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Authentic Family Learning

Real Life Reading
and Writing in the
Community



What is family learning?

A form of community education that takes place in libraries, museums, primary schools, nurseries and children's centres

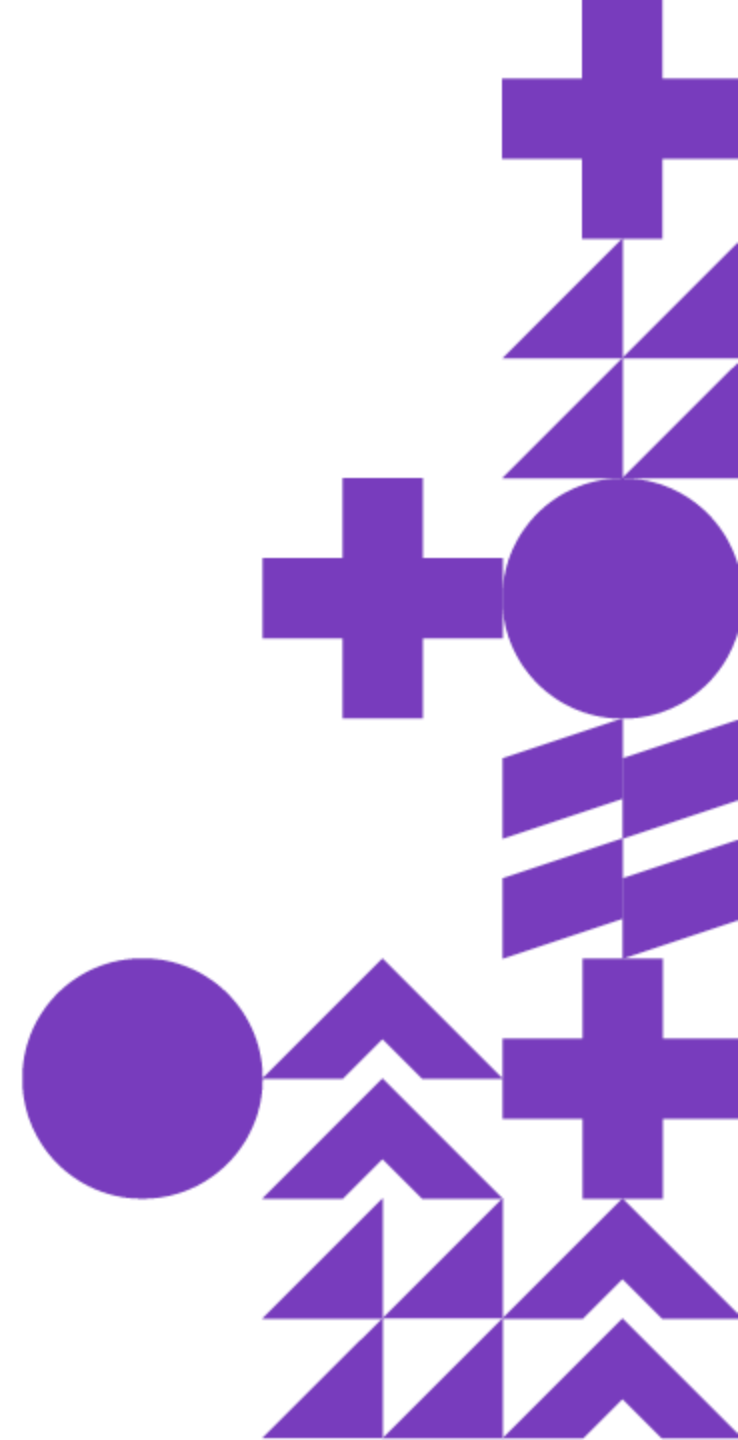
Parents and children learn together – usually during school day

Paid for by the local authority

Courses are usually between 5 and 10 weeks long

Usually centre around literacy, numeracy or ICT

Aim to develop parents reading, writing and maths skills, develop home/school connection, help parents support their children's learning, foster community cohesion.





Professional Discomfort

Rhetoric vs. Reality

My expectations about community education and the reality of family learning were very different

- No children in the classroom
- Pretend lesson plans
- 'Individual Learning Plans' that were prepared in advance and impossible to attend to in reality
- Not telling parents about the 'corrective' aims of the programmes
- Fortified learning environments
- Looking after the paperwork not the people
- Reliance on worksheets and drilling literacy skills

....this was the starting point for developing an 'authentic' approach to family learning that would *do exactly what it said on the tin.*



Value as Virtue?

Family learning programmes have been interpreted in different ways.

For example, Prins, Willson Toso, and Schafft (2009) articulate their **empowering impacts**, especially in helping women in poverty to receive social support that in turn enhances their psychosocial well-being.

