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AUTHOR Fisher, Julie
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ABSTRACT

A 1-year research project was designed to analyze an early childhood teacher's current teaching practices within a framework of existing theories and to address unexpected or anomalous situations by constructing and testing new categories of understanding, strategies of action, and ways of framing problems. The main teacher concern addressed by the project dealt with the increasing difficulty of promoting a developmental curriculum alongside Britain's national curriculum. Classroom observations and consultations revealed that it was important that: (1) children be enabled to take more control over their learning; (2) play be seen as the child's "work"; (3) the role of the teacher should incorporate more time for observation and intervention; (4) sufficient examples of work be collected to provide evidence of the quality and progression of the children's learning experiences; and (5) the requirements of the national curriculum be met. (MDM)

University of Reading
Dept. of Educ. Studies
Bulmershe Court
Woodlands Avenue, Earley, Reading
UNIVERSITY OF READING
ENGLAND

JULIE FISHER

Third European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education

A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN AN EARLY YEARS CLASSROOM

Introduction

This paper describes a one-year action research project involving myself as researcher in early childhood education and the teacher of a class of reception children (aged 5 years) in a first school (5-8 years).

The project developed from a shared desire to challenge a perceived trend in early years curriculum provision and practice, away from the needs and interests of the child and towards the requirements of an externally imposed agenda.

The teacher and I shared a common set of principles about what constituted 'good early years practice' and from our different professional perspectives felt that this practice was being undermined. Our objective was to establish and develop classroom practice which was grounded in the principles of child development which we both espoused, whilst ensuring that the legal requirements of the National Curriculum were met.

An action research plan was established which was rooted in Schon's notion of 'reflection on action'(Schon,1987). The plan followed a cyclic model of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Carr & Kemmis,1986), which was subject to collaborative analysis by myself and the teacher.

The reflective practitioner

Our objective was to analyse the teacher's current practice within a framework of existing theories and to address the unexpected or anomalous by

> constructing and testing new categories of understanding, strategies of action and ways of framing problems (Schon,1987,p39).

We agreed with Handal's suggestion(in Day,1993) that the normal conditions for school based action research may well be such that an incomplete 'self-reflective' cycle is encouraged and teachers spend most of their time planning and acting and less time observing and reflecting.

It was our belief that by establishing a shared project with myself in the role of consultant, we might foster what Day (op.cit.) describes as a 'comfortable collaboration', thus enabling observation and reflection to take place in a context of mutual support. It was essential that the culture in which the research took place should facilitate this, and it was necessary that the Headteacher of the school should be prepared to let us adopt this essentially organic model. We agreed that the greatest development would come through a process whereby thinking, practice and the discrepancies within and between the two were raised to an explicit level (Argyris & Schon,1974).

In order to maximise the potential for collaboration, we began with 'a frank appreciation of each other's strengths and weaknesses' (Pollard & Tann,1987,p.10).I was concerned to avoid acts of 'academic imperialism'(Elliott,1991) and saw my role - as the 'outsider' researcher - as describing,interpreting and

informing the practices which the teacher wanted to transform(Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Whilst the teacher engaged in reflection-in-action, constructing and testing new strategies, I would inform the reflective process through an analysis of the established theories on children's learning and by developing hypotheses on their implications for classroom practice.

Specifying the boundaries of the problem

We began by setting the boundaries of the problem as we perceived it(Adelman,1985), namely that it seemed to be increasingly difficult to promote a developmental curriculum alongside a National Curriculum.

We decided to investigate the validity of this concern through an action research project, and this paper describes the first cycle of that project, which took place over one academic year. This first cycle had two distinct phases, the first of these was an 'observation' phase when I recorded aspects of the teacher's current practice; the second was a 'consultancy' phase when we jointly reflected on the practice in the light of the observations made, the teacher's personal theories, a range of established theories, our individual experiences and expertise and the criteria for the project. On the basis of these reflections we drew up an action plan designed to close the gap between principles and practice.

Observing the practice

In the observation phase I spent one day per week in the classroom as a non-participant observer. I established a cycle of planned observations which would study four specific aspects of the classroom practice, and thereby give a broad overview of the issues with which we were concerned. Each observation lasted for one session of the school day. For the purposes of the study, the 'sessions' ran from the beginning of the school day until play-time; from play-time to lunch-time and from lunch-time to the end of the school day. In this way, with a cycle of four observations, each aspect was observed in rotation at different times in the school day.

