Research Article

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‘You’re Alive!’: On the ‘Livingness’ of Spirited Educational Research

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Abstract: This paper explore ideas of ‘livingness’ in education and in research, through ideas of spirituality, conversation, care and curiosity. Research ‘on’ education is distinguished from educational research, with the latter having a transformative intention, and this can overcome some of the dualisms that have become embedded in education policy and practice. Research that is surprising has this in common with dialogue, in Buber’s terms, and with transformative education. And the care for the object of study that researchers may exhibit is related to mutual care in all ethical relationships. This is an appropriate guide to curiosity. One example of such curious research is the use of conversation, conversation that is more dialogic than dialectical. In such ways, education and research can together be more ‘alive’, as can we all.

Keywords: dialogue; conversation; spirituality; livingness; Martin Buber

1 Introduction

The title of this short paper quotes a student who was present at a research seminar I gave in a university. The seminar was for staff and students, and a small group of students came up afterwards to thank me. One of them explained that they had been using one of my books for their assignments. She continued, with surprise and pleasure in her voice, ‘but … but … you’re *alive*!’ I enjoyed the comment, and it made me think more about ‘livingness’, and how ‘dead’ a lot of writing and other academic work can seem to people. In one sense it is obvious to everyone – even to quite young children – that a book is written by a person who may still be alive. Yet it is still a surprise for most adults to meet an author of a book they have read. There is something about the dynamic or moving or conversational or embodied character of a real live person that doesn’t quite suit the more static or monologic or disembodied character that we attribute to many books. Some books – especially novels and poetry – have a more dynamic and living quality, but that seems personal to the reader (as the characters in novels are like friends), so the author has a separate assumed existence, a bit like a parent or grandparent of a conventional living friend, someone whom we *may* not know at all, and whom we can ignore if we want to. (If I were to meet an author of a novel, I might say ‘*you’re* alive!’, as I had not thought the characters had an author, rather than ‘you’re *alive*!’, which expresses surprise that a rather ‘dead’ book has a ‘living’ author.)

There are several consequences of this story, for my work and others involved in research of various kinds. One is as an illustration of what I would call ‘spirituality’ or being ‘spirited’. It also speaks to the difference between research that is ‘on’ a subject and that is ‘in’ a subject: for education, the difference between ‘education’ research and ‘education*al*’ research. One of the research methods I have used myself, an ancient method that is nevertheless a somewhat marginalised activity, is conversation. That is an example of what I would call ‘spirited’ research, and therefore another illustration of ‘livingness’. This article presents these themes separately, and brings them together in an argument for why such approaches can help transform education (or support transformative education) and help transform research (or support transformative research). It is no good transforming for the sake of transformation, of course, so I consider an appropriate purpose of transformation in these contexts, and how we might therefore juggle the educational, spiritedness, conversation, care and curiosity. They all orbit around livingness. We are all, as it were, surprisingly *alive*.

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2 Spirituality and Educational Research

There are ordinary as well as extraordinary meanings of 'spirit' and therefore 'spirituality'. A parent may say 'I like my children to be *spirited*', and this has an ordinary albeit valuable meaning, a sense of children having a bit of life to them, being active and motivated and *lively*. Extraordinary meanings of spirituality often have religious implications, but are not so far away from the ordinary meanings. For example, in Jewish and Christian traditions, it is said of Adam that he had life 'breathed into him', with the word 'spirit' coming from the Latin word for 'breath', in turn from translations of the similarly breathy Greek *pneuma* and Hebrew *ruach*. Here, some analysis is provided of possible meanings of spirituality itself, and then the links between spirituality and education, and the outcome of researching the 'spirit of the school'.

2.1 Substantial (dualist) and relational spirituality

Through religious and non-religious cultures, spirituality, ordinary and extraordinary, has been used in two different kinds of way. One set of traditions is wholly dualist and refers to the spiritual as a separate substance, as in phrases referring to 'the material and spiritual worlds', or references to 'touching the spirit'. The other set of traditions is either monist or only contingently (temporarily) dualist, and refers to the spiritual in terms of relationships, for example as a breath (between a god and a lump of clay, in biblical accounts) or as a 'spark' that joins together (as in many descriptions of love, between people and between the divine and the human). In Jewish and Christian religious cultures, there are examples of both of these traditions, which I refer to as the 'substance' and 'relational' approaches to spirituality (Hay with Nye 2006).

