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Exploring Strategies to Enhance Levels of Engagement for a Small Group of Non-Engaged Learners in Mathematics.

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Abstract

The aim of this action research was to explore strategies to enhance levels of engagement in mathematics for a small group of non-engaged Key Stage 2 learners and to observe whether their individual performance improved. Prior to this research, the children had been identified as being unable to engage in mathematics. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used to ensure results could be measured and interpreted effectively. Data were gathered using initial and monitoring observations; questionnaires and a reflective journal. The children took part in selected activities, some of them physical, during three sessions. The evidence collected suggested their engagement levels improved as well as their individual performance. It was suggested that the children continue to take part in active learning activities as a means to boost concentration and maintain motivation.

Introduction

The aim of this action research was to explore strategies to enhance levels of engagement in mathematics for a small group of non-engaged Key Stage 2 learners and to observe whether their individual performance improved. This lack of engagement inevitably meant they would miss vital instruction for task completion, requiring one-to-one explanation from myself, their teaching assistant, or the class teacher. The latter was thus prevented from spending time with other children experiencing difficulties, while the children were not keeping abreast of their peers and felt deflated when unable to complete the task at hand. Interestingly, in other subjects they appeared to be engaged and fully involved, whereas mathematics appeared to trigger disinterest; the desire to explore the reasons for this formed the basis of the research.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) state they would like 'children to have confidence in their mathematical ability and attain well so that they have the best life chances' (DCSF 2009:3). They acknowledge that since 1997 there has been a steady progression in the standards of mathematics in both Key Stage 1 and 2. Ofsted echo this in their report *Mathematics: Understanding the Score* (2008), though they believe that progress slowed in Key Stage 2, stating that 'the essential ingredients of effective mathematics teaching are subject knowledge and understanding of the ways in which pupils learn mathematics' (2008: 3) in other words skilled intervention by the teacher. Indeed, this is crucial if we are to encourage children to make good progress in mathematics. Some children may under-perform by having 'low expectations of their capability' and therefore need to build up their confidence and self esteem (DCSF 2009: 3). Children learn in different ways and tapping into their particular learning styles can provide insight into their motivation or lack of engagement. Employing an active approach to learning using the senses and physical activity can aid this, allowing them to see pictures in their mind, a 'hook' if you will, to draw them into the lesson (Tileston 2007; Clausen-May 2005).

The study focused on a group of four Year Three children, two girls and two boys. The group took part in active learning activities within the classroom, on three separate occasions for up to 30 minutes. The effectiveness of this research may have been influenced by a number of factors. Firstly by the small number of children involved; secondly, by the children's individual cognitive ability and prior mathematical knowledge and thirdly, by the amount of time needed to effect change. Daily usage of the activities would probably have provided a more accurate measurement of progress but only the results of the three sessions were to be analysed.

Literature Review

The review of the literature focused on areas which offered solutions to engaging learners with emergent themes of challenges to mathematical learning, motivation and active learning.

A major challenge for children in learning mathematics is relevancy; there must be connection between mathematical concept and real life, an idea held by theorists such as Piaget (1964) and Bruner (1966). Indeed, mathematics can provide a way of tackling a range of real-life problems and practical tasks (The Mathematical Association 1992). Language in mathematics is just as important as in English, as the *Cockcroft Report* (a key report in the 1980's) states 'ideas and findings are passed on through language and developed through discussion' (1982: para.306). The report goes on to say that mathematical language can present a challenge to a child as often words they understand in everyday language can have a different meaning in mathematics, such as 'take away'; they may think of food rather than another meaning for subtraction. This language is interpreted as symbols, which makes maths, according to Blackhouse et al., 'both possible and powerful ... allowing mathematics to be applied in many situations' (1992: 114). While Clausen-May (2005) agrees with this, she points out that such symbolism appears only as meaningless squiggles to some children. Further challenges to understanding can be emotions, in particular anxiety and attitude. Some children experience anxiety and stress, not just toward mathematics but toward relations with peers; to avoid the stress they simply disengage from the source of anxiety (Liebeck 1984; Buxton 1991). Inattention can challenge learning, as failure to attend to concepts being taught can have a knock-on effect for future learning (Skemp 1986). This affects understanding leaving a gap in pupils' knowledge, preventing them from keeping up with their peers; learners, who are more reticent and shy, may feel daunted by asking for further explanation. A solution to this, suggests Compton et al. (2007), is to encourage mathematical talk through talking partners; where mathematical problems can be discussed as well as provide shy, anxious pupils with a 'voice'.

Now being aware of the challenges, it remained to look at ways of engagement, though there is little research about engagement and primary school children. Clausen-May (2005) talks of how children learn at different rates and in different ways such as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic methods. She points out that using models and apparatus can help children build a 'picture in the mind' (2005: 5), something that can help all pupils, regardless of learning style. Cockcroft (1982: 84) tells us that this is important in order 'to progress within each topic' to help make connections in abstract ways. Using this as a foundation, children can then develop 'mental hooks' which in turn can help build more knowledge (Hart 1983 in Ginnis 2002). Skemp (1986) called these hooks 'schemas' believing them crucial to how easy or difficult we find it to 'master future topics' (1986: 40). These styles can be fostered through effective

learning strategies, which include 'any thoughts, behaviours, beliefs or emotions that facilitate the acquisition, understanding or later transfer of new knowledge and skills' (Weinstein et al. 2002: 727 in Wadsworth et al. 2007: 6). Sullivan et al. (2006) recognise this too but argue by suggesting that non-engagement is a deliberate choice; that some children will engage only if they can achieve easy successes, as a challenge threatens their confidence and outlook of themselves. In contrast they go on to say that children with learning goals thrive on new learning and welcome feedback to improve it. Quality feedback and goal setting is another area, according to Sprenger (2008) that can engage learning; this can improve self-efficacy, the ability of believing in one's own capabilities (Bandura 1997; Wadsworth et al. 2007).

To keep pupils engaged requires motivation. Singh et al., (2002) state that motivation and engagement have a symbiotic relationship and both further learning; while motivation effects one's engagement in academic tasks, engagement enhances interest and motivation. Similarly, Hidi (1990) believes interest is a must for motivation, as it can determine whether a child invests or withdraws from learning. Building a happy community in the classroom is important for motivation; cooperation through discussion can provide this (Tileston 2007; Kelly 2005). Indeed, Bruner (1966) saw discussion as a way to scaffold learning. A sure way of engaging a child's interest is through enjoyment and fun, by doing something new or playing games (Blackhouse et al. 1992). This is agreed by Smith (2005) who believes that singing and humour go a long way to engage and motivate children; such active learning engenders a playful and curious atmosphere. Gilbert (2002) tells us how 'pulse learning' uses intervals of activity to break up the intensity of the lesson; this allows pupils to push themselves and then ease back by introducing physical and Brain Gym activities.

The literature in this review was pertinent to the study and helped me to decide which approaches I would use to further explore these themes. I consulted the class teacher about how I wanted to monitor and record findings, and the type of activities that could be used. Keeping the focus group within the classroom environment would give me a better indication of their levels of engagement, than if they were to work in isolation. Conducting the activities along with everyone else would reduce embarrassment for the group; whereas performing them in isolation may have caused reluctance to join in. Ultimately, I wanted them to enjoy mathematics and realise it can be fun to learn.

Methodology

Action research according to Cohen et al. (2007) is a powerful implement in effecting improvement and change *in situ*. Working within Year 3 as a Teaching Assistant, I and the class teacher were aware of a small group of children who appeared to become disengaged during mathematics, particularly at the start of the lesson. Interestingly this did not appear to be the case in other subjects. I chose to embark upon a study to explore engagement strategies but before undertaking it, first obtained the written permission of the head teacher and produced an action plan within my research proposal. Although the research was on a very small scale, by examining engagement strategies it could effect change locally by informing teaching and learning practice (Cohen et al. 2007).

I then considered the ethical issues. As required by the *Bishop Grosseteste University College Research Ethics Policy* (BG 2008), I completed the Ethics Guidelines and Checklist

along with an Ethics Statement. Upon receiving consent from the head teacher, I was given verbal consent from the class teacher and written permission from the parents of the children identified. In order to judge the effectiveness of the activities and to make the results more reliable and valid, I decided that the whole class would take part but only the target group were to be observed; therefore consent was sought from only their parents. The letters gave the participants and their parents details of the research to be undertaken and the methods involved in data collection. They were reassured that confidentiality and anonymity would be carefully observed in accordance with ethical guidelines and that the final report would be viewed only by the head teacher and University College tutors. I realised after letters went out I had not informed them that my findings would be available before submission, so a further letter was sent to rectify this. By adhering to the ethical guidelines, the value and integrity of the work is maintained (Taylor et al. 2006). Anonymity was achieved by referring to the children by the letters A, B, C and D.

Three cycles of research took place on three separate occasions, each lasting 30 minutes with alterations to the activity made after each cycle. Reflecting after each cycle allows 'better situation understanding and improved action implementation' (O'Leary 2004: 140). The cycles ran once a fortnight for 6 weeks, allowing time in between to reflect and restructure. The first cycle contained one activity at the start of the lesson, whilst the second and third cycles contained two activities. The first cycle contained a kinaesthetic starter activity designed to focus attention along with a differentiated task. The second cycle also started with a kinaesthetic starter activity but introduced a physical activity to maintain concentration. This was similar with the third cycle, but the second activity was modified after reflection of the second cycle. I thought that changing the activities too drastically may impair validity and reliability.

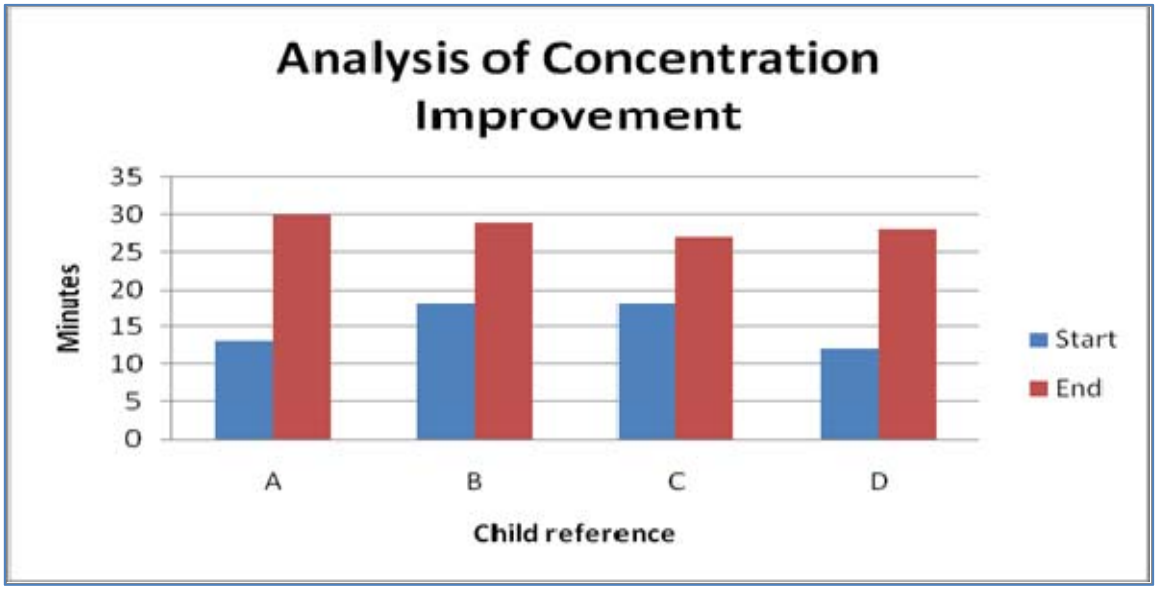
Research methods during this study spanned both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. The qualitative methods included: observations of the children during the activities; questioning them about the activities using a questionnaire and a reflective journal completed after each cycle. Using these three methods of data collection provided a means of cross-checking or triangulation in order to validate results (Taylor et al. 2006). Quantitative methods were used in the observation to show how long children stayed on task during the lesson.

In order to display how the children rated the sessions, I used an adaptation of the Likert scale (Likert 1932) using faces displaying different emotions with the statements: bad, not sure, ok, good and very good. By using this combination the statements were clear and unambiguous. Though action research is generally qualitative, quantitative methods can present statistics in an immediate, accessible format (Koshy 2005). The same three questions were asked after each cycle and rated by the children; the first two questions were to aid future adjustments whilst the quantitative results from the third question were to be used as a comparison to the observation results, to see how the children thought they had performed. The qualitative method enabled the children to explain their choice of score which could also be compared with my observation and reflection of their engagement. By doing this I would be better equipped to understand and explain the reasons for the children's disengagement from mathematics.

Data Collection and Results

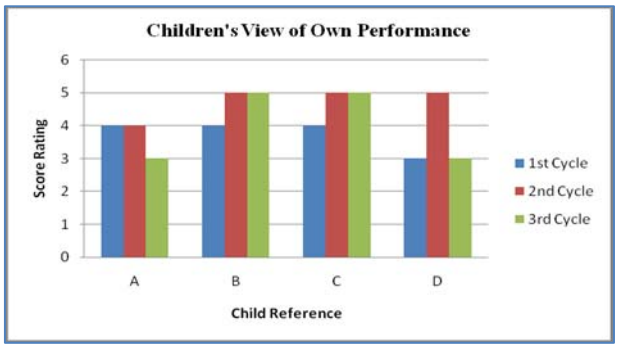
An initial observation was taken prior to the study to determine current engagement levels, followed by three others to monitor progress. The three observations followed sessions where particular activities took place to engage attention. The first session involved the children using talking partners to solve a problem with fraction tiles. The second session involved a bingo game based on the multiplication tables and a physical activity of Heads and Tails to maintain motivation. Following this, the third session involved using number fans to work out number bonds during the starter and an adapted physical activity using singing and movement to keep them engaged. My findings in Figure 1 show that every child's engagement levels improved by the end of the study.

Figure 1: Assessment of the length of time children could stay engaged on task at the start and end of the study



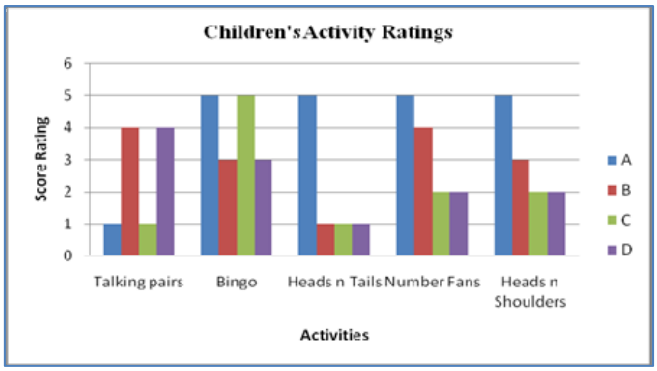
Apart from finding strategies to enhance their levels of engagement, the purpose was to see if their individual performance improved. The data from the children's questionnaires show in Figure 2 that two of the children felt they had improved, whereas the results for Child A and D were not as conclusive; A's performance seemed to decline while D only seemed confident of his performance after the second cycle of the study.

Figure 2: How the children assessed their performances after each cycle



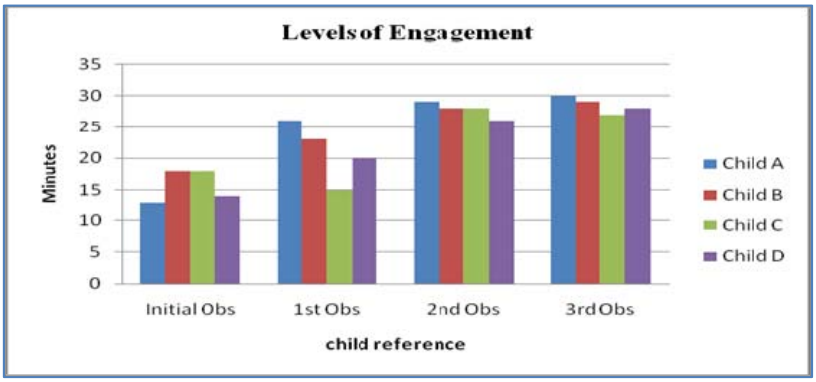
These results in Figure 3 were also supplemented by reflective journal entries after each session and by the opinions of the children from the qualitative information in the questionnaire which gave important insights into how they enjoyed the activities. My findings indicate that Child A enjoyed most of the activities whereas the others had a varied response.

Figure 3: How the children assessed the activities



The final Figure 4 shows how levels of engagement have progressed despite how the children rated the activities.

Figure 4: Analysis of Engagement levels throughout the study



Analysis and Discussion

After my initial observation it became clear that my focus group found engagement quite a challenge. After consulting the literature and the class teacher, I decided upon a course of action for the next session.

In the first cycle, using a hands on approach at the start of the lesson seemed to be a good way of focusing their attention, but it was hard to decide if they were understanding the concept of equivalent fractions, or whether they were just moving the apparatus about. The paired discussion, based on a suggestion by Tileston (2007) was interesting, as I believed they would embrace the chance to talk. Their responses took me by surprise.

> **Question 1: How did you rate the first activity?**
>
> Child A & C (1) Child B & D (4)
> **Child A:** I didn't like talking in pairs because I like to work by myself.
> **Child B:** I like to talk in pairs because it helps to work out the answer together, as we have a better chance of getting it right.
> **Child C:** I don't like the talking together thing.
> TA: Why not?
> **Child C:** I'm not sure how to work it out, and having to talk means I have to think!
> **Child D:** I liked talking because I find it easier to understand and easier to ask my partner.