The first observation in the cycle was of an individual child and their movement through the various activities in which they were engaged. This observation was planned to provide evidence of the flow of the child's transition from one task to the next; their time on task; their individual learning needs and strategies and their management of space, resources and other children.
The second observation was of a specific activity. This was planned to provide evidence of the varying responses of the different children who came to take part in the activity and evidence of the appropriateness of the activity to the teacher's purpose. It also provided evidence of general issues of space and resourcing.
The third observation was of the class as a whole as they went about their various activities. This was planned to highlight issues of space; resourcing; interaction between peers and with the teacher; the independence of the children and overall organisation and management.
The final observation was of the teacher. It was, planned to provide evidence of her various roles; her interactions with specific children and groups of children and her part in the management of the class.

Throughout this initial phase, I took notes of everything I observed alongside a running time check approximately every five minutes. As well as these descriptive notes I kept a diary which contained a more evaluative commentary of events and a cumulative number of questions and issues which were to be shared with the teacher in the second phase of the project. This evidence was supplemented by the class teacher's own diary of issues which she wanted to record and discuss in the consultative phase.

At the end of phase one, the observation records were analysed in order to establish the key elements of practice within the classroom and to specify the boundaries of the work which was to follow. My analysis of the observation phase was corroborated by both the class teacher and an external assessor who was invited to evaluate certain aspects of the project from an objective stance. The external assessor - an LEA Inspector for Assessment and Testing - was asked to evaluate the key management strategies which

the teacher used in her classroom and to assess the quality of the children's learning experiences in relation to the strategies used.

The principles inferred from the observed practice

From the observations made, and corroborated by the teacher and the external assessor, there is evidence that the practice in this classroom was grounded in the following principles:

(1) Children should be enabled to learn actively and interactively.

(2) Children need first-hand, concrete experiences.

(3) Play is the key learning process for young children.

(4) Children have different learning needs and these should be addressed through differentiated input and outcomes.

(5) Children should be encouraged to make choices and decisions about certain aspects of their learning and their learning environment.

(6) At this age children work mainly as individuals and so fixed grouping is unnecessary.

(7) The role of the teacher is to plan intended learning outcomes but to make certain tasks sufficiently open-ended that the children can extend the activity according to their individual needs and interests.

Exploring established theories of learning

Having established the principles in which the teacher's practice was grounded we began a fuller examination of the literature to find evidence to support, challenge or extend these principles. I undertook the bulk of this literature search and shared as much in the way of whole books, chapters and articles as the teacher could find time to read. We decided to begin with existing theories on the following key areas:

(a) How young children learn
(b) The role of the teacher

We felt that all other areas of concern and interest e.g. the place of group work; finding time for observation and assessment; were dependent upon decisions made about these two key areas. The exploration of the literature lasted throughout both the observation and consultancy phases of the project.

The development of the consultancy phase

The consultancy phase began in the spring term. The key change in the second phase of the project was my shift from observer, to observer and consultant. At the end of each observation day the teacher and I had a discussion to which we both brought an agenda. The teacher was able to give me detailed explanations about strategies which she had used e.g.

> at recall time Theresa (the classroom assistant) and I work in tandem. She sits poised with a pen and if I start nodding furiously she records what the child is saying so we have evidence of their learning
> (discussion notes:14-05-93)

I, in turn, raised issues from my reading or from the observations which we might address. Both of us were engaged in ongoing reading of the literature and this reading constantly informed our discussions. The agendas for these discussions, our reflections and proposed action were all recorded.

During this second phase of the project the observation cycle was slightly altered. The external assessor had stressed the importance of collecting substantial evidence of the development of the children's learning, so I chose to spend every other week closely observing three children during one of the three sessions of the school day in order to collect data for a profile of their work in the classroom. The teacher selected three children all of the same age but of different abilities.

On the alternate weeks of observation I concentrated on the remainder of the cycle - either one activity, the whole class or the teacher - making sure that each time I began the cycle with a different aspect.