In contrast, more critical evaluations by Pitt (2002), Sparks (2001), Tett (2001) and Smythe and Isserlis (2004) relay the more **coercive and regulatory dimensions** of family learning for variously troubling the role and place of parents/mothers in contemporary society.



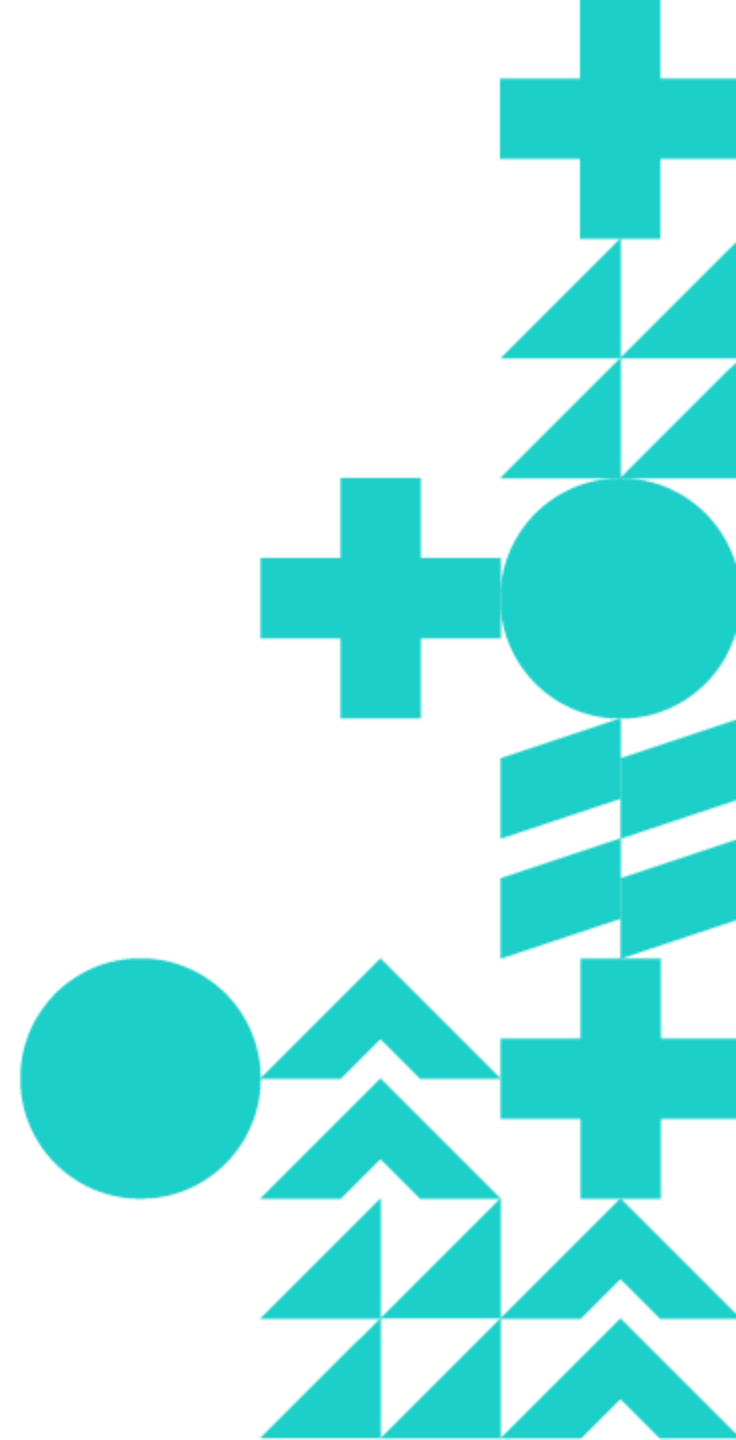
Value as Virtue?

Both readings are important and have their place.

As Vincent and Warren (1998, 191) point out family learning is neither wholly 'oppressive' nor wholly 'liberating'.

AFL has helped me understand that 'it is only by recognising and holding these opposing readings in tension, that an analysis can be formed which appreciates both strengths and weaknesses'.

Authentic doesn't mean perfect or better or special – it means real.



'keep your view of sensitive issues private; protect yourself by avoiding interpersonal confrontation and public discussion of sensitive issues; protect others in the same way; control the situation and the task by making up your own mind and keeping it private'

(Mezirow, 1991, p.104)