The UK education laws have, since 1944, required that all government-funded schools support the spiritual development of children and young people (Education Act 1944). This policy was the stimulus for my own research on spirituality (Stern 2009a), exploring whether and how the policy could be legitimately implemented in schools where many (roughly half) of the students and staff expressed no specific religious identity. I came to the conclusion that 'substance' theories of spirituality required specific beliefs that would not be shared by a significant proportion of those in schools – those who were materialist, and many others including some monist (i.e. non-dualist) religious followers such as many Buddhists and many of those identifying as Hindu. So I was inclined – from the perspective of inclusivity – towards a more relational approach to spirituality. I also came to the conclusion that I, myself, found relational approaches to spirituality rather more helpful, more explanatory, and more congenial when set alongside my other beliefs and values. In the end, the broadest – albeit relational – definition that I could come up with for spirituality was that spirituality involved overcoming contingent dualisms. That is, where there is significant division, if that division was overcome, this might be an example of spirituality or being spirited. Divisions might include the division between material existence and being alive, as in the biblical account of Adam, completed, according to Sacks, only when Adam meets Eve and is therefore fully a *person* (Sacks 2003, p 150-151). Other divisions include the division between the physical and the mental (for those like Descartes who believe in the *interconnection* between body and mind through the pineal gland, notwithstanding their nominal dualism), between the earth and heaven (joined in some Christian accounts by the Holy Spirit, represented by a dove flying between heaven and earth), between people (joined, according to the philosopher Buber 1958, 2002a, through *dialogue*), and between people and others (again, joined by dialogue, according to Buber, and including *dialogic* relationships to the clay or glass in craftwork, according to Sennett 2008, p 272). Where there is division so great as to be referred to as an albeit temporary, contingent, form of dualism, overcoming that division is at the heart of all the relational kinds of spirituality.

2.2 Spirited education and research

Such approaches to spirituality were therefore used in my own research on what became known as the 'spirit of the school' (Stern 2009a). That research explored aspects of relationality within and beyond schools. The process of the research, its methods and its methodology, involved what are conventionally called qualitative and broadly ethnographic approaches. Along with interviews, there were various activities that would also have been appropriate as classroom activities for students, or continuing professional development activities for staff. Participants were treated as 'informants' (as 'distinct person[s] with something unique to contribute') rather than 'respondents' ('provid[ing] raw data to be interpreted by someone else'), in the categorisation of Platt (1981, p 85). The participants' own interpretations were sought and discussed,

rather than them simply supplying information to be interpreted by the researcher. What emerged was evidence of a consciousness of the importance and richness of relationships within each school, and beyond each school. Relationships were described as close across generations, as well as amongst the students and amongst the staff (Stern 2012). 82% of 105 respondents (aged 7-16 and adult staff) described people from both generations as most close to them (Stern 2012, p 734), a surprising result given expectations that only intragenerational closeness would have been common, at least for anyone over the age of eleven.

A surprise, like the surprising intergenerational closeness, is evidence for what Buber describes as real or genuine dialogue, in contrast to technical dialogue (the exchange of information) or the all too common 'monologue disguised as dialogue' (Buber 2002a, p 22). A real conversation, like a real lesson or even a real fight, is evidenced by surprise (Stern 2013). The entirely predictable cannot be dialogic. This is also true, I suggest, of research, at least such research as is itself dialogic. It is not that all surprising research results are therefore the result of dialogue; rather, it is the *absence* of surprise that suggests the research is not dialogic but static or, in a sense, 'dead'. If nominally non-living objects such as clay or glass can be regarded as in (partial) dialogue with human beings, as Sennett says, and if trees and horses can be said to be in (partial) dialogue with human beings, as Buber says (Buber 1958, p 19-20, Buber 2002b, p 49-50, Buber 2002a, p 27), how much more 'alive' should we expect interactions between human beings to be? Research within school can be dialogic in such ways, and to the extent that it is, it can be regarded as not just 'about' education, it can be educational.

Educational research has an intention to develop or improve education (Bhindi and Duignan 1997), either the education of those involved in the research (as in the example given here) or the education of others. This can be built into the process of research, with research currently defined in UK and much international policy as a 'process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared' (DfENI 2019, p 90). The 'effective sharing' may be with other researchers (as in peer review and academic publishing processes) as intended by the definition, and it may also involve those directly involved in education such as students and staff in schools. Dialogue is as important to higher education as it is to schools, of course (Stern 2009b, 2014a), but research can not only transform schools 'from the outside': it can itself provide an appropriate exploratory *pedagogy* for schools (Stern 2010, 2014b).