The consultancy phase 'action plan'

Using our observations and those of the external assessor, sharing our reading of the literature and reflecting on the teacher's practice, the teacher and I identified the following areas for action:-

(1) enabling the children to take more control of their learning
(2) developing the role of the teacher
(3) collecting evidence of children's learning

ENABLING THE CHILDREN TO TAKE MORE CONTROL OF THEIR LEARNING

Children come to school as competent learners. Any study of child development has repeated examples of the very youngest children striving to make sense of their world (e.g.Smith & Cowie,1988). There is clear evidence (Piaget,1952; Athey,1990) that this endeavour is both systematic and sustained. It seemed fundamental that we should develop practice which acknowledged this and the teacher began by involving the children in the exploration of themes which she had planned to introduce in the classroom. They were encouraged to raise questions about areas of interest and their questions formed the basis of much of the teacher's future planning. The major topics (the cross-curricular plans for the term) were already decided for the teacher as part of whole school planning to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum, so these were non-negotiable.

We decided that as well as using the questions children raised as a starting point for planning work that we should emphasise a cycle of learning experiences which would begin by informing the teacher still further about the children's existing knowledge, understanding and interests. In order to do this we realised that we must first gain access to it (Rowland,1984). So, the teacher moved from a model of teaching and learning which began with *her* input and then developed through differentiated follow-up, to one which began with exploration on the part of the children and observation on the part of the teacher, and where these observations were then used to inform the teacher-intensive and teacher-initiated work of the future.

The teacher began her planning cycle by firstly giving children opportunities to work at activities which were '*child-initiated*'. The children had control over the resources, context and development of their chosen task. They were given status in the classroom by being referred to as 'work'; by being given time and space for completion and not used as a 'carrot' for when the teacher's tasks were finished; by being observed by the teacher and used in the recall and assessment process in the same way as teacher-initiated activities. The teacher believed that such activities would

> give me information about the childrens' interests, self-motivation, skills and conceptual development, in ways which no teacher-directed activity can. If I'm always in control of the activities, the children just reveal what I allow them to. This way they tell me what they want to about themselves and I find out so much more about them as individuals
> (discussion notes:25-02-93)

The teacher also planned more '*teacher-initiated*' activities which had intended learning outcomes, but which were sufficiently open-ended to enable the children to take the activity forward in ways which the teacher believed revealed more about the children's learning needs and preferred learning styles. From the observations of these activities the teacher was then better able to plan the '*teacher-intensive*' activities which focussed on the specific needs of individuals or small groups.

The more the emphasis in the classroom moved towards exploration and observation the more obvious it became that children learn in different ways and at different rates (Donaldson,1978; Wood,1988)). The teacher wanted the children to be motivated to learn through having as much control over their own work rate, order of work and context for work as was possible. She also believed that if children were to become *self*-controlled, that they should be encouraged to reflect on the outcomes of their planning and actions. In this, the teacher was influenced by the cycle of 'plan/do/review' described in the manual of the High/Scope curriculum (Hohmann,Banet & Weikart,1979) and saw this as enabling children to have greater control over their own learning. The planning at the beginning of the day became extended so that the children identified more than the first activity which they intended working on. Those that were ready had books in which to plan - although the manner in which they did so e.g.through symbols, drawings or writing was entirely of their own choosing. When work was completed the children recorded what they had done on 'recall charts' which the teacher then used at the end of sessions as the focus for the review of the children's work. This review time was built in at least twice and sometimes three times within each day as a time for recalling and assessing the children's work. This gave opportunities for the children to articulate their concrete experiences through language, a stage identified by Vygotsky (1962) and Bruner (1966) as crucial in the move from concrete to abstract thought, providing opportunities as it does for increasing children's ability to manipulate ideas and to think logically. This review time provided the teacher with further valuable evidence of the children's knowledge and understanding of a whole range of areas.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The role of the teacher is inextricably bound up with how she sees children as learners. By acknowledging the model of the active learner, constructing an internal model of the world (Wells,1986) the teacher was drawn to adopt what Rowlands (op.cit.) describes as an 'interpretive' model of teaching which involved the teacher's attempts to understand the children's growing understandings of the world.

Such a model firmly reinstates the teacher as central in the learning process, a position unhappily misconstrued by some at the peak of the 'child-centred' rhetoric (Blenkin & Kelly,1987). Wood (1988) emphasises the collaborative nature of the learning process by suggesting that children's knowledge is often a product of the 'joint construction' of understanding by the child and more expert members of the culture. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) use the metaphor of 'scaffolding' to describe this construction of knowledge coming about as the teacher initially supports the child's learning, gradually removing that support as the child becomes more competent and confident. The notion of scaffolding was a development of the work of Vygotsky (1978) who believed that the most significant development in learning comes when the teacher pitches work within the child's 'zone of proximal development'.The role of the teacher here is seen as a reactive and participatory one. Children's development is static unless they are able to work in their zone of proximal development and the teacher does not wait for this development, as Piaget suggested, but propels it(Smith,1993).