This above all: to thine own self be true

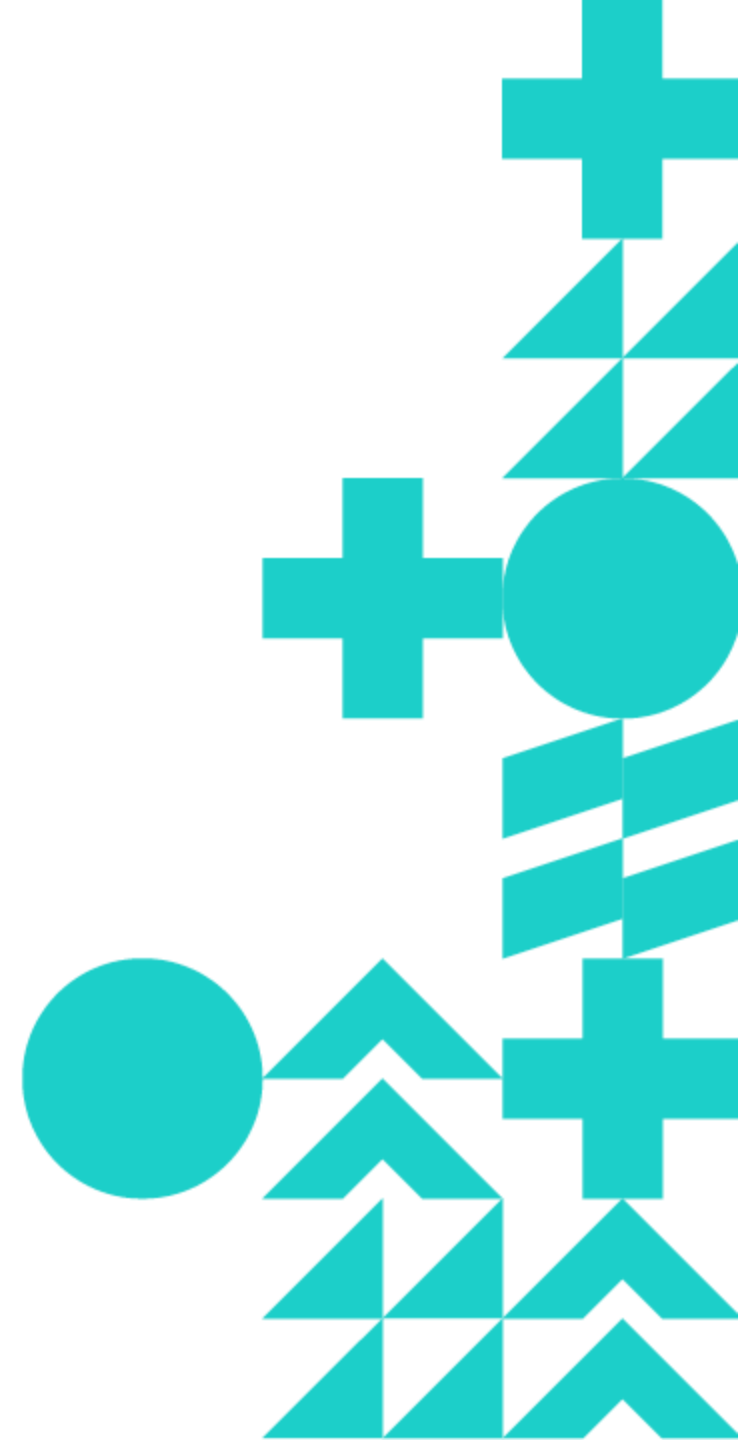


What is AFL?

AFL is a form of Family Learning that focuses on real life activities that have meaning and purpose **and** that can be achieved as a group.

The focus shifted from decontextualised literacy tasks and tests to real life activities including

- Creating Story Sacks
- Arranging Educational Visits
- Creating classroom displays
- Writing letters to children





What did I do?

