Worms turn into butterflies

Menna Godfrey tells the story of her response to a four-year-old’s insistence that worms turn into butterflies and how this prompted her to reflect again on her understanding of children’s learning.

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F YOU came along to our seminar ‘Being an inspiration as an EYP’ at the CWDC EYP conference in Birmingham, back in July, you will have heard some of this story before. We hope it will inspire you to think again about your own responses to children’s developing thinking and how you support other practitioners in reflective practice.

All too often when we talk about being reflective practitioners we are simply asking ourselves questions about what happened and what we did about it. While this is a good start, I believe we need to go further to ask why we did what we did, in relation to our beliefs about how young children learn.

The stimulus for our thinking about reflective practice is undoubtedly the work of Donald Schön.

I was challenged to consider exactly this when I overheard the following conversation as I observed a group of three and four-year-olds with a worm they had dug up.

As I listened, I heard one of our more fluent and influential four-year-olds state, very dogmatically: ‘Worms turn into butterflies you know.’ I was surprised at this comment, especially at the confidence with which it was delivered. I began a process Schön would call ‘Reflection in action’ almost without thinking about it; he described it as ‘thinking on one’s feet’.

Why has she got it wrong? – We have posters up showing the life cycle of a butterfly, we have read The Very Hungry Caterpillar many times, and played the game and done the jigsaw!

What should I do? – I cannot have all these children thinking worms turn into butterflies.

Should I tell them she is wrong and I am right? What would that do to her self-esteem? Would it encourage the others in the group to volunteer answers in the future?

In a split second all these thoughts raced through my mind. ‘Are you all sure about that?’ I asked. ‘What else do you know about butterflies?’

As the conversation progressed, and others contributed, it became clear that the children knew that caterpillars turn into butterflies. What they were not sure about was what worms turned into! The originator of the statement was convinced that they also turn into butterflies.

It is definitely easier to show what ‘does’ happen through sharing ‘information’ books than it is to show what does ‘not’ happen. No-one has produced a book or online source to explain that worms do not turn into butterflies.

As the group’s interest turned to how the worm moved and whether they could find any more, the moment had passed. At circle time we again read The Very Hungry Caterpillar, we looked at a poster showing the life cycle of a butterfly and I introduced the word ‘metamorphosis’ – which was a great success because the children are at the stage where they love long words!

Later, during my reflection, I talked with other members of staff and friends about the incident. I believe that children learn best by experience but I could not immediately offer this.

Should we set up a wormery? What about buying a ‘hatch your own caterpillar’ kit? I could download a video clip showing the life cycle of a butterfly.

I hope that I inspired my staff team to think reflectively about the ‘learning experiences’ they are a part of.

I also considered how my understanding of young children’s learning had prevented me from telling them the ‘answer’ (that I was right and they were wrong). I had used their knowledge to inform our discussion and together to construct a theory about the world of worms, caterpillars and butterflies.

We had considered possibilities together and while the question of what worms turn into was still unresolved for some of them, I had been able to offer my understanding that worms just go on getting bigger – maybe the wormery will help the learning become embedded.

I also wondered how I first knew about caterpillars and butterflies myself and remembered finding a caterpillar in hedge clippings at the age of four or five. My father found a shoe box and with careful attention we followed the life cycle of the privet hawk moth until the moth emerged. I dare say I also kept worms!

Although quite a simple, focused example of interactions with the children, I was reminded that, used together, Reflection-in-action and Reflection-on-action (Schön) aid practitioners in reaching a personal understanding, not only of what we do, but why we do what we do, and the way that we do it.

Reference