It could be that they are not used to this particular activity; it is not used on a regular basis, and when it is they hardly have time to gather their thoughts. The partnerships were a boy/girl combination which may account for the reluctance; this could be the stress that Leibeck (1984) meant between peers, in this case an aversion to opposite gender. Child B and D certainly do not exhibit this and they were keen to get on, especially B as she still attempted to answer the question. This would be relevant to what Sullivan et al. (2006) believed, that wanting to improve learning and succeed was down to learning goals. In contrast Child C may be reluctant to take on the challenge as giving an answer and getting it wrong may be perceived as too stressful. If he did not understand the activity, he may feel his peers judge him as being 'stupid or thick'. Again, Leibeck would be correct about avoidance; we avoid the things we find stressful. As the children did not particularly enjoy this activity, I saw little point in repeating it. In order for talking partners to work it would need to happen on a daily basis rather than on three separate occasions. After reflection I decided to just stay with a hands on activity that needed concentration and introduce something physical and fun later in the lesson to keep them interested.

During the second cycle, after reflection, a Bingo activity was introduced which helped recap multiplication tables. This was successful as they all remained fully enaged. Child D's vagueness could be as a result of never having played Bingo before. Being a shy boy he may have felt intimidated by asking for further explanation and thereby proving Skemp (1986) correct. Child C's success at the activity seemed to spur him on. All managed to get to Section C and the importance of this was that none of them required any additional help from the class teacher. This was one of the aims of the study, for them to engage from the start and proceed without immediate intervention.

This belief in their self-efficacy would agree with Wadsworth et al.(2007) and Bandura (1997). The Heads and Tails activity was another surprise. After reflection it became clear that competitiveness was not a good idea for moral reasons.

After the second cyle I reflected that activities with an edge of competition may be detrimental to morale and the children could be in danger of swtiching off due to either low self esteem or emotional stress (Leibeck 1984). During the final cycle I kept with the same pattern of activities as the kinaesthetic approach seemed successful. The number bonds kept them engaged, but the speed of delivery proved a challenge for Child C and D. In the latter's case, a lack of knowledge let him down. The introduction of cubes into the main activity proved fruitful. The thoughts of Singh et al. (2002) were evident; engagement and motivation in symbiosis. The insights the children gave echoed Clausen-May's (2005) findings that a picture in the mind helped to 'see' the concept; knowing how they learn could determine if they were truly listening or faking it. The physical activity was an adaptation of the Heads and Tails game, but involved the children singing a number sequence while following the teacher's actions. The body language of the group suggested they really enjoyed it as they were laughing and smiling but the comments of two of them indicated stress again. Introducing two activities into cycle one and two was inspired by Gilbert (2002) who suggests staggered activities add to motivation and performance. Even though the children rated activities differently to how they were observed and had their preferences, the results clearly show a steady improvement in engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this action research was to explore strategies to enhance levels of engagement in mathematics for a small group of non-engaged Key Stage 2 learners and to observe whether their individual performance improved. The activities used throughout the study were adapted from the sources in the literature review and as a result of collaborating with the class teacher.

All of the children responded well to the kinaesthetic activities at the start of each maths lesson which certainly seemed to capture their interest and spur them on. Sprenger (2008), Wadsworth et al. (2007) and Bandura (1997) point out that self-efficacy is an important part of motivation, believing it influences levels of effort and persistency. This certainly seems to be the case in the second cycle after the Bingo activity.

Cockcroft (1982) stated that mathematical ideas can be developed through discussion, something Compton et al. (2007) acknowledge, adding it can also give confidence to shy children. That was not my finding as the observations were backed up by the children's views although Child D would have benefited from a mutual partnership to provide him with a 'voice'. This however could change if discussion was to become a regular feature of the lesson.

Matters of inattention are discussed by Skemp (1986), who believes this leads to gaps in knowledge when forming new concepts; without this knowledge mental hooks cannot be formed in order to 'hook' into future learning successfully. This was certainly the case at the beginning of the study, but by the second and third cycles most of the children had managed to engage without much aid. This was an important step as this had formed the basis of the whole research.

Sullivan et al. (2006) made an interesting point by suggesting that non-engagement is a deliberate choice and that some children will only engage if success is certain, defeat being too painful to bear. Evidence shows that Child C is a child who does not like uncertainty. I believe due to lack of confidence he prefers not to take risks, but there was not sufficient evidence to suggest he would not engage deliberately. That would require further observation in more than one subject.

Even though the children rated activities differently to how they were observed and had their preferences, the results clearly show a steady improvement in engagement. The observations of Blackhouse et al. (1992) and Smith (2005) about keeping activities fun, interesting and enjoyable were evident from the last two reflective journals. Despite how they rated them, they laughed and joined in with gusto. Gilbert's (2002) suggestion of 'pulse learning' was a welcome break but can get in the way of the learning. If the observation had been for a longer time it may have been possible to witness more of an effect.

Although three methods were used to gather data, it was difficult to see where triangulation took place. If I was to do this again I would probably use a scale to rate my opinion of their performance along with the children. The findings have shown a method of approach that has proven successful in enhancing engagement. Although not all the children feel their performance was great, Child B and C clearly felt they had improved. This was a small scale study and although the activities used appeared to show improvement, they would need to be carried out far more frequently to have any lasting effect.

This project report has been disseminated to the class teacher with recommendations that these active learning methods be used at the start of the lesson and to incorporate physical activity in small chunks at regular intervals to help maintain interest and engagement.

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Understanding What Factors Can Affect Children's Enjoyment of Reading and What Strategies Can Be Implemented to Improve This.

Sally Burge

Abstract

This small-scale action research project investigated a group of Year 3 children's perceptions of reading and also the perceptions of their parents. It also attempted to identify which strategies would be most successful in developing a love of reading. Data were gathered using questionnaires, observations, interviews, as well as completing a reflective journal. The findings of this research appear to suggest that there is much to be gained from providing a diverse range of literature, including those with controversial benefits such as comics. Furthermore, a greater use of public libraries should be encouraged, as this is a reading resource that today's children appear to use very little. Children need to be persuaded to use the reading opportunities available to them, so that they develop an intrinsic motivation to read.

Introduction

The purpose of this action research was to develop strategies that I could implement in my practice to develop children's enjoyment of reading. Additionally, it was crucial to understand any possible factors that could affect their perceptions of reading and how that may impinge on their enjoyment.

The focus of this research was six children from Year 3 who, during initial analysis, were identified as those who did not read for enjoyment. I therefore wished to address this issue to develop my practice and construct my knowledge of how children's reading enjoyment could be enhanced. It was apparent from class reading assessment tests that all of these children have the ability to read at a good standard. Reading tests are conducted at a specific moment in time and may, dependent upon the test, be more appropriate to one pupil's reading ability than another's (Vincent 1974). However, the initial identification of children, who did not read for enjoyment, highlighted that ability was not a factor in their enjoyment and therefore, it was deemed inappropriate to consider this issue.

More importantly, this research was chosen due to an increased awareness of more children lacking the motivation to read for pleasure. Following the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE 1998), it was hoped that the standard of children's reading would improve. I was involved in a governor capacity at the outset of the NLS; and I have personally witnessed the decline of individual pupil-teacher reading opportunities. This issue was also identified by Gamble and Yates (2008: 190), as they found that teachers lamented that the structure of the NLS had resulted in insufficient time to practise sustained reading. However this is only one possible factor that may have affected reading enjoyment. Therefore, prior to commencement of this study, further influential issues were also considered: what these children view as suitable reading material; how they choose a book and why they read; whether 'real' books or a reading scheme engage the reader and the effect of parental influence. Additionally, I

reviewed my own reading history and current practice and reflected on any differences or similarities.

There were limitations to this action research, mainly due to the perception of the researcher as to whether children's enjoyment of reading has been enhanced after each cycle. All actions and observations were undertaken to cause the least disruption to the six children's learning. Furthermore, as this was a small scale research project being undertaken in a small village school, the findings of this research may not be applicable in other settings. Nevertheless, I hoped that this research would provide an insight into reading behaviour and how it might be affecting their perceived enjoyment of reading which would aid my practice.

Literature Review

A high percentage of children do not read for their own enjoyment (Holden 2004: 38). This could possibly be due to fewer opportunities for interaction between readers or maybe the resources available to children do not motivate them to read for pleasure, only purpose. Alternatively, the curriculum framework may restrict creativity and emotional engagement with texts. According to the cyclical PIRLS 2006 study (Twist et al. 2007: 31) there had been an increase between 2001 and 2006 in the number of English children who were less likely to read for enjoyment, in comparison to their peers in other countries. Therefore it should be considered why this occurred when standards of children's reading ability has risen since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (Bell 2005).

In recent years, teachers have commented on what they perceive as the demise of sustained pupil reading opportunities (Gamble and Yates 2008: 190). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) principal researcher, Marian Sainsbury (2004) recognised the importance of ensuring that while schools are target-driven, they should continue to develop reading skills that also facilitate children's personal reading enjoyment. In addition, Ofsted (2004: 14) suggested that problems with children's reluctance to read for enjoyment were not managed effectively. However, these comments were made prior to the introduction of the Primary Framework (DfES 2006), as too were the findings of the PIRLS 2006 study (Twist et al. 2007: 62). Therefore the 2006 study does not include any gains that the new framework may have provided, so it should be expected that improvements in reading enjoyment would be evident in the next cycle.

However, further changes have been made to the National Curriculum following the recommendation of the *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* that children should be provided with 'every opportunity to enjoy and benefit from excellent literature' (Rose 2006: 4). The first change implemented from this review was to introduce a synthetic phonics programme, *Letters and Sounds* (DfES 2007). Unfortunately, the subsequent media reporting of the reading review focused on the introduction of phonics in order to raise standards; overlooking its vital intention of promoting a language-rich framework to boost attitudes to, and confidence in, reading (Clark and Rumbold 2006: 5). Additionally, the proposed *New Primary Curriculum* for English, communication and language advocated that all children should 'read widely for pleasure' (QCDA 2010:27) unlike the previous curriculum, which made no mention of reading enjoyment at Key Stage 2 (DfEE/QCA 1999: 53). Regrettably, due to the political climate, the reformed curriculum was not passed through legislation, as part of

the Children, Schools and Families Bill (DCSF 2010). Nevertheless, it remains available online and the expectation would be that any future government will continue to promote reading for enjoyment, as it is essential to motivation and learning and not a '…chance by-product of reading…' (Goodwin 2005: 56).

A further important issue raised by Sir Jim Rose's reading review (2006: 29) was the crucial role of adults in stimulating children's reading enjoyment. By adults, this includes not only school staff but also parents. Parents have opportunities to motivate children's love of reading by interacting with their children in reading activities and this is essential to a child's literacy development (Clark and Rumbold 2006: 21). Furthermore, Goodwin (2005: 56) advocated that sharing texts with others provides '…a source of pleasure and enlightenment…' Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that parents' reading habits can have an significant effect on their children's reading (Scarr and Ricciuti 1991: 16) suggesting that environmental influences can affect children's reading enjoyment. Additionally, pressure placed by parents on children to read can have a negative impact on that enjoyment (Marsh 2006: 62). However, *Raising Standards in Reading* (DfES 2005: 4) recognised the important role parents have in supporting their children's reading and recommended that teachers should actively engage them in this process. Parents' important contribution to children's reading ability and enjoyment needs to be understood, and built upon, by teachers (Nutbrown et al. 2005: 45). This is further supported by Gamble and Yates (2008: 7), who suggest that by understanding the role of children's out-of-school reading, connections can be developed in pupils' learning and enjoyment of reading.

In addition, the review of reading (Rose 2006: 4) identified that providing quality literature was an important factor. It could be argued that as long as a child is actively involved in the process of reading, then they can construct meaning from texts (Kelly 2008: 3) and engage with it. However, there continues to be debate over what is deemed as suitable reading material with some questioning the merits of reading schemes (Levy 2009: 375) and others raising issues about the value of 'real books' (Beard and McKay 1998: 79). *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure* (Ofsted 2004: 4) found that often schools disregard children's home-reading preferences and recommended that classrooms and school libraries should have a range of reading resources, including comics. Nevertheless, Hall and Coles (1999: 56) and Wilson and Scanlon (2004: 3) questioned the value of comics as suitable reading material; while Graham (2008: 157) argued that comics are inappropriate for long-term reading needs. However, the crucial factor is that many children derive pleasure from this type of reading medium (Coles and Hall 1997: 54, Millard and Marsh 2001: 36, Myers 2008).

In 2008, Jim Knight, the then Minister of State for Schools and Learners, announced the funding of the *Enjoying Reading* initiative; aiming to strengthen the link between schools and libraries, so that children would be motivated to read for pleasure and purpose (TRF 2009). In addition to this initiative, the *Framework for the Future* (DCMS 2003: 51) envisaged that libraries should encourage new parents to join the library in the first year of a baby's life. This has been achieved by libraries through *Book Crawl,* part of the DCSF-funded initiative *Bookstart* (Booktrust 2008). Similarly, libraries are one of the key providers of the *Bookstart* initiative, which distributes book-packs to young children, with the aim of inspiring and stimulating reading from an early age. This would suggest that libraries should be places where books are read and enjoyed. Therefore, Rosen (2004) suggested that the out-dated image of a quiet library should be replaced by one where everyone can take part in 'interactive reflection'.

Nevertheless, while the DEMOS report (Holden 2004) supported interaction to encourage intellectual challenge, it also recognised that some quiet areas should still be available. Equally important in engaging children in reading is the role of school libraries and classroom reading corners, which should provide many different genres of literature (Collins 2008: 107). Children need time and space to browse and sample books, although Washtell (2008: 68) recognised that this can be hard to achieve.

In conclusion, it is evident that reading enjoyment has become a key issue in recent years. However, this issue was discussed many years earlier in 1975 in the *Bullock Report*; which recognised that children's enjoyment of reading could be developed through parental involvement, teacher influence and book provision. Furthermore, this report recognised the key problem in maintaining children's enjoyment of reading often begins as they start to read independently (Bullock 1975: 102). Therefore, while teaching children to read is a key skill, it is crucial that alongside that they develop a life-long love of reading (Shenton 2007: 79).

Methodology

McNiff and Whitehead (2005: 61) define action research as a generator of new knowledge and understanding, which contributes to enhanced pedagogical practice. This is supported by Cohen et al. (2007: 297), who recognise that action research is a powerful process in which practice can be evaluated and improved. This research focused on how my practice could be improved to aid children's reading enjoyment. It investigated children's perceptions of reading and attempted to identify what strategies were most successful in developing a love of reading. Furthermore, due to the cyclic nature of action research, each stage of the project was evaluated prior to the commencement of the next. Taylor (2006: 5) supports this view, pointing out that the reflection of each action cycle is necessary to understand whether strategies were successful. However, it should be remembered that any findings will only relate to this small group of children.

Before starting this research, it was important to consider any ethical issues that related to this project. McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 88) recognise that it is crucial to maintain strong ethical practice and not to exploit the participants or the situation. Therefore, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2004) and the University College's Research Ethics Policy (BG 2008) were followed for this research. Accordingly, a research proposal was submitted to the school's Head teacher; with verbal permission being granted. However, no action was deemed necessary as the school holds signed Digital Photograph Consent Forms for any photographic purposes linked to educational purposes. Nevertheless, it was necessary to seek confirmation that the participants were willing to take part in this research (BERA 2004). As the children were deemed to be too young to fully understand the research process, the consent of their parents was requested by letter. Consideration was also given to the ethical responsibilities of maintaining participants' confidentiality. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, all children's names have been changed. Additionally, the legal requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 (BERA 2004) were followed, in which participants were granted the right to know how any information gathered would be managed.

Six children from Year 3 were identified for this research. Each cycle would last one week and it was anticipated that different reading resources would be employed each

week. Careful consideration was also given to ensuring that no child would be advantaged, nor disadvantaged, by this research (Puchner and Smith 2008: 79).

As this research focused on attitudes to reading, it was deemed necessary to obtain opinions from various parties to gain a greater understanding of why people enjoy reading. Therefore, prior to the three cycles of action research, the views of the participants and their parents, together with my own reflective piece, were gathered. Baumfield et al. (2008: 82) recognises the importance of parental responses in the triangulation of research findings; parents can provide crucial information about children's home learning experiences that can be correlated to research findings. However, following an analysis of the responses, adaptations were made to the remaining cycles.

This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods to enable triangulation of my findings, and to provide reliability and validity. Baumfield et al. (2008: 30) considered using both quantitative data and qualitative data to be essential to gain insight into both what happened, and why it happened, referring to this as a multi-method approach. Koshy (2005: 86) identifies that action research tends to be principally based on the qualitative paradigm, as it can provide deeper understanding of the research outcomes. Nevertheless, for reliability and validity in this research, it was considered necessary to employ quantitative methods in the form of questionnaires. These were completed following each cycle and established children's perceptions of reading enjoyment using a Likert, or ratings scale (Cohen et al. 2007: 326).

Various qualitative methods were employed in this research. Firstly, a research journal was chosen to monitor each cycle. McNiff and Whitehead (2005: 70) comment on the value of a journal, not only to record events during the research but also to reflect on its progress. Taylor (2006: 11) explains that being a reflective practitioner enables connections to be made between the research activities and the researcher's present understanding. Secondly, observations were undertaken of the children's independent reading activities using a semi-structured format, so that impromptu events could be recorded. According to Sharp (2009: 84), this type of observation provides a more suitable structure as they have a set focus but could be adjusted to suit any changes. In addition, photographs were taken of the children during activities and observations to offer further validity to the research findings.