Methodology

I used Burawoy's Extended Case Method

An immersive approach that moves through

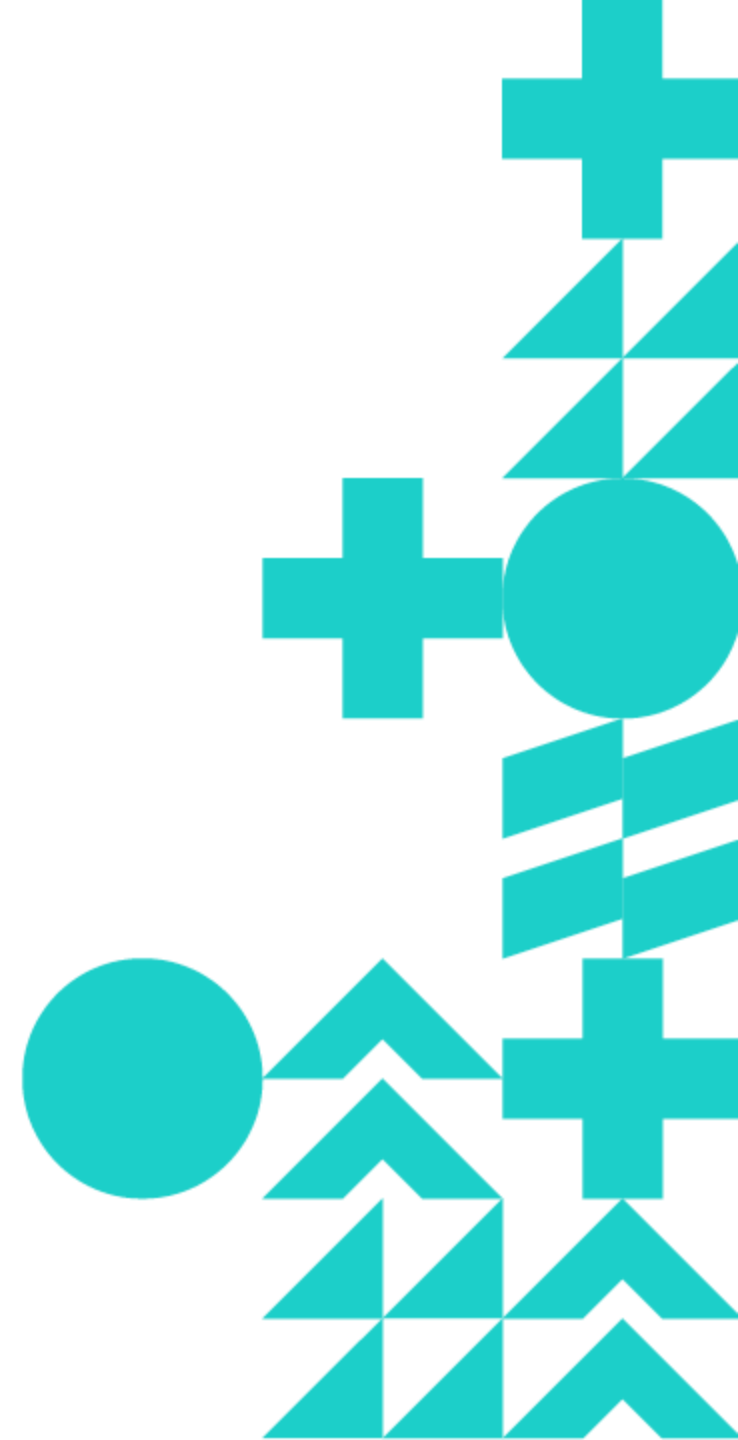
Intervention

Process

Force

Aims to relate interactions observed at the micro level to macro forces.

This helps establish how wider political, social and economic forces shape the individual's actions within Family Learning and strengthens my definition and characterisation of AFL



