognised the lack of humanity in the social conditions in the black township. They use words like “isolated”, “separated” and “betrayed” to describe how they would feel as a black person living in the black township. At the same time they recognised the privileged position of the students in the better-resourced schools. In the following lesson, Simon asked the students to relate the poem to the video footage in a written task²⁶. Russell Green writes:

“Some things have changed.. blacks have some power..still haven’t changed much in the way that they live because of money problems..”

To engage with others in learning about how to identify influence on learning, I shared an extract of the lesson with my Bath University colleagues. I showed the last five minutes of the Year 11 lesson when I was leading a question and answer session, asking students to reflect on what they had learned from the South African video. At the end of the lesson the students gave a spontaneous round of applause. Simon, the teacher, said that he saw this as an affirmation of their appreciative response to the session. He felt that they had seen it as something of an occasion, having myself, a business teacher, come in to do a special session with them. From Simons’ viewpoint, I could claim this positive emotional response as evidence that effective learning had

²⁵ See Appendix 10

²⁶ See Appendix 11

taken place. Others in the Bath University group were less convinced, feeling that the group dynamic and the fact that they were just two days away from leaving school generated the positive response. They pointed out that during the question and answer session the body language of some of the students had suggested that they were more concerned with some internal issues than with the learning from the video. From this discussion I learned again the value of engaging with others in discussion about learning. Different interpretations can be made about events in the classroom and claims about influence are not as straightforward as they might at first seem.

A claim that I am more confident in making is to have influenced the learning of two members of the English department. Both commented that they had learned from my project the value of video footage in showing the cultural context of the poetry. The Head of English said:

“We need to introduce video to poetry lessons to bring it alive. This will have to be built in to our scheme of work”. (Riding 2002)²⁷

Conclusions and Next Steps

My South African experience had met one of the criteria that the national learning agenda should offer, according to Pat Collarbone

“Learning opportunities which create enduring change in individuals and their organisations” (Collarbone 2002)

Neither my School, nor I will be the same as a result of my visit to South Africa. As I have demonstrated, the experience has changed me and my colleagues and students at the School. This change will endure due to the link that I have been inspired to establish.

²⁷ Simon Riding is Head of English at Westwood St Thomas School.

For me the crucial learning in this project has come from the examination of my own values that has given me the self-awareness to reflect more clearly on my own educational values and engage critically with the literature. For example, as a part of my NPQH²⁸ training I read about perspectives on inclusion. From five stated viewpoints on inclusion, I was able to recognise that my own perspective on this issue is closest to the position that:

Inclusion is about a philosophy of acceptance; it is about providing a framework within which all children – regardless of ability, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin – can be valued equally, treated with respect and provided with equal opportunities at school. (Thomas et al 1998)

My experience in South Africa, reflection on it and my desire to act has provided the context for deep learning about my own educational values. It has provided me with the opportunity to act to live out those values and in doing so I claim to have influenced others in their examination of their own educational values.

This influence will continue as I involve others in developing the link with Nqabakazulu School. As we continue the project educators and students in both schools and both local communities will benefit from the learning that takes place.

*“It is unfortunate that schools have fences”*²⁹(Sayed 2001)

We must recognise that our students cannot be sheltered from learning the harsh realities of community and public life. As global citizens we have a responsibility for the welfare of each other. Through the link there is much that we can learn from each other. The establishment of a link is a powerful statement of our values as a School.

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