As part of the final cycle, an interview with the whole research group was carried out. The children were encouraged to consider not only the final activity but also the impact of the entire project. The format of the interview was unstructured to enable spontaneous responses. Furthermore, so that the findings of the interview were as reliable as possible, it was tape-recorded and transcribed in as much detail as possible (Cohen et al. 2007: 155). Unfortunately, an interview with the class teacher was unable to take place, due to time constraints. However, additional validation was provided when unplanned opportunities arose in informal discussions with parents of the participants.

Data Collection and Results

Prior to the start of the research cycles, the participants of this study, and their parents, were asked to complete questionnaires to assess their views on reading enjoyment. The

quantitative results from these were collated into tables. Several key points were noticed and compiled into graphs (figures 1 and 2): the majority of children did not buy books or comics regularly and the children's infrequent use of library services was confirmed by their parents.

Figure 1: Book/comic purchases

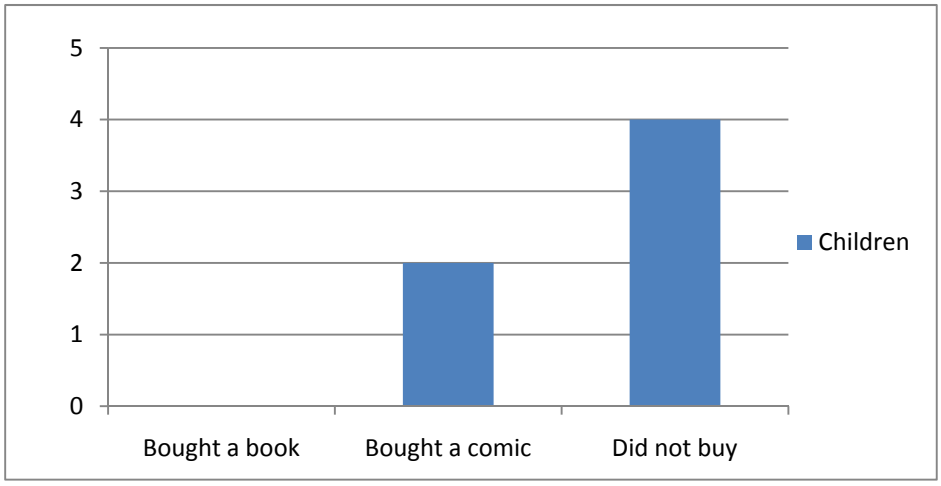


Figure 2: Library use by parents and children

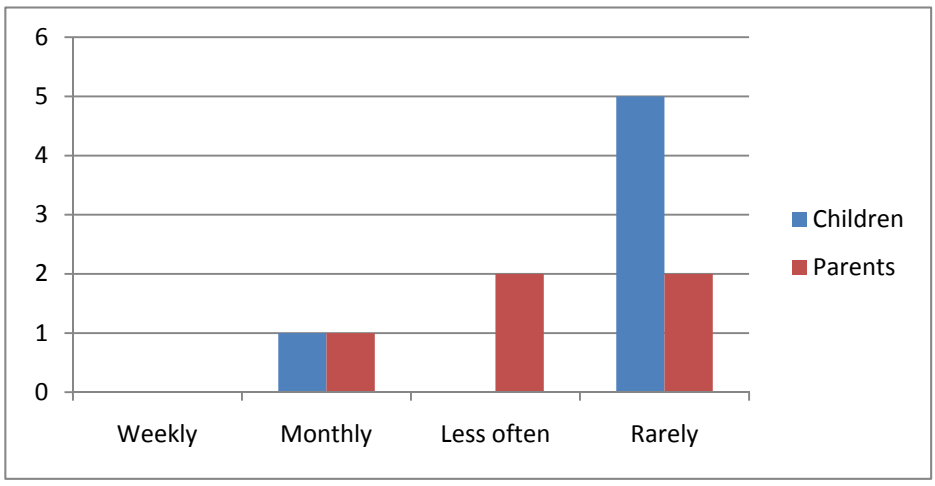
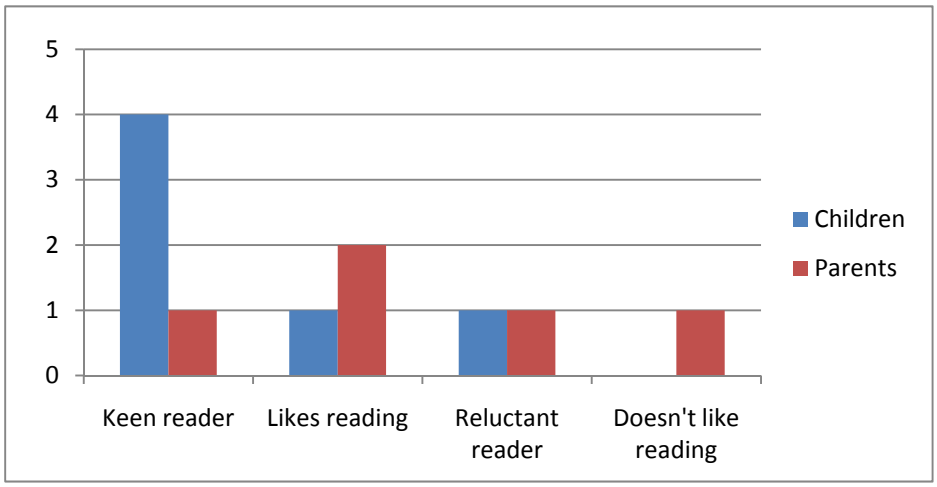


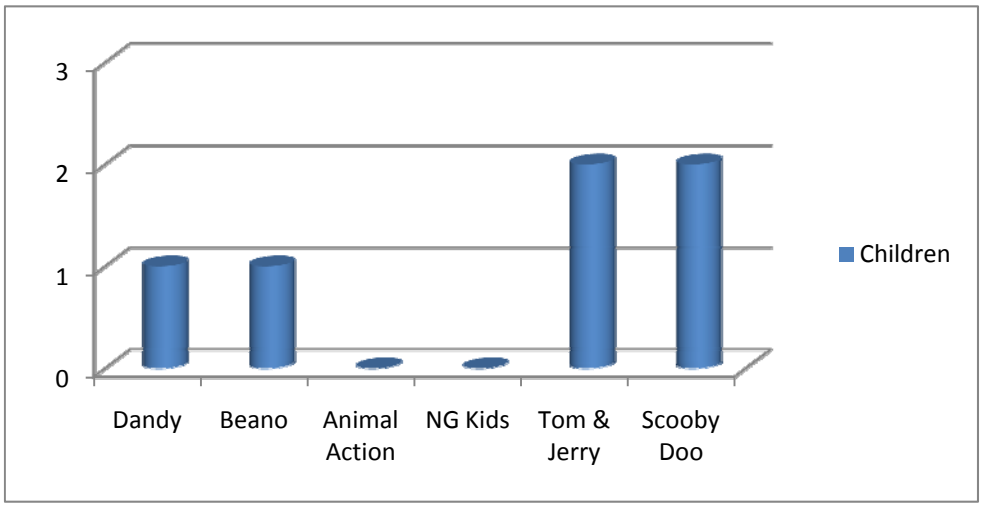
Figure 3: Assessment of child's reading enjoyment prior to action research cycles



Additionally, the results appeared to suggest that most children felt that they were keen readers. This contradicted the initial findings obtained prior to the onset of the research. Moreover, it also conflicted with the parents' responses (figure 3). The questionnaire also sought the parents' perspective of their own reading habits. This was later compared to my own reflective writing, as the parental responses were received after the start of the first cycle. It was revealed that the majority of parents were reluctant readers as children; whereas my own experience of reading was a positive one.

The reading resource for the first cycle was children's comics. The details of session were written in my research journal, together with my reflective observations. Photographic evidence was taken to capture children's behaviour during the session and in subsequent observations. The children's reactions during those observations were noted. Several contradictions to the initial reading for enjoyment assessments were identified. For example, Frank, who had indicated that he was a reluctant reader, showed enthusiasm and was engaged with the text. Furthermore, despite Wendy revealing post-research her preference for non-fiction rather than fiction, it became apparent that the factual comics were not as appealing to her as the comic strip ones. While the children were encouraged to look at all of the comics, the factual ones were usually the last to be chosen. Further support for this finding was discussed in my research journal, which reported the children's preference for cartoon-strip comics rather than non-fiction ones.

Figure 4: Children's favourite comic

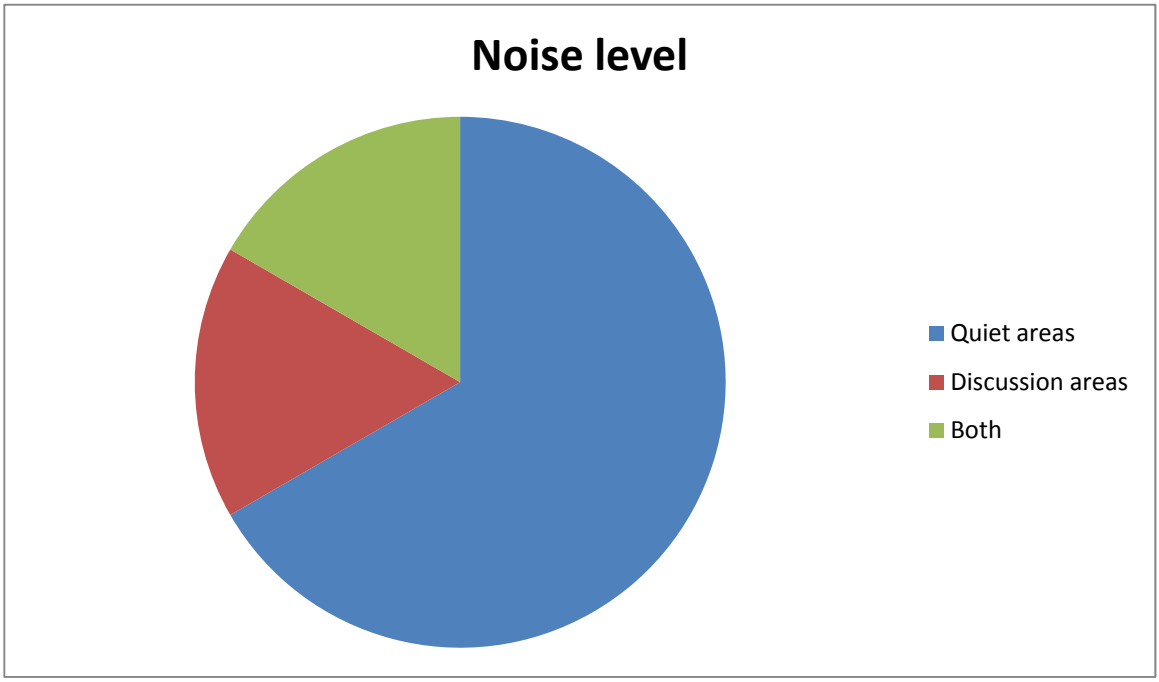


As shown in *figure 4*, the long-standing comics, *Beano* and *Dandy*, were deemed more popular than factual ones by the children. The most popular were the comics related to cartoon characters, with Barry commenting that it was just like watching the cartoons on television. From the findings of this cycle, it could be concluded that this genre proved to be very popular, as the children used their free time for these resources rather than the class books. Nevertheless, it was apparent that not all of the comics motivated the children to engage with the text.

For the second cycle of this research the focus was on how to use a library, as it had been identified from the initial research questionnaire that the majority of the children were not using a library on a regular basis. Therefore this part of the research was introduced to the children in the visiting mobile library. In undertaking this activity in the heart of a library, the children were able to gain immediate practical experience of choosing a book. Furthermore, my research journal highlights that often these children have few opportunities to use the mobile library, due to the number of classes in this setting and the limited amount of time the library is on site.

In order to develop the idea of library use further, the children were provided with two worksheets to complete. The first of these illustrated good understanding of how books could be located in a library; while the second identified a favourite author. Frank was unable to complete the worksheets as he had found it difficult to identify a favourite author. Furthermore, in the following session, when we discussed the library visit and about authors, Frank was unable to contribute to the latter. The children were questioned about whether a library should be a quiet place to read books or somewhere to discuss them. As noted in my research journal, David and Frank agreed that it was better if you were not disturbed. The final results were surprising as most felt that you should be quiet in a library (figure 5). However one child recognised that having areas to talk about books, as well as quiet areas, would be better.

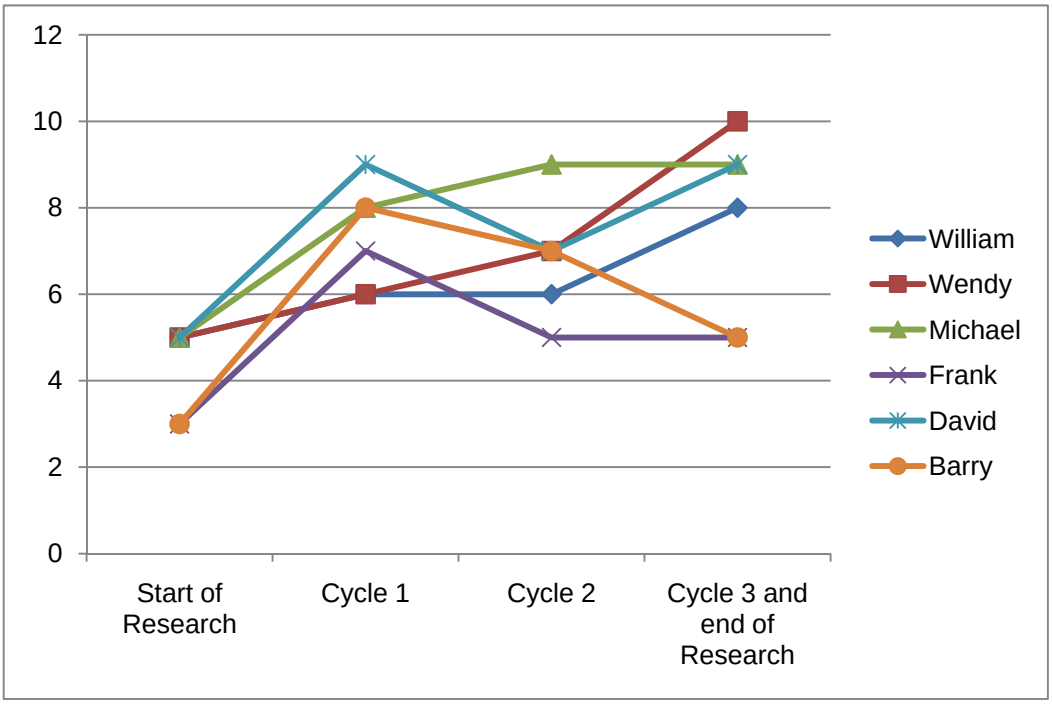
Figure 5: Noise in the library



The children's views on authors produced an interesting outcome, as Michael's notes about one of his favourite author's books were in-depth and illustrated a key skill of relating fiction to real-life events. While it was apparent during this cycle that Frank did not view this experience positively, it was surprising to note in the end of cycle assessments that reading enjoyment had declined not only for him but also for other participants. As none of this cycle had been tape-recorded, further evidence of the events of this cycle was provided through the use of photographic data.

The final cycle was delayed due to event constraints in my setting, although when opportunities arose to promote reading for enjoyment these were grasped and exploited. Therefore, the aim of this cycle was to promote the variety of literature available to the children. Once again, notes about the activities in this cycle were made in my research journal. These highlighted how the motivation to read for some children had increased. In addition, the resulting book reviews provided a clear indication of those children who were now enjoying what they read. As noted in my research journal, what was most encouraging was that Wendy had read three books during this cycle. The following interview with the research group confirmed that she did perceive that her enjoyment of reading had improved. This interview also highlighted that two of the pupils appeared to have been unable to gain any benefit from undertaking these activities. The final assessment of reading enjoyment showed that most children considered that they enjoyed reading more then than prior to the commencement of this research. This data was collated in the following graph (figure 6), which highlights the variations in the children's perceptions during this research.

Figure 6: Children's perception of reading during this research project



The final review of reading enjoyment was to have been triangulated with the teacher's views but unfortunately due to time constraints this was not actioned. However, two parents provided valuable feedback on the impact of this research upon their children.

Analysis and Discussion

In undertaking this research, the key focus was to find what could affect children's enjoyment of reading. Therefore, prior to the research cycles, information was gathered from both participants and their parents about reading habits. This provided me with knowledge and understanding of children's reading development at home, which could be compared to school reading. This is supported by Gamble and Yates (2008:7) who recognised how important it is to have knowledge of the children's reading activities at home and to incorporate this knowledge into your practice. However, in classes of around thirty, it could be argued that this may prove difficult to achieve due to the demands of the National Curriculum (DfEE/QCA 1999).

A further issue that arose was that children viewed their reading enjoyment differently to their parents in some of the assessments. Baumfield et al. (2008: 82) believed that involving parents in action research enhances the study and allows for triangulation. Indeed, their data had a significant impact on how this research progressed. For example, some parents considered themselves to be reluctant readers. According to Scarr and Ricciutti (1991:16), parents who like to read are more likely to provide opportunities for their children to experience 'the world of literacy'. Unfortunately, due to allowing parents confidentiality in their responses, I was unable to link their own reluctance or enjoyment with that of any of the children.