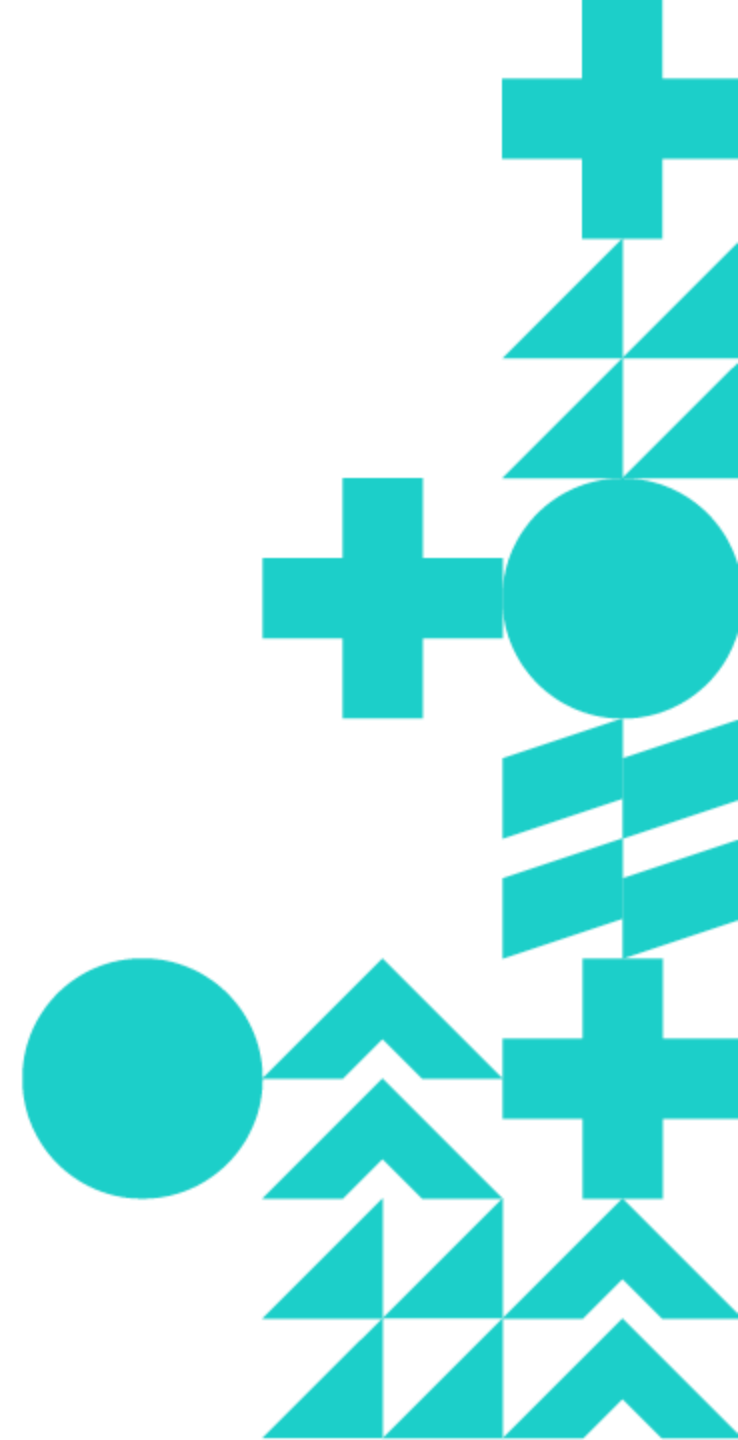
Sample

I delivered 1 AFL course in 5 different primary schools

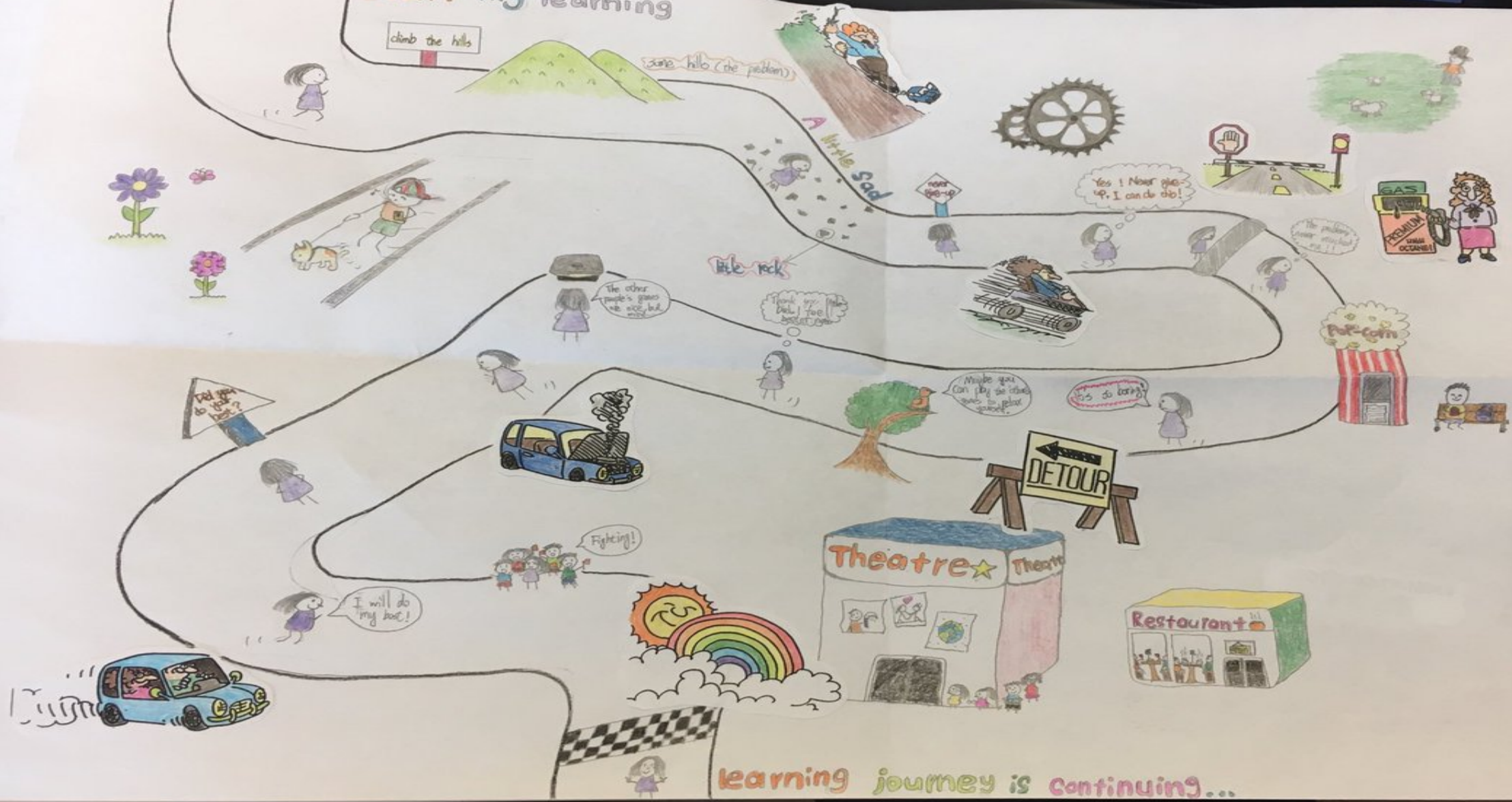
Each course was 10 weeks long

Project lasted 3 academic years

54 parents participated



Start my learning



By Lisa



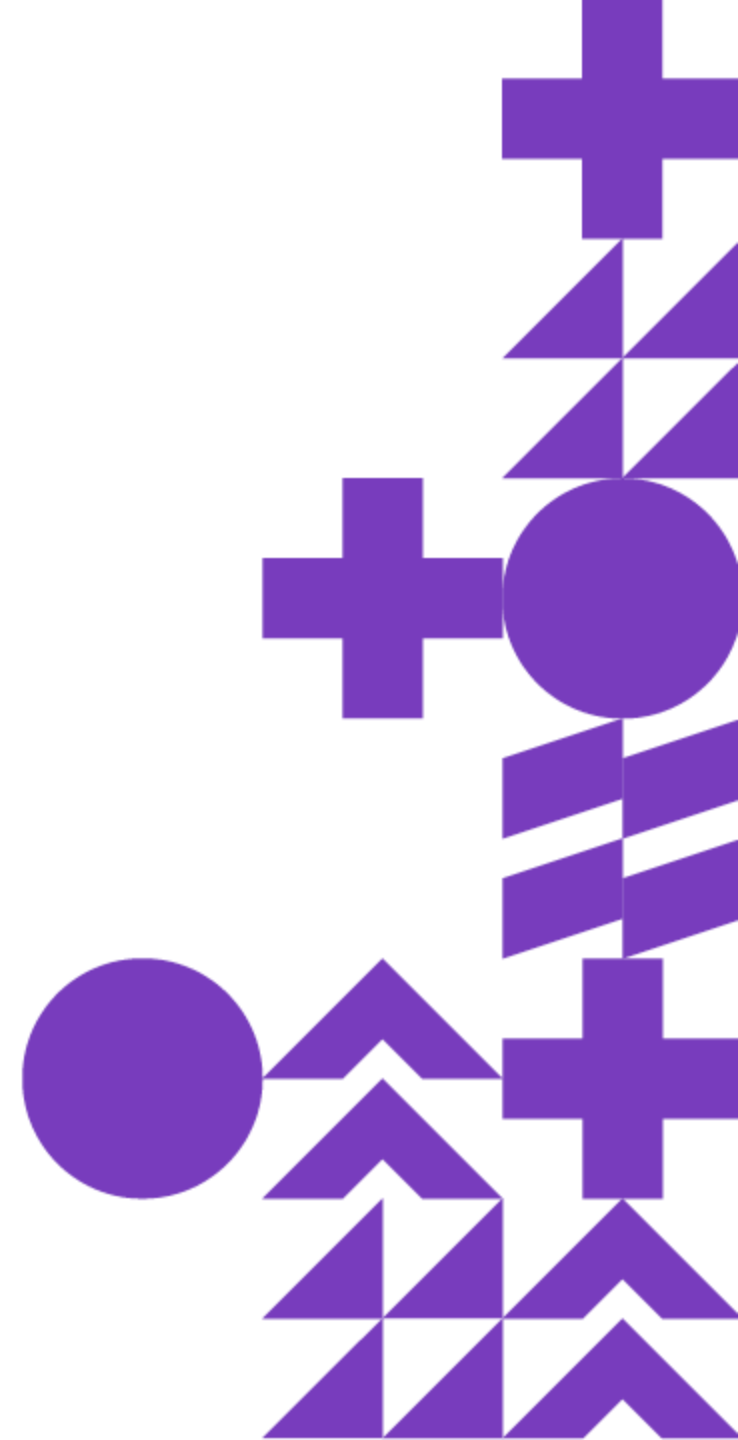
Understanding authenticity

Philosophical Findings

One benefit of doctoral study is getting the opportunity to bring together what Arendt (1958) called the 'active life' and the 'contemplative life' by identifying the relevance of philosophical ideas to the real lives of myself and the parents and practitioners involved in the study.

In my case, I was able to clarify and deepen my understanding of the value of authenticity in education.

I now see authenticity as important in three ways...



Authenticity as FREEDOM

Sartre contends that human beings are responsible for their own freedom and that those who *choose to believe they are not actually free*, due to extralocal factors, are living in a state of inauthenticity or 'bad faith'.

The routine treatment of parents as interlopers, as opposed to community members, contributes to the production and endorsement of institutional norms that legitimise the authority of the school and curtail the freedom of some parents to participate as an equal member of the school; for example by speaking freely or making requests.



