‘At a Loss: scared and excited’: a response to Jonathan Silin

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ABSTRACT This response to Jonathan Silin’s article employs personal narrative to engage with learning and loss in early childhood education. For the author, in Jonathan Silin sharing his stories of loss, he also tells the author’s stories of loss. For the author, these shared experiences are the ‘very means by which we learn about loss; about grieving; about pain; about being social; about being human; about being relational. We learn how limited terms like “resilience” are; we learn more about ourselves and we certainly learn more about the others in our lives.’

Jonathan, thank you for giving voice to those things we experience in life that we are all too often reluctant to talk about publicly. They represent, as you say, ‘difficult knowledge’ that is erased from our memories; silenced from our mouths; denied or ignored in our thoughts. I cannot respond to you as though you are not here in person, as though you are only the words written on paper. I want to, almost need to, respond to you as you have identified yourself as: a scholar; a son; a gay man; a partner; a friend; a supervisor of post-graduate students.

My response acknowledges how you have sat with, experienced and learned from loss and explored its relationship to learning. In doing so, you name some constructs and concepts that reconceptualise our understanding of learning, and also of loss. You have done so, by sharing stories of who you are; the meanings you have given to the world and the events in your life from which we may look again at loss and learning. This method resonates with Aboriginal epistemology that stories convey knowledge, information and meaning just as much as any textbook. Your stories grabbed me immediately for two reasons. First, the presence of some key words and phrases you use jump off the page for me. They cause me to think; to unlearn and re-learn my own understandings of loss and of learning, both personally and professionally. Second is that you’re telling the story of my life experiences, but particularly in 2011. This caused me to be scared but excited. By exploring loss the silences are acknowledged, not ignored; the gaps are acknowledged and not hurried to be filled; the erasures are acknowledged and a space is created so that in time, they may begin to be characterised. This leads me to the first phrase you use, ‘a constellation of character traits’ (p. 17).

I found this phrase exciting as it confirms that people are not dualistic but have multiple subjectivities. This is a tenet of the Aboriginal worldview when one evolves through life’s experiences to make conscious the many roles and therefore identities one will enact. This is to become a ‘full person’. These multiplicities are necessary if we are to fulfil and have fulfilled for us the roles and responsibilities of being: a daughter; a sister; a mother; a colleague; a scholar; a member of a sporting team; an aunty; a wife; a friend, etc. That is, we can’t be a daughter without someone being a mother or father. We can’t be a friend without having others being the same to us.

Your examination of ‘learning’ locates it with the construct of change, and this in turn is located with the construct of loss. Learning therefore requires the loss of some parts of the self in
order to progress. This is exciting and scary. It raises the question, ‘Is that what we do as early childhood educators – establish experiences of loss, rather than of learning?’ I am brought to think about how we sanitise early childhood curriculum and pedagogy from parts of the constellation of characteristics when we only refer to positive ones and only provide positive experiences without equally referring to the real (including those experiences that are negative). How is it young children can learn about and become ‘socially competent’ and ‘effective communicators’ (two Learning Outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework, Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) if the adults in their lives resolve their tensions, spare them of conflict and don’t acknowledge loss in their lives? What are they missing out on, or being denied in being taught by early childhood educators who are only ever happy and are always striving to achieve happy early childhood programs and services? These are, as you challenge, the ‘less obvious’ questions about us, first as people and then as early childhood educators. Is this type of learning really more about loss? This reconceptualisation challenges us to see learning and loss as inter-related, not as contrasting or conflicting phenomena. Learning is about unlearning, reframing and re-learning some aspects. I think these are the very principles that Jean Piaget theorised as: assimilation, accommodation and adaptation.

Your reconceptualisation of loss speaks to and of a core of what it means to be human; to be social; to be relational. In doing so, it speaks to and of a core of what it means to experience loss but how learning comes from loss. These states of being are not usually situated side by side. There is an honesty; a vulnerability; an acknowledgement and acceptance of being scared in your exploration of loss. This is ‘difficult knowledge’ because it highlights the inadequacy of terms such as: resilience; social competence; emotional intelligence. I am not convinced that the term ‘resilience’, as it is commonly applied, is based on an understanding of the states and phases of loss, pain, grief or fear. It holds an expectation for one to ‘bounce back’ and then move on. This might be possible in some circumstances, but not so in others. It troubles me and I’m not sure why.