However, as previously discussed the first cycle remained unchanged and focused on the use of comics to engage and motivate children to enjoy reading. While Wilson and Scanlon (2004: 3) argued that the value of comics was doubtful, the observation records and discussions appear to refute this. The enthusiasm and motivation of the children, when reading comics, was observed first-hand. Myers (2008) recognised that comics can have a profound effect on motivating reading for enjoyment. Moreover, the results from the end of each cycle (figure 6) appear to further endorse this, as there was a noticeable increase in the children's perception of reading enjoyment. Nevertheless, it has been argued that this is not a long-term solution for motivating children to engage with texts (Graham 2008: 157). However, in observations, children were at times engrossed in the stories, and were able to link their reading to their free-time activities. This would suggest that children enjoyed this genre due to the 'intertextual references' (Millard and Marsh 2001:30).

An additional benefit of using comics as a reading resource was the speaking and listening opportunities that it presented. Children were encouraged to discuss the comics they had read, which promoted the key language skills of being able to listen to others, and to talk confidently about their reading experience (Rose 2006: 56). However, Wilson and Scanlon (2004: 96) argued that traditional comics, like the *Beano* and *Dandy*, were written in dated language. This was found to have little bearing on children's preferences in this research (figure 4) with one third of children choosing them as their favourite comics during this study. Additionally, almost all children had reported that they had enjoyed reading the *Beano*, which further refutes the argument. Therefore, it could be assumed that despite being in print for over 70 years (Myers 2008), its appeal has not dwindled. My personal experiences of reading comics also reflected the opinion of Myers (2008), who acknowledged the value of such comics as enjoyable and engaging reading material.

For the second cycle of this research, it was important to not only build on the previous cycle's strengths but also to review the planned activity in light of the results from the questionnaires. It was necessary to amend the action plan for this research. McNiff and Whitehead (2005: 27) recognise that sometimes events occur during action research which necessitates developing your plan in another direction. For me, this was one of the results that highlighted that the majority of children do not use the library (Figure 2). When questioned, most children, apart from 'Wendy' were unsure why they did not use the library. Furthermore, as all parents listed the library as a source of their childhood reading books, it was puzzling that they appeared to have not provided this opportunity for their children.

The *Framework for the Future* document (DCMS 2003: 28) advocated that libraries provide the potential to motivate children's reading enjoyment. Therefore, in using the library as a resource, the aim was to ensure that the children were motivated to join and use their local library. It is thought that, due to the age of these children, the government-funded *Bookstart* initiative (Booktrust 2008) had not yet been started when these children were small. It could be argued that if this initiative had been in place, then it may have impacted on their enjoyment of reading.

For the third, and final, cycle, it was hoped that by providing a choice of several different genres of books, it would supply evidence of improved motivation to read, and engagement with the texts. My research journal identified how most children's attitudes to books had changed; although Barry's eagerness to read the comic

supported initial findings from cycle one. Further data for this cycle was provided by the children's book reviews and a group interview. It was interesting that while the majority of book reviews suggested that reading enjoyment had increased, Frank's review was contradictory. His comments appear to suggest that he is unable to recognise the value of any genre other than books that are football-related. Therefore, as suggested by Horner and Ryf (2007: 59), it may be beneficial to Frank's reading enjoyment that the class library is used to display literature that focuses on his reading preference. However, it could be argued that this then becomes a gender-related issue, which is not the focus of this research.

The interview also produced several interesting points. Firstly, Frank and Barry's responses seem to imply that this research has had little impact on their reading enjoyment; although it was undertaken in a limited period. Secondly, David and Wendy's motivation to read would appear to be higher than before this research began. Nevertheless, the children assessed their own reading enjoyment, and it was therefore based on their perceptions of their reading enjoyment. However, it is questionable whether this data provides the reliability and validity for this research, as the results rely on children's feelings, or perceptions, at one given moment. Greater validity may have been added to this research if there had been more parental involvement during the cycles, rather than just receiving the views at the start and end of the research.

Conclusion

The aim of this action research was to determine what factors affected children's enjoyment of reading, and how my practice could be developed to motivate children to read for pleasure. My own perception that this was a matter for concern had already been substantiated by the findings of the PIRLS 2006 study (Twist et al. 2007: 32), which found that 15% of the children questioned gained the least enjoyment from reading; a substantial increase since the previous PIRLS study in 2001. These are key skills that enable children to engage with the text and enjoy the reading experience. Therefore, in increasing my understanding of what motivates children to read is an important factor in boosting their reading enjoyment. Additionally, being able to identify a lack of enthusiasm for reading, such as in Frank's case, can result in changes to teaching and learning (Ofsted 2004: 14). Consequently, this research has provided the children with opportunities to enjoy books, and also to understand the many reading choices available. Key strategies have been developed that will hopefully be transferrable to other situations and thereby improve my practice. For example, it will be important to find texts that relate to children's everyday experiences, as this helps to sustain their interest (Nutbrown et al. 2005: 44). Additionally, my intention is to promote greater use of the library facilities available in this area, looking at how links can be developed that will raise the profile of local libraries. Furthermore, the class reading resources are to be reviewed and it is hoped that children will be able to have a greater role in deciding what reading resources are included in it.

When the aim of research was first proposed to parents, many expressed concerns about their child's lack of engagement with reading and were keen to allow their children to participate in this research to improve their enjoyment of reading. One child in particular was highlighted in this research as having a serious problem with his attitude to reading. However, following this research no justifiable conclusions can be reached due to the lack of information relating to his reading habits at home.

Therefore, in order to address this issue, it may be beneficial to develop a greater understanding of home reading and initiate a specific strategy to encourage intrinsic motivation towards reading (Ofsted 2004: 4).

This research is unable to offer unquestionable evidence of enjoyment, as many of the findings are based on the children's own perceptions. Moreover, my own bias as the practitioner undertaking this research could lessen the validity of this research. Additionally, it is important to mention in relation to this research that firstly, children within my setting tend to perform above the national standards in reading and secondly that this research group was comprised of more boys than girls.

Nevertheless, the responses from the children tend to suggest that they have, through this project, increased their awareness of the choices of reading material available to them. In the activities undertaken, it has been perceived that these children have enjoyed the experience. More importantly to me as a professional, it has provided a valuable insight into the following: why children choose to read or not; the impact of parental involvement in their reading and what the school's role is in their reading enjoyment. However, I consider that the greatest benefit from this action research is that my practice has been developed, as I now have a greater awareness and understanding of children's reading needs which will benefit every child that I support.

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An Opportunity to Innovate: A Case Study of One School's New Secondary Curriculum.

Deborah Porter

Abstract

This research is a case study of a school in the East Midlands which has embarked on a radical curriculum innovation; it had its new intake of students operate in a 'home base' building called Discover where they were allocated their own working space and given a laptop computer. In addition to bespoke facilities, the innovative restructuring allowed the school to personalise students' work, teach in smaller groups, and make learning materials available online via its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This research project explores how the same students, now in their second year of the new curriculum, in Year 8 (n=15) are experiencing the evolution of change. Their opinions, collected via semi-structured interviews are compared against those of Year 9 (n=15) students who still remain under the school's former, more traditional curriculum. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Head Teacher and one teacher and walk-through impressions by two researchers gathered additional data. The results indicate that the aim to provide personalised programmes of study, and to foster students' autonomy, is being achieved to a large extent. But aims concerning the use of ICT appear too premature to be fully effective. However, further analysis suggests that the discrepancies could be due to Discover's temporary environment, awaiting new buildings; but at present, the new curriculum exists in an incompatible setting. Therefore, it is likely that the temporary infrastructure has influenced the data collected and that findings may not be truly representational of whether the new curriculum is achieving its aims.

Introduction

> [Innovation is]... doing things differently in order to do them better (Hargreaves 2004: 65).

Innovation: the word itself has become popular in the discourse of 21st century education. In September 2008 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) introduced the new secondary curriculum as part of major reforms to 11–19 education (QCA 2009a: 3). It purports to pass the baton onto school leaders and give them the 'opportunity to innovate' (QCA 2009b: 1). But despite all its apparent liberalism, the prospect has been handled most cautiously. For so long practitioners have found themselves 'coerced into a situation where high-stakes testing, scrutiny of performance and the generation of data for competitive league tables' has dominated (Berry 2009: 33). The excessive accountability to multiple masters has encouraged playing safe, and not embarking on innovation (Hargreaves 2004: 68). The QCA's website, *Futures in Action: Building a 21st Century Curriculum,* states that schools should not wait for the next initiative to hit, but rather take ownership of a curriculum that would meet the needs of their learners (QCA 2008). This approach would involve 'disciplined innovation', 'informed decisions' and 'intelligent risks' (QCA 2008).

This research aims to examine the effectiveness of one school's new secondary curriculum. It is important to note that the use of the word curriculum in this research incorporates the associated pedagogy. The word curriculum is much more than a set of

content to cover, it is the entire planned learning experience (QCA 2007). The research was conducted in an 11-16, smaller than average size, secondary school in the East Midlands. While the school is intrinsically interesting for its radical innovation, it is also unique in that it is operating two distinct curricula. The new revolutionary curriculum, entitled *Discover* runs for students in years 7 and 8 and gives students responsibility for structuring their own timetable and a strong focus on independent learning. In contrast, years 9, 10 and 11 follow a systematic, timetabled schedule of lessons with predominantly didactic approaches - a largely bureaucratic-autocratic form of organisation (Rudduck and Flutter 2004: 10). This investigation will address the following questions as the basis for its research:

1) To what extent is the new curriculum achieving its aims?
2) How do students' attitudes to their new curriculum compare to those of students under the former curriculum?
3) How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of the new curriculum?

Owing to the small-scale nature of this research, it will focus on just one site, the name of which will be substituted with the pseudonym Blake Technology College (BTC). Names of respondents are also fictionalised.

Literature Review

> Ours is an age of growing dissensus about education (Hargreaves 1974: 208).

These words were uttered over 35 years ago in an article that presented the arguments of the 'Deschoolers' and the 'New Romantics' (Hargreaves 1974: 186). Illich (1971) also proposed that there was no question of reforming the educational system of that era, rather it should be destroyed and replaced with a new system. This view defines the '21st century educational imaginary'; this is the phrase used to capture a conception of future schooling practice (Hargreaves 2006a: 45). It is recognised that there will not be '*the* school of tomorrow, but many different schools of tomorrow' (Hargreaves 2006a: 50). Institutions will no longer be subject to a mind-numbing tedium of government orders, initiatives and strategies (Wrigley 2006: 112-4). Instead, practice across all schools will be 'decentralised' meaning that transformative practice will operate from the bottom-up, as opposed to top-down (Hargreaves 2006a: 51). Pring (2009: 6) stated that 'the present can be understood only as shaped by the past'; hence this section will contextualise recent developments in education and explore why radical innovation is now critical.

In short, the current system - driven by the disproportionate value placed on academic education - is failing children and the UK economy (Edge 2009). Claxton (2008) furnished his book with the title of *What's the Point of School?* Indeed, what is the point? The basic institution of school is held with such reverence that one cannot conceive ever doing more than tinkering with it, yet it is blatantly clear that it is dramatically failing (Claxton 2008: 17-23). One need only look to the Department for Children, Schools and Families' website to view its Statistical First Releases (DCSF 2009a). In 2007/08 there were 324,180 fixed period exclusions from state funded secondary schools. In the same year, over 10.3 per cent of 16-18 year olds were reported as not in education, employment or training; and more than one in 20 students were listed as persistent absentees (DCSF 2009a).

It is indisputable that efforts have been made to address these problems; governments in both England and Wales have been vigorous in the pursuit of 'higher standards' (Pring 2009: 2). For example, in England, *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003:6) is an ongoing effort to build foundations between a range of social and education services to 'protect children and maximise their potential'. In Wales, *Learning Pathways 14-19* is an initiative that gives students choice and flexibility over the tailoring of their education (WAG 2004); and more recently, the *Building Schools for the Future Initiative* (BSF) has been the largest capital investment programme aimed at rebuilding and renewing all of England's 3,500 state secondary schools (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP 2007: ii).

Berry (2009: 34) conducted an evaluative study of a London comprehensive where large parts of the Year 7 and 8 curriculum were being taught in an integrated, cross-curricular way. He found that students understood the approach and were able to 'follow the thread from lesson to lesson' and conceptualise how 'it all fits together' (Berry 2009: 35). However, despite radical reform, teachers remained anxious over whether they were meeting learning objectives. Such anxiety stifles innovation; it encourages 'incremental innovation' which results in only minor alterations to the original blueprint (Hargreaves 2004: 66). However, ministers now talk of schools' 'transformation of education' rather than 'mere improvement' (Hargreaves 2004: 67). Between May 2008 and March 2009, Ofsted visited 37 schools across England to evaluate the progress being made in implementing the new Key Stage 3 curriculum (Ofsted 2009:1). They found that successful innovation was linked to strong leadership where all staff were involved in developing a coherent whole-school curriculum (Ofsted 2009: 5). This is what BTC has done; its headteacher has challenged the fundamental assumptions one has about education and embarked on 'radical innovation' (Hargreaves 2004: 66).

BTC is set within a predominantly urban location. It caters for approximately 720 students aged between 11 and 16. In September 2008 BTC redefined its whole school approach to 'be at the forefront of innovation in teaching' (Daily News 2008). Under the government's *Building Schools for the Future* initiative, BTC radically transformed the delivery of its education; it had its new intake of students operate in a 'home base' building called *Discover*. On arrival students were allocated their own working space and given a laptop computer. In addition to bespoke facilities, the innovative restructuring allowed the school to personalise students' work and teach in smaller groups (Young 2008). It has also made available learning materials and students' assessments via its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). In replacement of the 'common set timetable' is a programme that allows students to organise their own weekly 'learning journeys' (BTC 2009b). This involves students booking 15-minute subject tutorials, and allocating themselves adequate personal time in which to 'complete assignments and meet deadlines' (BTC 2009b).

BTC's new curriculum, has been inspired by Hargreaves, arguably the country's leading authority on personalised learning. Hargreaves (2006a) offers a new view of the learner as central to personalisation; instead of expecting students to adapt to pre-ordained structures, he argues that practices be better adapted to meet the needs of learners (Hargreaves 2006a: 16). He compares this practice to the industrial shift from mass production to mass customisation (Wilby 2009), whereby the student voice is valued, and actively contributes to change. However, Hargreaves has recently reframed his own

conception, arguing that the government has used it 'as a clothesline on which to hang existing policies' (Wilby 2009).

Predating Hargreaves, Woodhead (2009) also condemned the government's usage of the term. He stated that Labour's quest to make learning more 'accessible' and 'personalised' made him "sick"; he continued: "I do mourn and resent what seems to me to be a desolation of learning'' (Curtis 2009). Woodhead rebukes the new National Curriculum as a collection of 'fads that are pursued in the never-ending drive to modernise every aspect of our children's lives in schools' (Woodhead 2009: 2). He asserts that the government's utilitarian obsessions have fostered a 'culture of low expectation' and 'undermined belief in the intrinsic value of academic study' (Woodhead 2009: 2-3). He believes the most recent revision of the National Curriculum to be a 'warped, ideological view of the educational enterprise' (Woodhead 2009:4). It is fair to assume that he would not agree with the innovative practice that is underway at BTC.

Thomas Estley Community College (TECC) in Leicester was chosen by the QCA as a case study for the new secondary curriculum. The school's new curriculum focuses on cultivating personal, learning and thinking skills through its subject specialisms. In order to assess whether learners had made progress towards achieving the curriculum aims, the QCA had to ensure they collected 'the right evidence from the right people' (QCA 2009b: 8). When evaluating the effectiveness of a new curriculum, the QCA assert that 'the words of those directly involved, particularly learners, are often the most powerful evidence of the impact of change (QCA 2009c). Their methods have influenced those of this study, which seeks to explore the extent to which the curriculum aims are being achieved, how student attitudes compare, and teacher perceptions of effectiveness.

Methodology

The main method used was a case study approach, within which other methods were used. As Denscombe (2007: 45) notes, 'The case study approach... encourages the use of multiple methods in order to capture the complex reality under scrutiny.' The other methods incorporated were: walk through impressions (QCA 2009b: 8); structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The walk-through impression (QCA 2009b: 8) took the form of a semi-structured observation schedule. It consisted of 30 curriculum aims, adapted from *The BTC BSF Vision* (2007: 11-15). The walk-through impression (QCA 2009b: 8) involved two observers literally walking-through Year 8s in *Discover* to see to what extent the curriculum aims were being achieved. The use of two observers allowed for cross-referencing during analysis. The 'participant as observer' stance was opted for as students are well accustomed to the presence of external visitors, and it enabled both observers to immerse themselves into the activities and 'gain additional research insights' (Opie 2004: 129; Sharp 2009: 85). Space allocated for note-taking on the schedule allowed for the accommodation of 'unforeseen happenings' (Sharp 2009: 85).