Authenticity as TRUTH

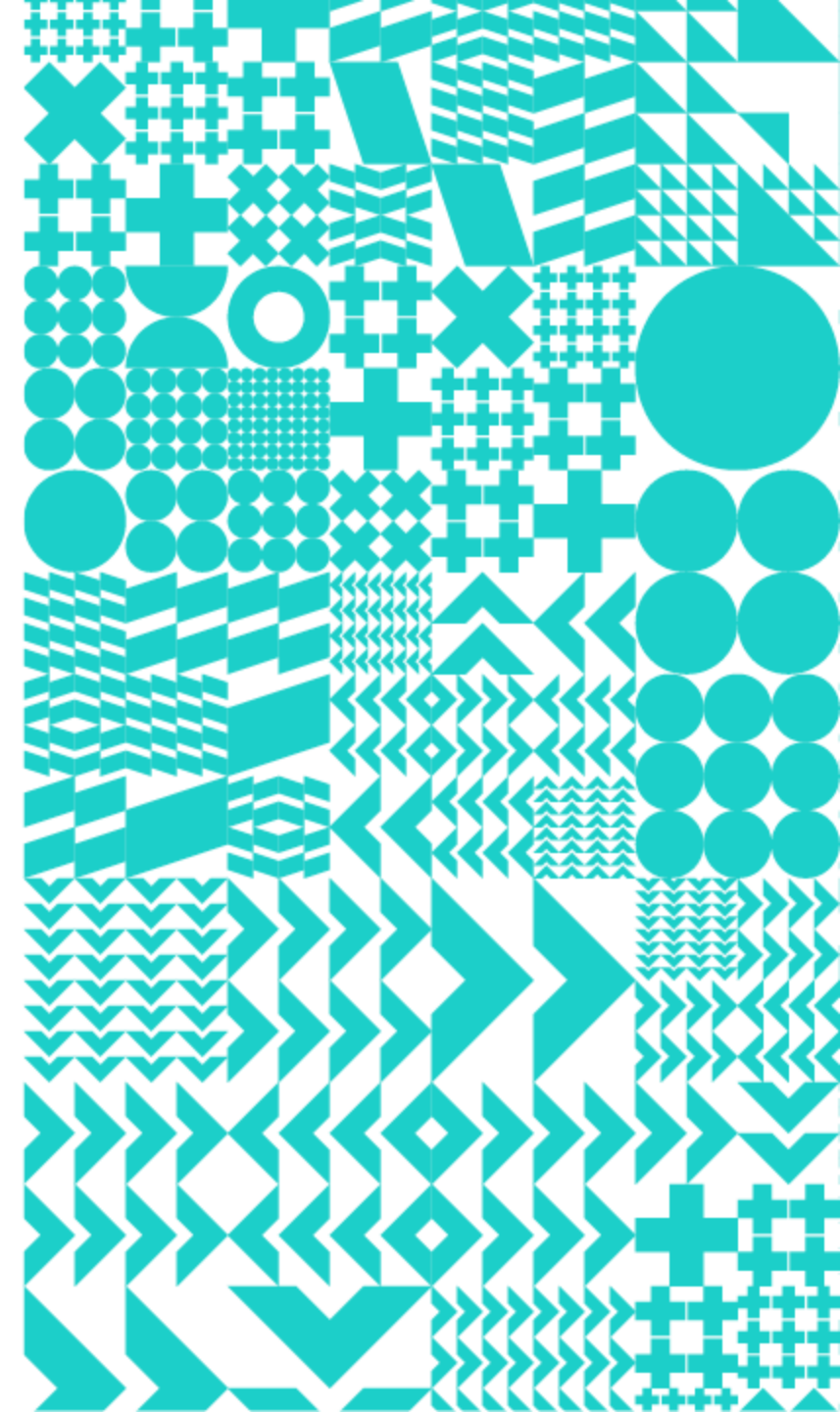
Aristotelian interpretation of authenticity; truthfulness or parrhesia

It encompasses the obligation to speak the truth for the common good, even at personal risk.

This truthfulness starts with yourself

Aristotle compels individuals to seek out the **origin of their actions** and to understand whether they are being true to their own beliefs or if their actions serve the interests of another.

For example, we might ask ourselves whether we are doing something for praise or to avoid punishment or to align with the values of our organisation.