Along with being dialogic and educational, such research can – through dialogue and through its educational intention – exhibit another ethical feature, that of care. Like dialogue (Buber's 'real' dialogue), care is ethical if it is mutual. Noddings differentiates ethical care from non-ethical 'care-giving'. When non-ethical, care-giving can involve providing hep or support, but it is not mutual, the care-giver is not open to care from the recipient of care-giving. Ethical care is always open to mutuality. And, also like dialogue, a human being can exhibit ethical care for a non-human being, if that non-human in turn might to some degree care in turn for the carer. This is the mutuality that craft workers describe of the clay or glass being worked upon (Sennett's dialogue is a clue to this), the way in which 'material reality talks back' (Sennett 2008, p 272), or a musician and their musical instrument may show for each other: the instrument responding to the touch of the musician. A researcher, in turn, has a relationship with what is being studied. When that is mutual, in other words when the object of study and the researcher are somehow to some extent in dialogue, there is an ethical care-based relationship. Researchers who exhibit care for the object of study are, I suggest, *curious* (Stern 2018a). Curiosity is a caring attitude, in contrast to simply exploiting the object of study for the researcher's own sake, and it can help transform performative education (Stern 2018b, 2020).

3 A Conversation on Transforming Education and Research

I carried out a number of conversations for a project on 'virtuous educational research: conversations on ethical practice' (Stern 2016). These were framed not as conventional interviews but as conversations, because they exhibited three distinguishing characteristics. In the first place, I attempted to change the power dynamic of a typical interview, to equalise the relationship. (I would not claim a relationship to be absolutely equal, but it is still possible to move towards greater equality, which is what I mean by 'equalise'.) This involved allowing each person, including children and young people (Stern 2015a), to lead the conversation at different times, changing tack in the interest of following up an important point. It also avoided the pretended 'neutrality' of the interviewer, as a real conversation is unlikely to ever attempt that (see McNiff 2008). Secondly, the structure of the conversation, including the structure of the *reporting* of the conversation, was also different. I gave the conversationalists editorial control over the content of the full transcript and of

the shortened 'tidied up' transcript from which the final text was drawn. I also kept the sequence of the conversation in the final reported version, rather than picking out quotations to support my own argument. This therefore also helped equalise the relationship.

The third distinctive feature of the conversations, as of any 'ordinary' conversation, was the lack of a predetermined outcome. Many discussions and debates and arguments are structured in order to generate a dialectic, with disagreement eventually resolved into a synthesis. A conversation, in contrast, may be dialogic rather than dialectical (Wegerif 2008, Chng and Coombs 2004), without requiring a resolution. 'In dialectic', Sennett tells us, 'the verbal play of opposites should gradually build up to a synthesis', whilst in dialogue the conversation 'does not resolve itself by finding common ground' yet 'through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another … [as] Bakhtin applied … to writers like Rabelais and Cervantes' (Sennett 2012, p 19). This uncertainty (Durka 2002, p 1) and interminability of conversations is what makes for a culture, as described by Oakeshott (1991, p 489-491). And it should not be feared. Noddings says that the main purpose of schooling is to help create 'better people', and that the question of what 'better people' means is always an open one. 'Well', people respond, 'you'd be in an interminable discussion'. 'Yes', she replies, 'it would be interminable', but 'that doesn't mean you never get anywhere' as 'you become more and more enlightened' (Noddings, in Stern 2016, p 28, and see Noddings 1994).

Enabling conversation is one of the ways in which I suggest education and research can both be transformed. I say this notwithstanding the presence of conversation throughout history and across all culture. Nevertheless, education is all too often fixed and predetermined, outcome-driven and with fixed unyielding 'scripts'. Such education is matched by much current research which is, in turn, also predetermined and involving fixed scripts even when nominally 'qualitative'. Conversation can sound, and can be, radically transformative (e.g. Bana 2010, Feldman 1999, Jasinski and Lewis 2016, Olsson 2018, Sanjakdar 2009). In my own published conversations on research, Pirrie describes the quality she most valued in research as its 'livingness', the 'animating thing … the livingness of it'. Research exhibiting 'livingness' is 'about how you do it', it is 'always remembering people past, engaging and interacting with people who are not there, that are in the pages of books' (Pirrie, in Stern 2016, p 60-61, and see Pirrie 2019).

4 Conclusion

Such livingness takes me back to the sense of mundane spirituality or ordinary 'spiritedness' (Wong 2006, Stern 2015b, Stern and Kohn 2019), as well as ethical care for the object of study. Research and education, and especially educational research, that exhibits such spirituality will be transformed from less dynamic, 'dead' research into more flexible, living, spirited research. This has been my own experience in research on spirituality (Stern 2009a) and on virtuous research (Stern 2016a) and much more. Through an unconventional research career addressing a wide range of issues, my own studies have suggested that it is not enough to seek transformation simply for the sake of transformation, but to juggle various aspects of spirituality, the educational, conversation, care and curiosity, in ways that can promote a certain *livingness*. I am, I hope, at least *alive*.

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