Structured questionnaires
Structured questionnaires were distributed to 15 Year 8s and 15 Year 9s. These year groups were chosen because they are close in age, yet are subject to different curriculum diets. The questionnaire made use of closed questions; these generally offer 'good reliability and validity' because they are pre-coded and lend themselves well to

quantitative analysis (Frederickson et al. 2002: 438). For Denscombe (2007: 166), open questions allow respondents space to 'express themselves'. However, such questions can often be time-consuming and foster an unwillingness to participate (Denscombe 2007: 166). In light of this, the questionnaire's final draft consisted of Likert-scale questions, which is a 'technique [used] for the measurement of attitudes' (Likert 1932: 55). An advantage of this technique is that it allows researchers to operationalise ambiguous concepts. The questionnaire's design was inspired by Frederickson et al. (2002: 437) who recommends the use of 'children's own vocabulary'. Sharp (2009: 69) also advises that questionnaires for children be 'shorter [and] simpler'.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with the headteacher and one other teacher were carried out for the purpose of triangulation (Sharp 2009: 73). An interview with the Head teacher was conducted prior to all other methods in order to clarify the aims of the new curriculum. A semi-structured schedule was chosen as this allows the interviewee to retain control of the agenda by 'responding to mostly open questions' (Sharp 2009: 74). This was imperative as the interview offered a real opportunity to gain 'privileged information' from a 'key player in the field' (Denscombe 2007: 175). But for the interview to fulfil its potential, it was important to demonstrate considerable interpersonal skills. Oppenheim (1992: 70) notes:

> The interviewer should... probe gently but incisively and present a measure of authority and an assurance of confidentiality.

Presentation and analysis of findings

The aims of the new curriculum

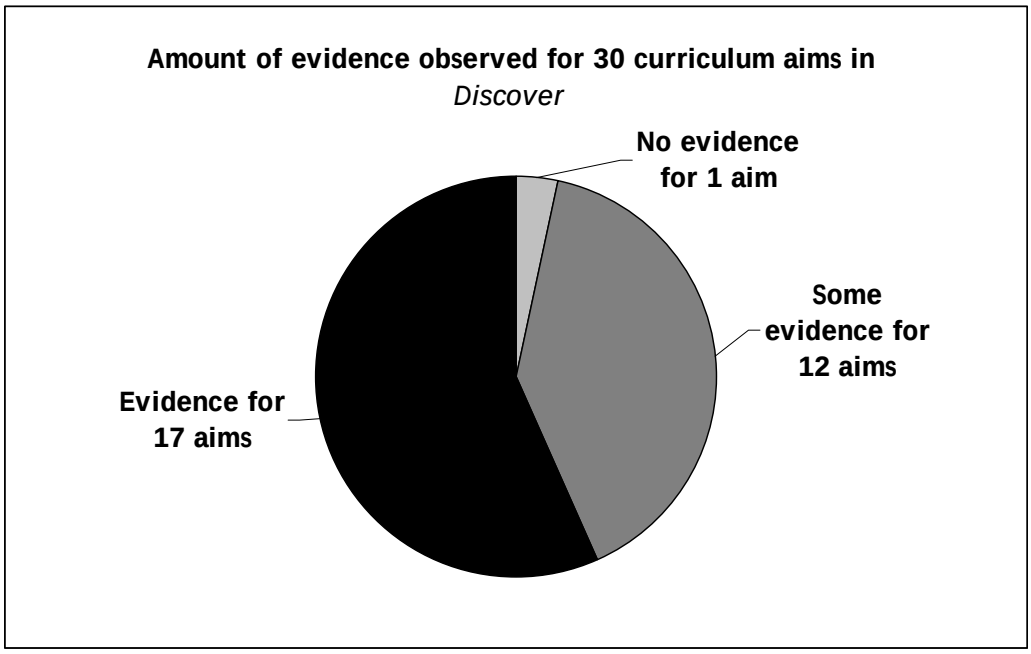
The semi-structured interview with the Head teacher was conducted for the purpose of clarification; it was necessary to clarify the aims of the school's new curriculum before measuring their subsequent impact. Throughout the interview with the Head teacher, it became evident that substantial groundwork and critical reflection had commenced before configuring the innovative curriculum approach called *Discover.* This preparation is a characteristic of successful reforms according to Ofsted who identified that such institutions 'based their reforms on considerable background research into theories of learning' (Ofsted 2008: 5).

In *Discover's* rationale one must note the juxtaposition of the words 'pedagogy' and 'curriculum'. As previously stated, the word curriculum is much more than a set of content to cover (QCA 2007). In terms of BTC's 'entire planned learning experience', the Head teacher clarified that the only aims this research could measure would be those based on how the curriculum is delivered, rather than its content. In addition, the Head teacher placed substantial emphasis on the fact that *Discover* has its students operating in a temporary Portakabin. Major refurbishment was due, but until completion, the new curriculum exists in an incompatible setting.

There are 30 curriculum aims, which are thematically divided in *The BTC BSF Vision* (2007: 11-15). These are: Assessment for Learning; Learning how to Learn; Personalisation of Learning; and Information Communication Technology. Figure 1 offers a summative presentation of what was observed in *Discover* following analysis of

walk-through impressions by two researchers (QCA 2009b: 8). The observation schedules were divided into the four themes for consistency.

Figure 1: Amount of evidence observed for 30 curriculum aims in *Discover*



After calculating the mean value from both observations, one can approximate that there is 'evidence' or 'some evidence' for 29 aims, and 'no evidence' for one aim. The following presents the findings from each of the three methodologies and has divided them accordingly. When different kinds of evidence converge in this manner, it becomes referred to as a 'chain of evidence' (Yin 1989, in Gillham 2000: 95).

Assessment for Learning

In the sub-category 'Assessment for Learning' on the observation schedule, both observers confidently noted 'evidence' for each of the five aims (Table 2).

Table 2: Curriculum aims for Assessment for Learning

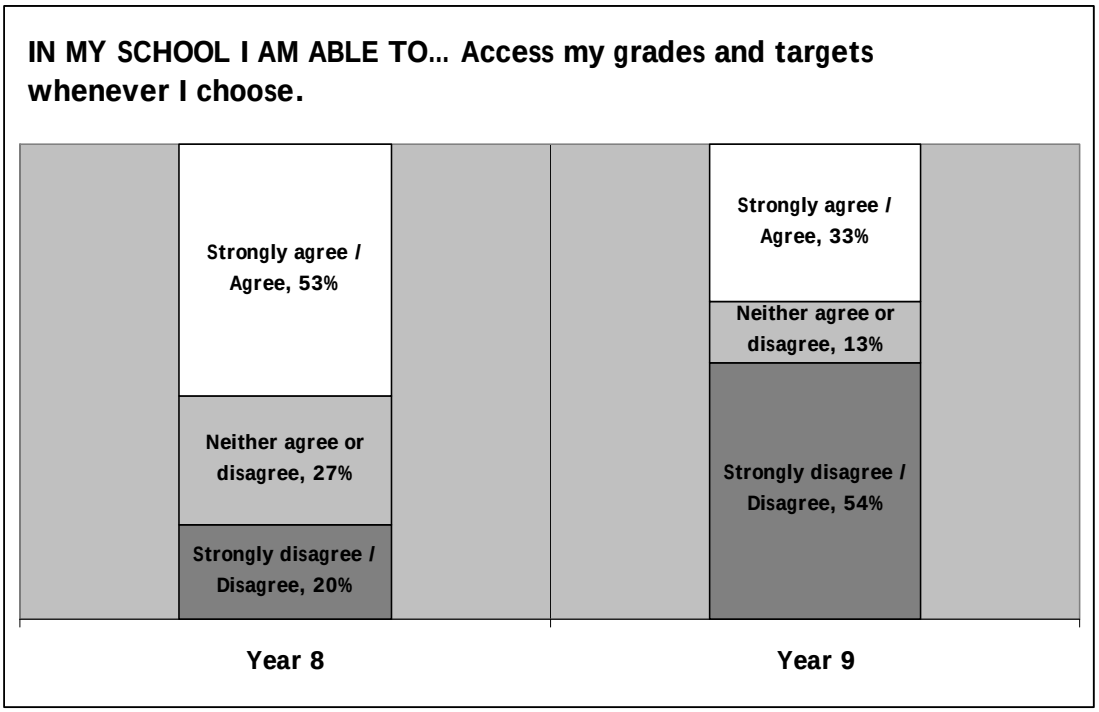
Curriculum aims (Adapted from *The BTC Vision* 2007: 11-15)	**Evidence** E – Evidence S – Some evidence N – No evidence
Assessment for Learning	
(15) 'Assessment for Learning is a central philosophy of pedagogy. Staff formalise this... by utilising students' VLE e-portfolio'	E
(16) '[Students have] availability to data about ongoing performance... including targets and progression'	E
(17) 'Assessment for Learning [is] personalised, teacher led and through self, and, or peer group evaluation'	E
(18) '[ICT] ensures that summative assessment data, as well as formative information is available for students, parents and staff'	E
(19) 'Staff are able to monitor progress using individual student profiles'	E

The BTC BSF Vision (2007: 11-15) states that 'Assessment for Learning is a central philosophy of the pedagogy'. The associated aims are being achieved to a large extent; one observer noted:

> Students know exactly what level they are on, and what they need to do to improve. When prompted, students could demonstrate how to access their grades and targets via the VLE.

The Year 8 students' knowledge of their attainment was also expressed in their responses to statement (1) on the structured questionnaire, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Students' access to their grades and targets



When the Year 8 and 9 responses are placed beside one another, the stark contrast becomes clear. While 53 per cent of Year 8 students agreed with the statement, a comparative 54 per cent of Year 9 students disagreed. It is fair to assume that this result owes to the use of ICT pervading all aspects of the new curriculum (BTC 2007: 16). In *Discover* students have access to their own personal assessment profile via the online VLE. This is so that 'they can self manage their learning to reach higher levels' (BTC 2009a: 5). Students can view their own 'grade book' which gives them a comprehensive overview of their levels, comments and targets to date. With the new system in place, grades are no longer spread across numerous subject departments, but are centrally located and readily available to both teachers and individual students. In spite of one fifth of Year 8s disagreeing with the statement, the observations suggest that students have easy access to their assessments. Therefore, it can be asserted that the aims concerning Assessment for Learning are being achieved.

Learning how to Learn

For each aim in the sub-category 'Learning how to Learn' on the observation schedule, both observers only noted 'some evidence'. This is not because the aims are not being achieved, but rather because the aims cannot be 'seen' *in situ*; for example, whether students are developing 'higher level thinking skills'. This could be attributed to a poorly formulated schedule, but it does serve to illuminate the views of Woodhead (2009: 76) who believes the National Curriculum should be nothing more than 'a statement of knowledge'. He states:

> What matters is the skill, not the subject. The latter is... a vehicle in which skills... can be banged endlessly into the skulls of the learners who have the misfortune to be entering secondary school in September 2008 (Woodhead 2009: 80).

Former Schools Secretary Ed Balls recently dismissed Woodhead as being 'out of step' with the educational establishment (Griffiths 2009). In light of what has been observed at BTC, Woodhead's controversial stance needs more consideration. He condemns 'Learning how to Learn' as 'a bizarre distraction from the true purposes of learning' (Woodhead 2009: 80). However, in saying that, he is assuming that teachers shun their subjects in favour of teaching the likes of teamwork and reflective thought. But this is not the case. At BTC students acquire skills as a consequence of their prescribed curriculum; they are embedded within the fabric of the curriculum. For example, the skill of self-management is cultivated as a by-product of students organising their weekly timetables. This finding was supported by data gathered from the questionnaires. The responses gathered to statements (10) and (11) are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' belief in that they are learning how to learn

IN MY SCHOOL I FEEL...					
I'm developing skills to make me a better learner.					
	Strongly disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree or disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
Year 8		2	1	11	1
Year 9	2		4	7	2
Fully involved in my learning; I don't just come to school because I have to.					
	Strongly disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree or disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
Year 8	1		5	8	1
Year 9	5	1	7	2	

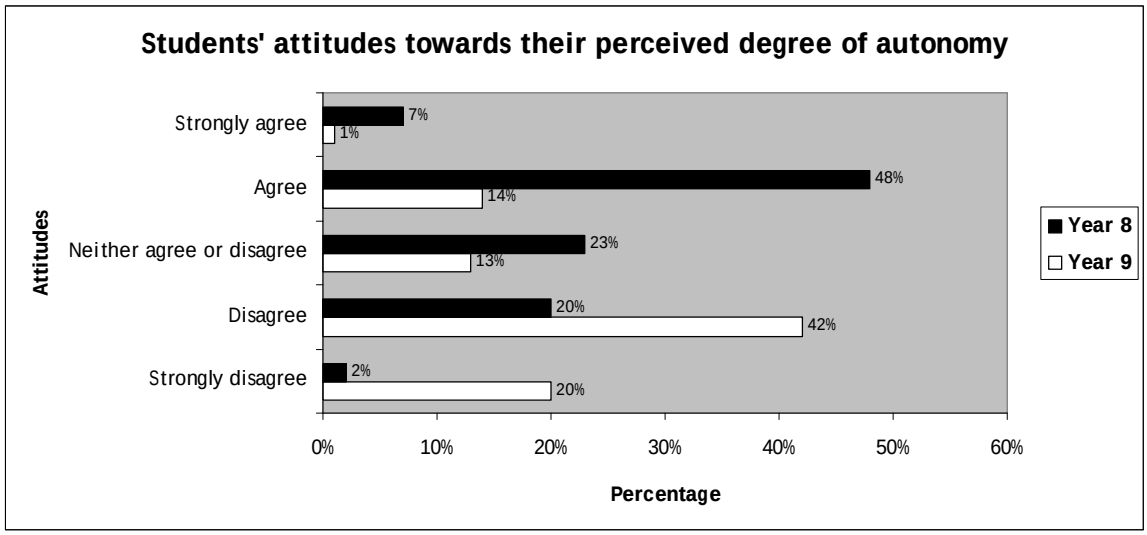
While the responses to the first statement show little disparity, the responses to the second are particularly telling. On calculating the frequency of responses, it appears that a proportionate majority of Year 8s feel they are fully involved in their learning. In direct contrast, one third of Year 9s chose to strongly disagree with the statement; therefore, by default, they comply with the view that they just go to school because

they have to. *The BTC BSF Vision* states that staff members in *Discover* should 'empower' students by 'building competencies and aspirations' and by 'assisting [them] to be independent learners' (2007: 14). These results show that this aim is being achieved. *Discover* functions to enable students to have greater ownership of their learning, which in turn fosters their independence and organisational skills. This defies Woodhead's view that skills are now taught at the expense of subject knowledge (Woodhead 2009: 80). It would appear that students in *Discover* acquire skills as a result of 'the organisation of learning' (BTC 2008: 1).

Personalisation of Learning

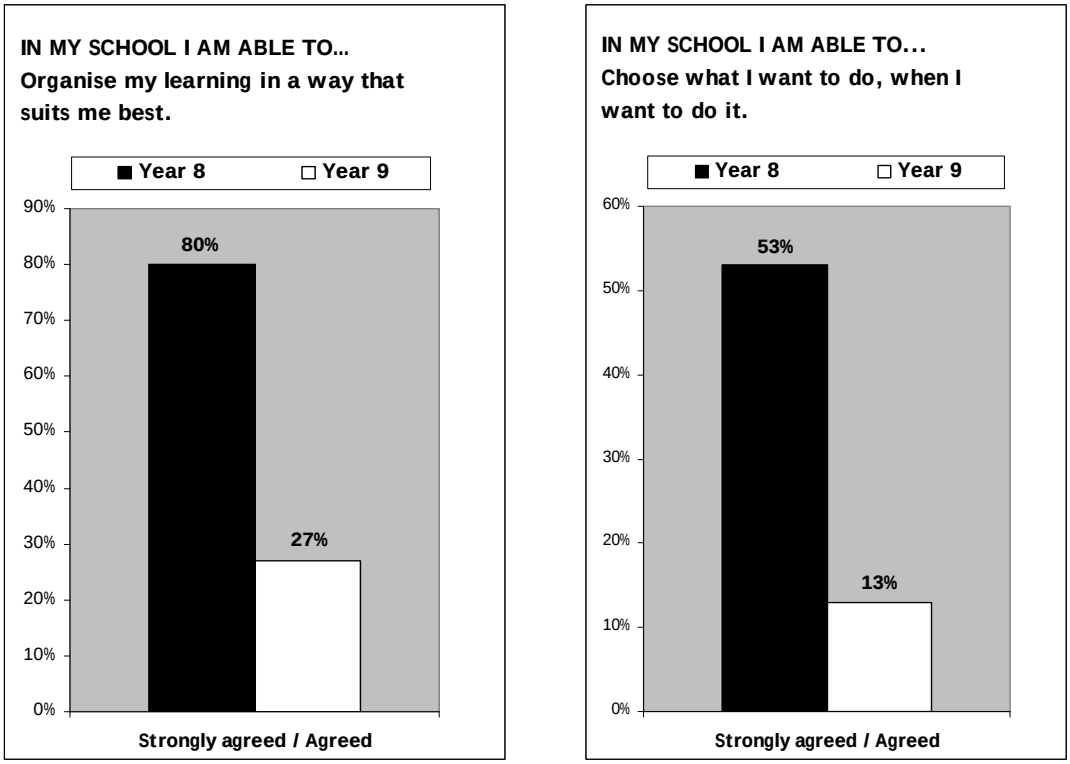
Aims for Learning how to Learn cannot be separated from the aims concerning the Personalisation of Learning. Questionnaire statements (2), (4), (5) and (9) all related to students' perceived degree of autonomy and whether they feel they can personalise their learning to their own needs. The format of a 'grouped frequency distribution' was used to organise the raw data in order to provide a broad overview (Denscombe 2007: 259).

Figure 3: Do students feel their learning is personalised to their needs?



As shown in the summative display, 55 per cent of Year 8s agreed or strongly agreed that they have a high level of autonomy. In direct contrast, 62 per cent of Year 9s disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements regarding their autonomy. When compared, it appears that the new curriculum's aim to allow students to follow 'personalised programmes of study' is being achieved (BTC 2007: 11-15). When breaking down these results into their former individual statements, some striking differences appear. Figure 4 illustrates how Year 8 and 9 students differed in their agreement with statements (2) and (5).