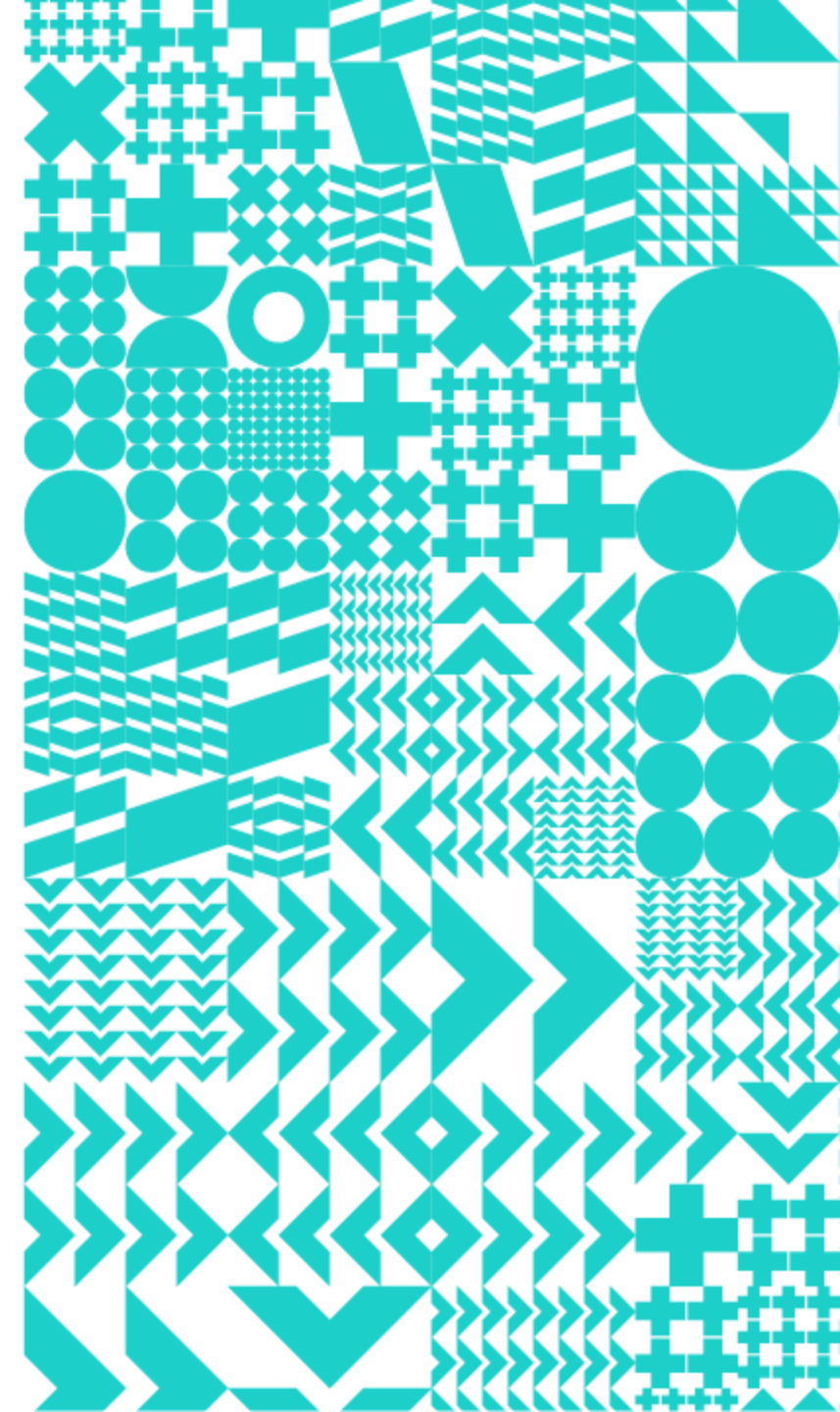
Authenticity as TRUTH

One way that truthfulness is established within AFL is by acknowledging challenges and setting intentions as a learning community at the start of courses.

In this way, AFL situates the 'person-in-the-world' that they really inhabit (Lave & Wenger, 1991,52).

Thus, AFL benefits from the reciprocal trust derived from truthful interactions about the lived realities of families

For example, less frustration about the gap between parents' espoused values about education versus actions such as lateness, lack of uniform or incomplete reading records



Authenticity as AFFECT

I developed a marked distrust of reason and rationality throughout my time as a family learning tutor as it was used to often to justify sub-optimal treatment of parents.

In this, I align with Rousseau who felt we are at our most authentic when we are in touch with the more passionate side of our nature and that reason is very often used in a self-deceptive way or in a rationalising way.

Ways that might divert us from our natural tendency toward compassion toward worse preoccupations such as with what others think of us or what is proper within our community.



Authenticity as AFFECT

Arendt cautioned against sentimental discourses of suffering that evoke pity rather than action and lead to voyeurism and passivity.

This is what she called cheap sentimentality

She also pointed out that what other people think matters because we live together in plurality

Guignon (2004, p.163) holds on to the Romantic predilection for the **individual's** "feelings, desires and beliefs", while emphasising authenticity as operating within a framework of belongingness and social indebtedness.



Discussion

Is there a core value that underpins your practice?

Which forces divert you away from your core value in practice?

Are your research values the same as your practice values?

Do the same forces divert you away from your values in research?

Have you found a philosophical underpinning for your values?