If it is necessary to know learners so well that a teacher can provide the right level of guidance, the right stimulii for learning and the appropriate intervention, then it is imperative that the role shifts from one focussed on active teaching alone, to one that highlights the dual role of teaching and observation. Without observation the teacher will simply not have sufficient or sufficiently precise evidence on which to plan for future learning. The teacher and I devised planning sheets which made explicit the *teacher's* intended outcomes for the day. These showed

(a) what she planned to teach to the whole class, a small identified group or an individual
(b) what she intended to observe and why e.g. a particular child, an activity, or a certain group
(c) what the teacher initiated activities should be - in order to give her the evidence she wanted, as well as incorporating opportunities for the exploration of areas of learning identified through previous observation.

As the teacher spent more time 'observing' and her planning became more specific, two significant things happened. Firstly, the observation notes and the diaries show how much more time the teacher had to focus on her 'teacher-intensive' activities without interruption. This had implications not just for the children's growing independence but for the professional satifaction of the teacher. One comment during our discussions in the spring term was

> the more control I give away, the more in control I feel
> (discussion notes:31-03-93)

Secondly, as the children assumed more control, their interactions with the teacher altered. At the beginning of the first term the children went to the teacher for approval, praise and support, and for reassurance that what they were doing was 'right'. Observation notes record comments such as

e.g. 'Do you want me to do any more?'(17-09-92)
'Can I stop this now please?'(22-10-93)

When the children were first given more control and were encouraged to self-initiated more activities they seemed to revise their ideas about what 'being a pupil' meant and completely ignored the teacher for considerable periods of time. In the second term I have records of the teacher being left alone regularly for between fifteen and twenty-five minutes without interruption, able to get on with her teacher-intensive activities. Towards the end of the second term the relationship changed once again and the children started to refer back to the teacher, but the nature of the exchanges had altered. No longer were the children seeking reassurance, but were coming to their teacher simply to share the pleasure of a discovery or an achievement or to specifically request her support

e.g. 'Do you want to see the model I've made?'(14-05-93)
child 'I can't do my 'a's.' *teacher*' Do you want me to help?' *child* 'yes'(17-06-93)
'Can you help me finish the story I'm writing?'(16-06-93)

COLLECTING EVIDENCE OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The teacher and I were conscious of the advice of the external assessor that we should gather substantial evidence of the children's learning if we were to make claims for the success of our new classroom strategies. We knew, also, that this evidence would form the basis of the summative assessments which the teacher would be required to make at the end of the summer term, and from these would come the evaluation of the effectiveness of the teacher's provision in terms of the National Curriculum. Although I was collecting a great deal of evidence through my observations, the teacher felt it was necessary to implement systems of her own which would be adequate without my supplementary evidence. The teacher and her classroom assistant worked on systematic ways of recording the evidence that was being made available through increased opportunities for observation.

The evaluation of the effectiveness of the consultancy phase

Our primary concern in the second phase of the project was that the teacher should close the gap between the implications for practice inferred through the theories which she accepted and her own practice, and that I should be instrumental in facilitating this.

We identified the following issues as crucial to this development:

(1) That the children be enabled to take more control over their learning, through planning, doing and reviewing.

(2) That play be seen as 'the child's work' and the perceived difference between the two be irradicated as far as possible.
eradicated

(3) That the role of the teacher should incorporate more time for observation and intervention.

(4) That sufficient examples of work be collected to provide evidence of the quality and progression of the children's learning experiences.

(5) That the requirements of the National Curriculum be met.

Evidence of the development of each of these issues abound in the observation notes and the teacher's own diary, and examples of this evidence have been given in this paper. The external assessor was asked to focus specifically on these in her assessment at the end of term three and her written report is awaited.

Conclusion

The success of this research lay in the effectiveness of the consultation phase, and the worth of the intervention. Through exploration of the literature the teacher and I were able to develop a more rigorous notion of 'good early years practice' which we felt more confident in using as a rationale for practice. As we pursued the discrepancy between principles and practice, we developed new understandings about children and their learning, and opened up new ways of working which will be the focus of the second cycle of this action research project.

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