Figure 4: Students' agreement with statements (2) and (5)



Three times more Year 8s than Year 9s agree they are able to organise their learning in a way that suits them best; and four times more Year 8s than Year 9s agree they are able to choose what they want to do, when they want to do it. These results suggest that the aim for students to follow 'personalised programmes of study' is being achieved. However, their responses can be scrutinised. A short feedback session conducted following completion of the questionnaires revealed students' more in-depth attitudes:

> We get to work independently and at our own pace, but we still have deadlines to meet.
>
> It would be nice to spend longer in lessons and do the activity in the lesson. Our lesson time and personal time can sometimes seem a bit disjointed.
>
> It can sometimes get really stressful when we're having to be independent and entirely responsible.
>
> (Year 8 pupils 2009).

These comments illuminate the difficulties of tailoring 'a personalised programme of study' that reflects students' 'aptitude, ability and learning profile' (BTC 2007: 14).

Student voice is a source that is increasingly 'gaining momentum as a way of improving teaching and learning' (Hopkins 2008: 394). In 2006, 12 secondary schools in Kent were due to undergo substantial renovation under the BSF programme. But before the bulldozer arrived, Head teachers needed to liaise with stakeholders to establish a vision for secondary education. This involved consultation with young people about their hopes for the schools of the future. Frost and Holden (2008: 83) conducted research during this vision-building process to explore students' perspectives on school environments. They concluded that 'by systematically engaging young people in evaluating and designing educational provision, we will move towards rigorous and sustainable development for the 21st century' (Frost and Holden 2008: 94). This conclusion is in accordance with Rudduck and Flutter (2004):

> We should take seriously what pupils can tell us about their experience of being a learner in school... [and] find ways of involving students more closely in decisions that affect their lives in school (Rudduck and Flutter 2004: 2).

On analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires, one could assert that Year 8s feel their educational provision is personalised to their 'needs, aptitudes and interests' (Hargreaves 2004: 63). But the qualitative data narrates a different tale. When sifting through their responses, one cannot help but wonder how personalisation will ever be achieved when there are such diverse requirements. Mass schooling, as an institution, was born in an age when children were 'seen but not heard' (Burke and Grosvenor 2003: 150). But now, it is becoming widely recognised that the views of children are to count. Consulting students offers schools an important means towards their own improvement (Freeman 1996, in McIntyre et al. 2005: 150). Freire (1996, in Burke and Grosvenor 2003: 1) said that 'to alienate men [sic] from their own decision-making is to change them into objects'. At the heart of 'personalised learning' lies 'co-construction', which is the view that students are active participants in designing, delivering and assessing their own learning (Hargreaves 2006a: 17). In essence, Hargreaves wishes to abandon the delivery of the subject in favour of participating in the project (Woodhead 2009: 130). But as he himself noted, radical reform will be stifled until the National Curriculum is abolished (Hargreaves 2004: 13). In light of this, and with reference to the first research question, the aim to 'provide personalised programmes of study' will only ever be achieved to a certain extent. Hargreaves (2006b: 1) has published a series of pamphlets for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, one of which is *Deep Leadership – 1.* It concerns itself with how school leaders should see themselves as 'organisational designers' who 'exert a persistent effect on the strategic and organisational choices' to secure personalisation (Hargreaves 2006b: 4-30). For Woodhead (2009: 130), Hargreaves's philosophies are somewhat oxymoronic. He argues that when someone is 'in charge', students cannot 'in any meaningful sense' act as leaders (Woodhead 2009: 130). What emerges from Hargreaves is a statement of an ideal that is unrealisable (Woodhead 2009: 77).

One student in Frost and Holden's study (2008: 90) commented: 'Take into account all suggestions not just those most frequently mentioned'. While optimistic, this assertion is not realistic, but it is what BTC's new curriculum aims to deliver. But in a predominantly 'bureaucratic-autocratic form of organisation' (Rudduck and Flutter 2004: 10), it struggles to be attainable. Personalisation goes as far as prescribing a menu from which students can select preferences, but students themselves cannot dictate the options available. The Head teacher himself commented that 'excessive red

tape prevents progress' (2009). BTC's new curriculum offers students a choice and allows them to be autonomous. This is a positive move for the personalisation of learning, and is something that many schools are not yet doing. The teacher who was interviewed in *Discover* said:

> Personalised learning can only be achieved to a certain extent. We try our best to meet learners' requirements, but it isn't always possible (Teacher 2009).

Information Communication Technology

The BTC BSF Vision (2007: 16) states:

> The use of ICT pervades all aspects of learning at BTC and is used effectively to promote the inclusion of all students. Our students are e-confident and use a wide range of ICT resources to support their learning.

In *Discover* students begin each school day by logging onto their laptop computers. Each student resides at his or her own study desk until required to attend 15-minute tutorials. In spite of the prevalence of ICT, only 47 per cent of Year 8s agreed with statement (12) regarding their perceived level of 'e-confidence'. 87 per cent of Year 9s agreed with the same statement, even though they experience a 'traditional secondary 'bell' driven organisation of timetabled lessons, and didactic approaches' (BTC 2008: 1). This result appears at first to be an anomaly but, after taking account of student voice, it becomes clear.

> We want more structure and discipline. It's sometimes too easy to just slack off and play games (Jack, Year 8, 2009).

Taking this student's comment into consideration, it may be that while Year 8s feel 'e-confident', they may not feel confident that the prevalence of ICT is benefiting their learning. The teacher in *Discover* said:

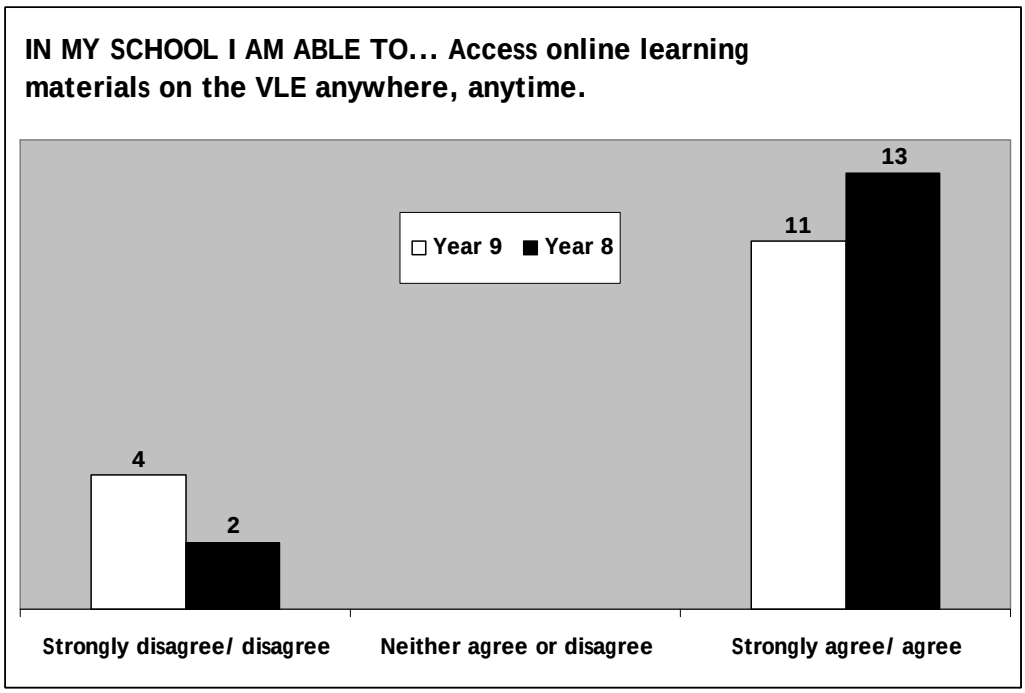
> We had some strong reactions from students in the first year. Some said it didn't suit them, but it is just a case of adapting. Some continue to say that Discover is too small, and many think it looks like a prison. It isn't ideal at present (Teacher 2009).

The teacher's comment indicates that *Discover's* existence in a temporary Portakabin plays a large part in eliciting negative reactions. But in spite of this, it can be asserted that the aim to promote ICT is not having its intended effects.

As mentioned earlier, 'evidence' or 'some evidence' was found for 29 aims on the observation schedules. However, the aim that both observers failed to find evidence for was aim (14), which referred to students' ability to 'understand concepts of reliability, validity and bias'. It was noted on both schedules that students tended to copy and paste information from elusive websites without any investigation into its credibility. In relation to students' perceived degree of 'e-confidence', it may be that the Year 8s do not feel adequately trained in using the internet effectively.

Owing to the confines of this small-scale study, it was only possible to note 'some evidence' for aim (4), that being students' ability to access online learning materials anywhere, anytime (BTC 2007: 15). Because of this, the aim was reproduced as a measurable statement in the questionnaire. The results of which are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Students accessing online learning materials



As illustrated, the statement could have been reworded to ask students whether they have access to the internet at home or not, as this appears to be the determining factor. What becomes apparent among many of the curriculum aims concerning ICT, is that they are premature. In the words of Woodhead (2009: 77), they are statements of ideals that are presently unrealisable.

An overall analysis of this study's results show that BTC's new curriculum is achieving the majority of its aims, with some discrepancies. Table 4 offers a reproduction of the total frequencies of the responses to the statements in the questionnaire.

Table 4: Questionnaire total frequencies of responses to statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Year 8	7	20	37	92	24
Year 9	20	47	36	66	11

The above table is an illustrative display of how students' attitudes were weighted; more than 116 responses from Year 8s agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, while a comparable 67 responses from Year 9s disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements. All 12 statements were based on *Discover's* curriculum aims contained within The *BTC BSF Vision* (2007: 10-19). The fact that Year 8 and 9 attitudes differ quite considerably serves to prove that BTC's new curriculum is achieving its aims to an extent. Inevitably, as previously discussed, obstacles obscure *Discover's* impact, but the QCA acknowledge this; they state 'curriculum innovation is a process driven by questions' where 'no one has the definitive answer' (QCA 2009b: 12).

Conclusions and implications

While conducting this research, BTC headlined local media (Daily News 2009): 'Ofsted grade [Blake Technology College] outstanding'. Ofsted visited the school owing to it being selected as a case study by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in recognition of its innovation (Headteacher 2009, Nov 30th). BTC's headteacher quoted the Ofsted report in the article: '[BTC is] one of the best examples out of the 20 schools we have visited for using the new Key Stage 3 curriculum, especially regarding intervention' (Daily News 2009). The inspector's comment compliments what this research has found at BTC.

This study has shown that Year 8 students, now in their second year of the new curriculum, are adapting to the evolution of change. They exhibit greater levels of autonomy, and express the view that their curriculum is personalised to their needs. These results were validated by the data gathered from Year 9 students. Analysis of the aims concerning ICT proved that they are too premature to be fully effective.

However, there remains an inability to firmly state to what extent BTC's new curriculum is achieving its aims. However, this partly owes to *Discover's* temporary setting. It is fair to say that BTC's new curriculum exists in an incompatible setting where the aims cannot be fully amplified, and therefore not accurately measured. Nevertheless, this does offer scope for further research. It would be interesting to repeat this study after substantial renovation is complete.

The introduction to this research identified BTC as being 'intrinsically interesting for its radical innovation'. This study has attempted to offer a comprehensive overview of the impact of BTC's new curriculum. It has identified its positive features, while also drawing attention to areas for improvement. Between May 2008 and March 2009, Ofsted visited 37 schools where progress was being made in implementing the new Key

Stage 3 curriculum (Ofsted 2009: 1). While identifying some successful features, their publication was peppered with recommendations on ways in which schools could improve. This is not negative, but rather inevitable when schools are implementing radical changes. Education is dominated by constant government initiatives (Ofsted 2008:1; DCSF 2009b: 3; QCA 2007: 3). However, their contribution to the cause is merely superficial as it does not 'get under the skin... [of] what really happens' (Gillham 2000:11). This research has delved into an untapped field where radical reform has been embarked upon. It has gathered 'privileged information' from 'key players in the field' that would have otherwise gone unheard (Denscombe 2007:175).

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Primary Teachers' Perceptions Of Children's Spiritualities And Methods For Fostering These In Their Pupils: A Case Of One Community School.

Michelle Thomas

Abstract

This research project explores the way primary school teachers define and foster children's spirituality. The nature of children's spirituality and the importance of promoting it in the primary school were considered to provide a theoretical basis for the research. Spirituality may be an ineffable concept important to life, however research indicated misunderstanding surrounding the term. A small qualitative case study was conducted investigating one community school in detail in order to provide a picture of perceptions held by teachers. Through unstructured interviews and questionnaires, meaningful insights were gained into teachers' views of children's spirituality, while content analysis of school policy documents contributed to uncovering the wider understanding of the term, and the ideal sought. Findings showed a range of perceptions and experiences, and an undercurrent of uncertainty among some teachers as to the nature of children's spiritualities. Questionnaire responses were hampered by a low participation rate but some meaningful insights were gained from a small number of interviewees. Spirituality was viewed as children's engagement and response to life, by two teachers, and this was supported by other researchers in this area. Many participants cited religious visits as methods that invoke children's spiritual experiences. The understanding of children's spirituality appeared to be linked to the experience of teachers. Suggestions are given for further research to explore in greater detail and depth frontline perceptions and practice.

Introduction

Recent emphases on teaching the whole child and Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education (SMSC) have shown a commitment to raising the importance of children's spirituality in our schools. With this holistic approach to teaching and the introduction of the creative curriculum, I feel more consideration needs to be taken of the spiritual dimension of childhood by those working with children.

The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority recognised an important link between spiritual development and learning a number of years ago:

> A spiritual sense can be seen as a prerequisite for learning since it is the human spirit that motivates us to reach beyond ourselves and existing knowledge to search for explanations of existence. The human spirit engaged in a search for truth could be a definition of education, challenging young people to explore and develop their own spirituality and helping them in their own search for truth (SCAA 1996: 6).

In addition, the second aim of The National Curriculum states that:

> The school curriculum should promote pupils' *spiritual*, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life (DfEE and QCA 1999: 11).

Children's spirituality is fostered through all National Curriculum subjects (DfEE and QCA 1999:19), as well as permeating all aspects of school life; its aims, values and policies. However, Nye (2009) is concerned that spirituality is not ingrained within the curriculum. For her, not enough emphasis is placed on children's spiritual development in education. I agree because although the term 'spirituality' is mentioned several times in curriculum documents there is minimal elaboration as to its actual meaning and application.

A large contribution to spirituality is made by the subject of Religious Education as detailed throughout the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE:

> Religious Education has a significant role in the promotion of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (DfES 2004: 11).
>
> Religious Education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human (DfES 2004: 9).

Research, until relatively recently, has centred on the religious dimension of the child's spirit rather than recognising the spiritual potential of all children. This has brought to question the intentions of researchers of particular faith groups and the degree to which such work can be representative of an increasingly secular and multicultural society such as Great Britain:

> There are so many dimensions involved in a person's well-being that religion cannot be the sole bearer of spirituality (Roux 2006: 156).

It is now widely understood that spirituality does exist outside religion as recent developments in this field have moved towards a more holistic viewpoint as part of human nature.

Despite the importance placed upon it by Ofsted, many teachers still hold limited views of children's spiritual development (Elton-Chalcraft 2002). Its ambiguous nature and connection with religion often leave teachers doubtful of its very meaning and relevance. Both the literature and my own experience indicate that primary school teachers tend to view children's spirituality in limited ways, often lacking awareness of every dimension.

This project explores teachers' perceptions of children's spiritual development and how they foster this in their pupils. Designed to take a detailed examination of one community school's views and approach I hoped to explore the following questions:

- What do teachers perceive spirituality to be?
- How do they develop spirituality in their pupils?
- How is this incorporated into the school ethos, curriculum and policies?

Despite its ineffable quality, many academics have explored the nature of children's spirituality. An increasing amount of research shows children experience spirituality in a variety of ways (Hart 2003; Hyde 2008; Hay and Nye 2006; Adams et al. 2008; Champagne 2001; and Bellousa and Csinos 2009).

Research by Hay and Nye (2006) is at the forefront of recent developments in children's spirituality; they recognise the potential in all children to be spiritual beings. Their work has questioned Piaget's idea that children lack the cognitive capacities required for certain spiritual experiences, and has defined the mode and form that children's spirituality can take in their theory of *relational consciousness* which I will explore in detail later.

The general consensus found in the literature is the importance of spirituality for children as reflected by Ofsted (2004: 10):

> Spiritual development is an important element of a child's education and fundamental to other areas of learning.

I have been influenced by a study conducted by Elton-Chalcraft (2002) who considered teachers' perceptions of spirituality. She found that teachers viewed spirituality in limited terms by concentrating on its social and moral dimension or in Hay and Nye's (2006) terms: the way children relate to other people. Although this study is dated and used a relatively small sample I believe my research may reveal a similar trend; that teachers are unaware of all aspects of spirituality in children.

Literature Review

Section 351 of the Education Act, 1996 requires the curriculum in a maintained school to be broad and balanced and to promote: 'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society' (DfEE and QCA 1999: 12).

The National Curriculum lists the shared values of teachers as set out by the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community. This statement of values (DfEE and QCA 1999:148) details those which have been generally agreed by society. These include those pertaining to the self, relationships, society and the environment and are similar in part to the four dimensions of spirituality suggested by Elton-Chalcraft: (inner, social and moral, environmental and transcendental) with the exception of not having a religious aspect (2002).