You highlight one outcome of what we, as early childhood educators, are doing when we seek to spare young children of those experiences that will contribute to their becoming, their being and their belonging. We tend to bracket the hard things, the painful things, the things that make us laugh nervously; that have us despairing, fearing and suffering; that cause melancholy and make us vulnerable, uncertain and unsafe. We mourn for the safety; for the certainty; for the clarity. We find our own ways of dealing with them, that’s what makes us who we are, not what others want us to be. This is what I learned from a constellation of challenging experiences in early 2011 that began at the same time a huge cyclone hit Far North Queensland where many of my family and friends live. That same evening I was professionally and racially vilified in a work context; later that week my mother’s youngest brother passed away and unknown to me at that time, it was the first of six deaths that occurred in six weeks. I felt like I had been hit by a concrete wall. I had nothing in reserve to draw on to attend the funeral of a young man that I taught as a four-year-old who decided there was no longer a place for him in this world. These are the very things that make us real and in your article as you are telling your stories of loss, you are telling my stories too. In doing so is the very means by which we learn about loss; about grieving; about pain; about being social; about being human; about being relational. We learn how limited terms like ‘resilience’ are; we learn more about ourselves and we certainly learn more about the others in our lives.

I know that what was learned from these experiences (that mostly involved loss) is that not only do we mourn for the self we had become to that point in time, but others mourn for that person, that self too. When the ones who live with us and love us see us in this pain and they sense our grief they inevitably want it to change, to be different, preferably as it was. They want it to be ‘normal’. When this doesn’t happen within a short period, they get worried and when the expected change doesn’t come, they get scared. They want to change it and most will attempt this by seeking to change us. Rarely do they want to change ‘with us’, or even better, to learn from this loss and change themselves. They will coach rather than care (believing that a positive outlook will bring magic) and they will sit ‘on you’ when all you need is someone to sit ‘with you’. They do many things, often anything to not face their own loss of you as a competent; happy; functional person. They are either reticent or unable to learn with you as you experience and find ways to deal with the loss that sits like a shadow in your life.
They expose characteristics of the constellation of themselves, and this puts more weight on you. It doesn’t help. It’s a challenge to others because if you’re not the same, and they can’t fix that (or you) then the implications are not to be stated. It means that when it is too difficult to become learners from these experiences, they behave in very unfriendly and sometimes hurtful ways. When they do, they add to your hurt, your pain. They suggest anything to ‘fix’ the loss that they are experiencing without knowing this is how it is that at some point in time, it is both necessary and okay to ‘muddle through’ (Silin, 2013) these experiences of grief and mourning because the loss represents change, unlearning, reframing and re-learning. You wrote, ‘Grief could and should be “worked through”’ (p. 17). Should this entail seeking professional help, it will inevitably entail prescribing medication. As an interim measure, this is never to be denied, but there is a risk that it will defer, delay and compound the inevitable ‘working through’ or ‘muddling through’ the grief and the mourning. This also gives some relief to others, and it may restore some of the old you, but you’re never the same. What happens next is another exercise in learning. The professionals will advise a higher dosage and this risks one being over-medicated to the point where it takes a lot of insight to realise how some medications take you further away from learning; they make you numb and compliant. Self-medicating might be a solution, but the risks are the same and the pressure to be the ‘you’ that no longer exists plays repeatedly in your mind.

Whilst in early childhood education we don’t want to explicitly teach loss, deliberately set up tension and conflict we don’t want to establish programs that are a ‘protection from “difficult” knowledge’ (p. 16). It is as you say, ‘to be curious rather than to be threatened’ (Silin, 2011). In this, we will be comfortable with the ‘oh dear’ (or worse) moments when young children deliver a challenge about their loss, or their learning that requires us to be real, to be human and therefore, to be humane. In these powerful moments, we can indeed be ‘scared but excited’.

References


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