As detailed throughout the National Framework for Religious Education (DfES 2004), attainment target two pertains to the development of a child's spiritual journey. Its emphasis on learning *from* religion encourages children to explore questions of meaning and develop personal responses to the big questions; areas closely related to PSHE and citizenship curricula.

All these sources indicate that children's spiritual development is an important part of their education and implies awareness by teachers of how to recognise and foster it. I felt, therefore, that there was a need for research to capture teachers' perceptions, especially in this rapidly changing world. With an overloaded curriculum and emphasis on SATs spiritual development is easily forgotten.

In order to appreciate teachers' awareness and understanding of children's spirituality I needed to explore the nature of spirituality and what it actually meant in relation to children's development and wellbeing. Ofsted have attempted several definitions of the concept. This is their most recent:

> Spiritual development is the development of the non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view, either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. It is about the development of a pupil's 'spirit'. Some people may call it the development of a pupil's 'soul'; others as the development of 'personality' or 'character' (Ofsted 2004: 12).

Primary school teachers play a central role in the development of children's 'characters or personality' and the personal qualities described above such as 'self worth' and 'personal insight' are important elements of these. However spiritual development incorporates other aspects including the way in which children relate to one another and their world. In its document: *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development,* Ofsted (2004) list a number of characteristics that children developing spiritually will exhibit. They also give an indication of the types of things schools do which promote spiritual development.

There is no doubt that spirituality is difficult to define.

> … of all experiences, it is the spiritual which, it seems, is most resistant to operational definition. At its worst, attempts to pin it down lead only to a greater awareness of its intangibility and pervasiveness' (Best 2000:10).

McCreery (in Hay and Nye 2006: 60) defines it as: 'An awareness that there is something Other, something greater than the course of everyday events'. What does he mean by 'Other' though? Is it God, a soul or something else to which he is referring? This is not clear, making for a somewhat unsatisfactory definition. Similar ambiguity is found here:

> Spirituality is the journey to find an authentic, unified and profound understanding of the existential self which informs action, sustains hope and enables personal transformation (West-Burnham & Jones 2007: 18).

These, and similar definitions provide no tangible explanation of spirituality but instead present complex statements open to interpretation. Therefore, I considered more detailed explanations provided in current theories of childhood spirituality as a theoretical basis on which to base my research.

Many academics explain spirituality as an ontological reality; part of being human and yet inseparable from humanity so seeing it as beyond, and more than that which pertains to the religious (Hart 2003; Champagne 2001; Hyde 2008; Adams et al. 2008; Hay and Nye 2006).

Hay and Nye conducted a three year research study. Using a grounded theory approach, they hoped to develop a theoretical framework of children's spirituality. Interviews with children revealed quite detailed accounts of children's spiritualities. Although the sample was relatively small it contained children from both religious and

non-religious backgrounds. Based upon three categories of spiritual expression: awareness sensing; mystery sensing; and value sensing they remained open as to what accounted for spiritual expression. From their conversations they developed a theory of *relational consciousness* as they found that children were relating to themselves , to other people, to the world and to the Transcendent. According to their *'signature phenomenon'* Hay and Nye believe that every child has a unique 'signature', or way of spiritual expression that needs to be understood in order to recognise a child's spirituality.

This is similar to the view taken by Champagne (2001, in Erricker et al. 1997: 78) who places importance on listening *to* children's spiritual expressions and listening *for* the spiritual in children's everyday lives. Erricker and Erricker (in Erricker et al.1997) also emphasise the importance of listening and talking to children in order to understand their spiritualities. Their research, as part of the Children and Worldviews Project, led them to proclaim the importance for educators to recognize children's interpretive framework so as to understand how children learn. Hart (2003) talks of a spiritual curriculum involving ten touchstones that can awaken spirituality. These include 'hearing the inner voice' and 'listening with your heart'. Like Hay and Nye, he believes; 'Children are inherently spiritual beings' (2003: 171) and that it is important to '...welcome and nourish our children's spiritual intelligence' (2003: 16).

The study by Elton-Chalcraft (2002), mentioned earlier, showed teachers' perceptions that concentrated on the moral and ethical dimension of spirituality. She based this on her *'hologram metaphor'* likening spirituality to a hologram; containing different dimensions that may not necessarily be seen together. These were the inner dimension; social and moral dimension; environmental dimension and transcendental dimension. These are similar to those in Hay and Nye's (2006) theory of 'relational consciousness', as discussed earlier.

Examples given about children's spiritual experiences are varied. They include: being at one with the world; philosophical inquisitiveness; showing empathy; making sense of a dead pet; seeing the invisible (Adams et al. 2008). Also documented are accounts of finding courage through illness, moments of awe and wonder, and meaning making. All instances relate to children's perceptions and responses to normal everyday events (Adams et al. 2008). Furthermore, Hyde (2008) identifies five spiritualities through which children's spiritualities seemed to naturally flow: wisdom; wonder/awe; the relationship between one's self and the other; seeing the invisible and wondering in relation to the ultimate questions of life. Therefore, many academics believe that children posses rich spiritual lives that can be nurtured if those around them can recognise these spiritualities (Hyde 2008; Adams et al. 2008; Hay and Nye 2006; Champagne 2001).

With so much interest, evidence and importance placed on children's spiritualities, has this transferred to those who are involved most directly with children's development, namely teachers of the primary phase?

Research Methodology

In this small research project I explored the ways primary school teachers define and foster children's spirituality. I chose to conduct a qualitative study adopting an interpretive approach because it was based upon understanding, meaning and

perceptions, where I wanted to achieve some richness in detail (Denscombe 2003). It followed in the spirit of a case study investigating one particular school in detail.

I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with some of the teaching staff followed by a questionnaire to explore the prevalence of the views expressed. I also wanted to analyse school curriculum and policy documents to see if the views given were reflected in practice and school policy. In choosing multiple methods I aimed to build a bigger picture (Denscombe 2003) and to minimize the disadvantages of any one approach (Gillham 2000). This would provide a range of sources to allow for triangulation of the data and is particularly useful when a holistic view is sought (Cohen et al. 2007).

I conducted the study in a large community primary school in Lincolnshire as I wanted to explore perceptions within a typical non-faith school. The school serves an area of considerable disadvantage with a high proportion of children having special educational needs. The school achieved grade 2 (good) for both 'personal development and wellbeing' and 'care, guidance and support' in their Ofsted inspection report in 2009. The setting was familiar to me as I had been there on placement and was known to most of the teaching staff. I hoped this would help gain the involvement and trust of participants. Formal permission was gained through email during which disclosure of the specific research outline and dates were arranged.

Having a narrow research focus would allow an in-depth study of perceptions of spirituality (Denscombe 2003; Gillham 2000). I chose to use semi-structured interviews as this method would allow me to collect detailed information from a small number of people (Sharp 2009; Denscombe 2003). Applying open questions in a semi-structured format would enable elaboration while still providing focus (Denscombe 2003; Opie 2004):

> One of the strengths of the semi-structured interview is that it facilitates a strong element of discovery, while its structured focus allows an analysis in terms of commonalities (Gillham 2000: 72).

I thought this method would be more therapeutic and more rewarding than other methods, as stated by Denscombe (2003) but Gillham (2000) disagrees arguing that interviews are not therapeutic as participants may regret disclosures.

Developing the questions was more difficult than I had anticipated as they needed to be open, yet specific enough to elicit the relevant information. Writing questions is more difficult if the focus of the interview is narrow (Gillham 2000). After all, I did not want to lead responses. For these reasons I chose to utilize four questions used in the study by Elton-Chalcraft (2002) mentioned earlier. Therefore, the research tool had already been tested and found to provide relevant information. These four questions formed the basis of discussions to allow interviewees to expand in whatever direction they wished to pursue. I followed guidance by Gillham (2000) when preparing the interview schedule such as: using open questions, providing prompts to ensure equal coverage and allowing equivalent time.

Questions were few in number, followed by probes, to uncover deeper meaning. This raised the issue of researcher bias (Opie 2004), which I hoped to have minimised by establishing a good rapport. But as Hyde (2008: 19) states: '...absolute objectivity on the

part of the researcher is impossible.' After all, I was engaged in both the data collection and interpretation processes and was part of them.

Interviews were conducted in a classroom after school. The sample of teachers was a convenience sample because it was made up of those willing to take part. I had hoped to follow up interviews with a questionnaire to explore the prevalence of expressed views (Sharp 2009; Denscombe 2003) and to enable triangulation of findings, but there were insufficient views to provide a full range of categories of questions. Despite knowing the teachers and providing questions in advance many were unwilling to give an interview on the subject. For this reason I made use of the interview questionnaire to gather responses from those reluctant to verbalize their views. I gave the questionnaires out personally in order to explain my research intentions. I asked the same four questions allowing half a page for each response as advised by Gillham (2000) and applied the same coding procedure.

Providing questionnaires made the data anonymous, enabled respondents to consider responses and could be filled in at a time convenient to them. Filling in the questionnaire indicated implicit consent on the part of the respondent. Keeping the questions the same as in the interview provided another method by which to triangulate findings.

Unfortunately, I was unable to provide prompts or probes without leading the responses and so relied on the clarity of questions to elicit appropriate answers and, because it is not interactive, it relied on the literate expression of respondents. This made it difficult to uncover reasons behind thoughts as suggested by Bell (2005).

I chose to conduct documentary analysis using curriculum documents and school policies in order to see if views given were reflected in the documentation. Analysing school planning and policy documents would provide an insight into the ways teachers were explicitly and implicitly contributing to the spiritual journey of pupils. I found discourse analysis to be inappropriate for analysing policy documents as uncovering hidden meaning would be difficult when they had been carefully crafted, (Denscombe 2003) so instead undertook content analysis.

From the outset of the project I was open with regards to the intentions of my research. Informal permission to undertake the research at the school was gained from the head teacher via e-mail, followed by the formal submission of the project outline, as advised by Israel and Hay: 'Researchers owe a professional obligation to their colleagues to handle themselves honestly and with integrity' (Israel and Hay 2006: 112).

As spirituality is a subject adults are reluctant to talk about (Nye 2009), I needed to gain the trust of interviewees in advance by adopting a sensitive approach. I introduced the nature and intentions of the research in person to give potential participants the opportunity to ask questions about the study. I also left an introduction and the questions in the staffroom to help familiarize teachers with my research focus and prepare those willing to take part (as recommended in Gillham 2000: 12). Leaving an interview sign-up list enabled participants to give their informed consent: 'Ethical research involves getting the informed consent of those you are going to interview, question, observe or take materials from' (Bell 2005: 46).

Individual sets of questions were distributed for participants to consider prior to the interview and I provided a choice of recording methods (notation or recording). Varying the method of recording raised concerns over reliability as the conditions of the interview would not be constant and so could affect how respondents answered. Advance viewing of the questions could also have affected the validity of responses as participants may have said what they think the researcher expects or have planned an answer instead of giving an honest response. However, I felt these measures were important in order to give people the confidence to take part and to encourage deep and meaningful discussions. Participants were informed of their right to stop the interview and withdraw from the research at any point (BERA 2004).

In practice, only two teachers were willing to be interviewed and both preferred that their answers be noted down, so the format remained the same each time. Unfortunately, this raised fresh concerns over the notes taken and the degree to which they truly reflect what was said during the interview process. Research intentions were disclosed in advance and all information treated as confidential. All data concerning the school and participants has been made anonymous. Some data was obtained from informal conversations with teachers and I was careful to clarify statements and obtain permission for their inclusion.

In broad terms, spirituality can be linked to the themes in the Lincolnshire Agreed syllabus for Religious Education (Lincolnshire County Council 2006): Relationships with Self, God, Others and the World. These resemble those by Elton-Chalcraft (2002) and Hay and Nye: (2006) inner, social and moral, environmental and transcendental. I planned to categorise data from both the interviews and questionnaires to establish common themes that emerged; not having pre-conceived categories provided the prospect of alternative views.

I was aware that the findings would not be representative of all teachers due to the small focus of the research and the particular context in which it took place. My intention was not to find generalisations but to provide insight as a basis for further research, possibly on a larger scale. I understood that as the researcher I would play a significant role in the production and interpretation process (Denscombe 2003 and Gillham 2000). After all, the analysis of text is subjective and open to researcher bias (Opie 2004). For these reasons it was important for me to be clear about my viewpoint from the outset and be as objective as possible during the interpretation process. I have already discussed my view of spirituality; its holistic ontological nature, separateness from religion and importance in childhood. My prediction was that teachers would lack the awareness of all dimensions of spirituality.

Analysis of Findings

Data were gathered from interviews with two teachers, informal conversations, five questionnaires and an analysis of four school policy documents. The reasons for the small sample and the arising limitations are discussed below.

The school Ofsted report (2009) made the following statements: 'Pupils' spiritual, moral social and cultural development is good.' And 'The good quality of care and support helps to encourage the good personal development of pupils.'

There was not sufficient time in which to analyse all the school policies. This, and access difficulties to curriculum documents led me to concentrate on the three most pertinent school policies: the behaviour policy, Religious Education policy and sustainability policies. As Art was mentioned as a subject that inspired awe and wonder I also analysed this policy.

I applied analytic coding to the raw data (Denscombe 2003). For the school policy documents this involved identifying specific words related to spirituality. These were derived from the document: *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (Ofsted 2004) mentioned earlier, as well as from the definitions and theories discussed in the literature review.

This was not straight forward, as the meaning of words depended upon the context in which they were used. For example, respect could be placed in all categories depending on whether it indicated respect for others, oneself, God or the world. I began to consider whole phrases as it was clear that identifying words by themselves was restrictive.

Each policy document that was analysed had a section dedicated to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, showing these themes integrated across the whole school. In the Religious Education Policy there was explicit reference to providing 'opportunities for spiritual development'. It offered little further explanation other than that 'Children consider and respond to questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life'. This idea has strong similarities to responses from interviewee 1. Her examples of children's spiritual expression all involved engagement and response by the children, as I discuss later. It is questionable whether the following aim from the RE Policy refers to 'spiritual' and 'moral' issues as separate: 'develop an awareness of *spiritual and moral* issues in life experiences.' What does the document mean by spiritual? It was difficult, in some cases to understand the meaning that the author had implied. The rest of the paragraph outlines the moral and ethical aspects and social development.

Interestingly, the section referring to the Early Years Foundation Stage contains significantly more references to relationship with self than other sections or policies. Obviously it is the nature that young children need to learn about themselves before learning how to interact with others and the wider world, but does this mean that older children do not need to learn about themselves as much? Children are constantly changing and developing so I would argue that throughout childhood and beyond people need to understand themselves. In this respect Hart's (2003) ten touchstones of spirituality place great emphasis on understanding oneself.

In the behaviour and discipline policy references pertained mostly to the relationships between the children and the staff and expectations of behaviour. I found it necessary to adapt the coding system as some elements referred to interaction detrimental to relationships. Although they still refer to human interaction they imply a negative outcome, in other words reduced spiritual well being. This policy is dedicated to promoting good relationships and reducing negative relationships between children and the staff.

The procedure used would have been reliable had another researcher used the same coding system on the same documents and arrived at the same set of highlighted

words. However, the coding process became increasingly complex as certain phrases could fit into more than one theme. Also, the interpretation process afterwards would vary depending upon the researcher, as he or she would play a significant role in the interpretation process, as stated earlier.

Unfortunately, the validity of the findings was questionable due to the nature of the documents themselves. They were from secondary data that had been developed by the school's governing body and subject co-ordinators for a particular purpose and so their credibility was brought into question. As legal documents they serve as evidence for inspections by Ofsted and so may not have been true reflections of actual practice within the school. However, the process of content analysis has provided an insight into the ideal sought by the school, if not a picture of reality itself and added to the understanding of categories and terms related to the concept of spirituality.

I categorised definitions given in the interviews and questionnaire to the four broad dimensions of spirituality in the Lincolnshire Agreed syllabus for Religious Education as discussed earlier: relationship with Self, God, Others and the World (Lincolnshire County Council 2006).

Categorising the data was difficult as views given did not fit neatly within them e.g. 'A sense of belonging/ feeling calm and loved' could be viewed as the relationship with self, as well as relationship with others. Where this was the case I placed the viewpoint in both categories. Answers given to the first question in both the interview and questionnaire could be placed within these four dimensions. It was more difficult to apply a similar coding procedure for the other questions due to the lack of detail given. For this reason, I looked closely, compared and contrasted views and sought the overall picture.

1. How would you define spirituality?

Relationship with self	Relationship with God
A sense of belonging/feeling calm and loved The individual's own self belief Do we have a soul?	Christian Acceptance/understanding that there might be more to life than what you see, something 'bigger' than us. Do we have a soul? Is religion correct? – It is difficult to understand Spirituality is an acknowledgement of spirit or some intangible energy or force. Connected, although not exclusively to religion A belief in a spiritual being What you believe in, no one thing
Relationship with others	**Relationship with the world**
A sense of belonging/feeling calm and loved Somebody's beliefs and values, moral values Morality, social interaction, the human side. (says this is probably what other people call spirituality) What you believe in, no one thing	Awe and wonder An example would be in Arts practice – it's that 'wow' factor when you're emotionally moved – (it doesn't require (belief in) a higher being to experience this

Box 1 * Answer highlighted in yellow were given in interviews

In relation to this first question (their definition of spirituality) there was a variety of differing viewpoints, despite the small sample as can be seen in box 1 above. Most teachers associated spirituality with morality and religion. The following respondent provided an insightful answer, referring to three out of the four dimensions:

> Somebody's beliefs and values. A belief in a spiritual being but also the individual's own self belief and moral values.

This answer is referring to a person's belief in themselves as well as the values they hold. There is a clear distinction between these and the reference to morality; 'a

spiritual being' appears to be a reference to God or it could have been referring to something mystical.

All participants were extremely busy and this meant that responses were not as full as had been hoped. One teacher mentioned that another questionnaire (distributed by another student) looked '*less scary*' and two mentioned that they would '*Google it*' (the term spirituality) when they got home. One had written the following in pencil: *Spirituality is an acknowledgement of spirit or some intangible energy or force. Connected, although not exclusively, to religion.* This appears to be a definition copied from an information source. The respondent's original thoughts have been erased as faint marks can still be seen. Many of those involved asked for my views on the subject, while others required affirmation of the relevance of their responses. These all highlight the very lack of understanding and doubt present.

Surprisingly the teacher coming from an atheist perspective was the most willing to share her views on the subject. She defined spirituality as having two aspects; morality and awe and wonder. Like the findings by Elton-Chalcraft (2002), she thought other teachers regarded spirituality as just morality. She describes an example of children's spirituality in her classroom in which she expands on her definition:

> The use of Andy Goldsberg [sic] pictures (he uses natural materials to enhance the beauty of nature) in a lesson. In one lesson, the children became really animated and I was surprised by how much they responded in an emotional way. They struggled to find the vocabulary to express this emotion. The children had a go themselves. The engagement and whole involvement when talking about their own sculptures they'd made; they had invested a lot of themselves into it.

This describes an occasion where the children were emotionally involved in their activities; 'they had invested a lot of themselves into it'. Further examples given show that spirituality, for her, is when the children are engaging and responding in a deep and meaningful way. They are moved by what they are doing, being creative and giving of themselves in some way. This indicates an awareness of spirituality relating to children's experience, rather than being associated to specific subjects. In other words how children are acting and feeling not what children are learning.

She discussed spiritual moments of discovery when learning about the Fibonacci sequence in mathematics and probably would have discussed most, if not all of the subjects, had there been sufficient time. She, therefore, revealed a deep understanding of spirituality as her emphasis on children's responses and engagement are shared with the examples given by researchers discussed earlier.

The following response, given in the second interview, shows the thought processes of the interviewee as he thinks through the concept of spirituality:

> Acceptance/understanding that there might be more to life than what you see: something 'bigger' than us. Do we have a soul? Is religion correct? It is difficult to understand (Interviewee R).

He openly expresses the difficulty he has with understanding it yet also provides ideas which encompass religion, the existence of a soul and the possibility of something

bigger. Although he may possess a greater understanding than he was able to express he clearly demonstrates a broad understanding of the term. Whereas the respondent discussed earlier doubted his own thoughts and so referred to an information source, this one was happy to express his ideas.

2. Could you describe any examples of children's spiritual experiences/ development or wellbeing?

Conversely most respondents answering the second question erred towards RE lessons and religious visits as examples of children's spiritual experience. An exception was an example of a child being able to see monsters. There is much literature giving examples where children are able to see ghosts and angels, for example, but this is one aspect that many adults would not find credible. Childhood experiences shared during research years later has revealed many such cases where people have kept experiences to themselves for fear of not being believed (Adams et al. 2008; Hart 2003).

Interviewee two described two examples of children's spiritual experiences. The first describes an occasion where a child really engaged and excelled at an activity as well as experiencing awe and wonder.

> One low achieving boy in year six was playing the village priest in an ongoing role-play in the class. The class had visited churches and looked at religious ceremonies. He was really good at playing the priest and had modelled it. When we visited the church the child said: 'Oh wow! They really do this? This is like a real version!' (Interviewee R)

The child in this example had become really animated and absorbed in the role as well as experiencing a sense of awe and wonder while visiting the places of worship. He really excelled despite being a low achieving member of the class.

The second instance refers to a moment of contemplation which R explained was more difficult to recognize:

> A girl in year six on a trip to Greenwich Stone said, 'This is the place where the living meet the dead'. She was really thinking about it. Really considering it.

Here the child was considering one of the big questions in life; what happens to us after we die?

3. How do you foster children's spiritual development?

- Through lesson discussion/ images visits/ interactive resources.
- Try to teach a range of religious beliefs so children are aware of the world around them. Alongside PSHE.
- Through RE and PSHE mainly. School trips/ visitors.
- We're doing it during RE lessons, but also on a day to day basis by reminding children what makes a good Christian and teaching respect to other beliefs.
- I don't know if I do.

Answers given on the methods used by teachers to foster children's spiritualities are listed above. One graduate teacher was not sure if they did: '*I don't know if I do.*' One referred to pedagogical approaches while the other three mentioned religious websites, visits or lessons. It was interesting that two out of the five respondents referred to understanding other's beliefs as a way of fostering spiritual development.

The responses given during the interviews to this third question were considerably more insightful than answers from the questionnaires. Both interviewees saw their role in fostering children's spiritualities as one of helping children discuss and respond to experiences or beliefs. This is the pedagogical approach used in Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning and Personal, Social and Health Education as mentioned in both interviews.

> By getting children to talk about what they are doing and helping them to respond to it by helping them find the vocabulary with which to express it. By keeping it open (the lesson) and being non-judgemental. By accepting people's viewpoints like in SEAL when everyone can have their say if they wish to. Appreciating and responding to that feeling they get inside and valuing and accepting the feelings (This links to emotional literacy and is in SEAL) *(*Interviewee C).

The response given in the second interview shares many similarities with the first. Both emphasized the need for accepting all viewpoints given in a discussion:

> Through discussion. Like in RE but, more through PSHE and discussing beliefs and why. By exploring attitudes- there's no right or wrong but giving children a chance to give their perspectives and provide justifications (Interviewee R).

Answers given to the fourth question concerning useful strategies or resources was limited. Three out of the five respondents claimed not to know of any. The remaining two talked of websites and artefacts as useful resources; '*Various websites- especially Hindu website'.* However, the answers given did not explain or elaborate further, so I should have included a 'why?' question. All responses from respondent 4 centred around Christianity and instilling Christian values in an almost confessional approach to RE, indicating a rather narrow view of spirituality.

Two teachers in conversation debated the presence of a spiritual self or other in the absence of a greater or higher order. Both agreed if you could look at everything at the same time–in harmony rather than a God up their somewhere, then that was a different way of seeing things, and a kind of spiritual existence could be understood. Each was considering the transfer of energy, particularly after death, and the realisation that it must convert in some way. C felt she was doing her bit for the 'everything' by instilling moral values and the ability to relate to one another in her pupils. Both saw religion as a way of formalising natural human spirituality like education is a way of formalising learning.

The feedback regarding the scariness of the questions indicated that the response rate may have been nil had I not delivered the questionnaires personally and reassured respondents about the purpose of the research. 'The questionnaire will always be an intrusion into the life of the respondent' (Cohen et al. 2007: 318).

Due to a reluctance to be interviewed and the poor response rate to the questionnaire, it is possible that those views given may not be accurate, complete or representative of the teaching staff within the school and therefore lack validity. On reflection it would have been more useful to break down the questions into smaller less demanding ones, by using some of the prompt ideas on the interview schedule. This would have made the research tool less daunting for respondents and more likely to elicit fuller responses. Piloting the questionnaire should have raised awareness of these issues but friends were more willing to provide fuller answers.

Two of the five respondents to the questionnaire were newly qualified or on the graduate teaching programme and so new to the profession. It seems that the two most experienced teachers were the most confident in the subject and therefore the most willing to be interviewed. Their responses provided far richer detail and valuable information than those answers given in the interview questionnaires. However, the fact there were only two responses limits the findings somewhat.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My research intentions were over ambitious for the scope of such a small scale study. A longitudinal ethnographic study would be required in order to fully explore how spirituality is perceived and fostered within one school. However, there is still much to be learned from the research. This was a typical school and could provide insight into schools with similar profiles even though broad generalisations could not be made.

Most evident during the process of investigation was the doubt and uncertainty pertaining to spirituality. Some teachers found the topic disconcerting, strange and a little embarrassing. They themselves had not been exempt from the very culture which discourages spiritual expression both throughout their childhood and their lives now. This cultural taboo surrounding spirituality has been widely documented (Adams et al. 2008; Hay and Nye 2006).

It was evident that there were varying views among the teachers in the school studied, as to the nature and expression of spirituality among children. In some cases, there was a lack of understanding of the term 'spirituality' and the assumption of its association with Religious Education in the curriculum. Most respondents referred to religious visits as times where children express themselves spiritually; probably in the form of awe and wonder. There was more emphasis on the moral and ethical dimension with a number of references to beliefs and values. This bears similarity to findings in the study by Elton–Chalcraft (2002) discussed earlier. However, one of the research methods, the questionnaire, did not suit the sensitive nature of the subject as answers given were often short and possibly lacked validity.

Having been on placement in this school I had witnessed first-hand lessons where teachers were positively promoting the spiritual nature of their pupils. That some teachers were unaware of this is testament to their caring and holistic attitude towards the children they teach. However, many researchers feel that awareness of spirituality is a pre-requisite for promoting and fostering it in children (Champagne 2001; Hart 2003; Hay and Nye 2006; Hyde 2008). So it may just be that the limitations of the questionnaires prevented the revelation of complete and accurate insights.

The interview method did suit the purpose of the research. The two interviews provided some meaningful insights regarding children's spirituality and this may be due to the teaching experience and confidence of the interviewees themselves. According to them, children's spirituality involves engagement and response to beliefs and experience, and like most examples of children's spiritual expression explored earlier, they relate to children's perceptions and responses to normal everyday events. The examples given to support their views included: awe and wonder, deep engagement in activities, philosophical questioning, contemplation and discussions. Both felt discussion was an important method for exploring beliefs and feelings in a non-judgemental way and the use of role play/drama featured in both accounts. It was clear that both interviewees were drawing on their teaching experience when sharing their broad understanding.

The degree to which certain policy documents related more to one spiritual dimension than another was revealing. The sustainable development policy was mostly, as one would expect, dedicated to children's relationship with the world while the behaviour policy favoured relationships with others. The RE policy contained all four dimensions with many references to the religious and moral and ethical issues. Global and personal relationships were featured less. It would be interesting to see the proportions that all the school policies covered. If a more objective method of categorising could be developed it might be worthwhile to analyse the policy documents from a number of schools to compare their proportional content. According to Schostak (2000: 192) 'All research has implication for actions.'

There needs to be further research to gauge a larger number of teachers' views regarding spirituality so that a fuller picture of perceptions can be formed. It may be profitable to set up an online discussion board where teachers could share their thoughts and experiences on the subject. Not only would this show the most prevalent view and uncover misconceptions or lack of understanding but it may also reveal a wide range of accounts of children's spiritualities which would serve to help raise understanding among the teaching profession. Therefore, It could serve as both a research and a teaching tool. Comparisons between age groups and different school types may show differences in the spiritualities recognised in pupils. If there is found to be a lack of understanding among teachers then the term may need more emphasis in the materials used in teacher training courses. After all: 'The role of the teacher is crucial in reconstructing a climate in which spirituality is nourished' (Hyde 2008: 37).

This project has increased my understanding of the complex nature of children's spirituality. It has also raised my awareness of the importance of children's spiritual development and my role in nurturing this in pupils. I agree with Hay (2006) who believes that it is the work of educators to nurture and protect the spiritual lives of children (in Adams et al. 2008), indeed: 'Spirituality is at the heart of understanding children, just as it is at the heart of what schools are about too' (Nye 2009).

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Action Research to Explore the Impact of Structured Literacy Activities on Improving Reading in Y1.

Tracey Gell

Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the use of systematic phonics teaching, regular guided reading sessions and directed activities related to texts to improve reading within Y1. Prior to the beginning of this research, 10 of the 11 focus children were working below national expectations in reading. To address this, three different strategies were introduced at fortnightly intervals focusing on phonics, guided reading and comprehension tasks. Both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were used and data collected through assessment, observations and work samples. This research concluded that the strategies used were effective in improving reading in the cohort of children studied and recommends that a similar programme be incorporated throughout the rest of the school to further improve reading levels.

Introduction

The aim of this research was to implement a structured literacy programme to support reading for 11 Year 1 children. The Head teacher had observed that reading levels throughout the school were generally very poor and wanted to establish the cause. Subsequent phonic assessments showed that the Y1 cohort of 11 children were only working on the early stages of phase 3 Letters and Sounds (DCSF 2007) with some not being secure with all of the sounds in phase 2. The Head teacher and I felt that there was a danger of children not making sustained progress in reading if these gaps were not addressed. Previous research has shown that there is a relationship between poor phonological awareness and subsequently delayed reading (Bradley and Bryant 1985). This group of children were therefore used as the focus for this research whilst undertaking systematic phonics teaching, regular guided reading sessions and related comprehension activities.

Previous studies have divided thought as to the relationship between phonics and reading, one being that learning to read is the cause of phonological awareness (Morais et al. 1979, Goswami and Bryant 1990: 4) whilst the opposing view is that an early phonetic awareness and sensitivity to rhyme are required to enable children to learn to read, (Bradley and Bryant 1985, Gaouch and Lambirth 2007: 68, Stuart and Coltheart 1988). Further studies have found evidence of the reciprocal relationship between phonics and reading (Cataldo and Ellis 1988, Perfetti et al. 1987). This research was based on the reciprocal approach with the focus being on a combination of intensive, systematic phonics teaching, regular guided reading sessions based on each child's phonic knowledge and directed activities related to texts to support the progression in reading of 11 Y1 children in a small rural Primary School.

Due to this being a small scale study because of the size of the school there are limitations as to the transferability of the findings of this research to larger settings. There were also issues with continuity of the phonics and guided reading sessions due

to staff illness, absence of individual children and changes to the timetable during the duration of the research. Time restrictions also meant that guided reading sessions could only be carried out twice a week for each group rather than the 5 times a week that is advocated as being of optimum value. In addition to this, there were occasions where children missed some of the directed comprehension activities due to absence and some groups had longer in between reading the texts and carrying out the activities if they read on a Thursday. Some of the lower ability pupils also found it difficult to work on the comprehension tasks independently which meant that on occasions they were not completed fully.

Literature Review

There is some debate as to whether children require a phonological awareness prior to learning to read or whether indeed reading actually develops this awareness. Liberman et al. (1989) and Lundberg et al. (1980) suggest that the best single predictor of a child's reading performance is that of their phonological awareness knowledge. This statement is supported by Blaicklock (2004: 36) who states that 'correlational studies have frequently found significant concurrent and predictive relationships between rhyme awareness and literacy'. The effects of phonological awareness on reading are further supported by Bradley and Bryant (1985) who carried out a study of 6 year olds with poor phonological knowledge. They implemented 40, 10 minute sessions for these children, incorporating the use of plastic letters and sound training. Their results showed that the children who had received this training were reading and spelling 10 months in excess of their counterparts who had received no training at all. This research is supported by Blevins (1998) who suggests that children find it easier to read the more words they recognise and phonics instruction provides them with a method by which to work out unfamiliar words to do this. Morais et al. (1979) and Goswami and Bryant (1990: 4) however argue that 'children learn how to break words up into their constituent sounds because they are taught to do so when they learn to read so making learning to read the cause rather than the result of phonological awareness'. However, Perfetti et al. (1987) and Cataldo and Ellis (1988) argue that phonemic awareness and learning to read are reciprocal and actually interdependent on one another.

This reciprocal relationship between sound and word recognition is highlighted by Ehri and Wilce (1987) who suggests that encouraging children to write words down helps to embed both word recognition and phonemic awareness as to how words are structured. Physically writing letters and words helps sounds become concrete and 'leads to children's conscious, reflective awareness of constituent sounds within words', (Yaden and Templeton 1986). Templeton and Morris (2001) argue that learning to spell is more than a specific skill for learning to write but in fact plays a crucial role in learning to read in terms of recognising conventions such as long vowel sounds. Their view is that there is an intrinsic link between phonics, spelling and word recognition when learning to read. The findings of Johnston and Watson (1997) reflect this view showing that as a result of systematic synthetic phonics instruction, children were reading and spelling 7 months above their chronological age. Hinds (1993) however disagrees that spelling and reading are intrinsically linked due to the child not needing to look at every letter in a word to read it as they would to spell it. This view focuses on the visual approach to reading and the belief that children can read a word by purely looking at the onset and rime rather than by using their phonic knowledge to sound it out.

The National Reading Panel (2000: 33) suggest that 'in addition to teaching phonemic awareness skills with letters, it is important for teachers to help children make the connection between the skill taught and their application to reading and writing tasks'. Guided reading provides children with the opportunity to do this with the teacher being able to make corrections and give support where necessary whilst the child remains in control (Fountas and Pinnell 1996: 25). However, Ford and Opitz (2008) argue that in a third of cases studied, these connections were not apparent, with guided reading being taught in isolation to additional literacy instruction so significantly reducing its effectiveness. From their research, Ford and Opitz also found that two thirds of teachers were failing to take a constructivist approach and saw guided reading as an instructional activity rather than a scaffolding one, as advocated by Vygotsky, with the teachers taking on a demonstrative role so reducing opportunities for children to explore the texts for themselves. This practice opposes the views of Reitsma (1988: 220) who found that guided reading and independent reading with self-selected speech feedback were 'significantly more effective than silent reading' due to the fact that where the child receives feedback and support, the teacher is able to correct any inaccuracies and model the correct pronunciation of different sound patterns. In silent reading or in the demonstrative practice highlighted by Ford and Opitz (2008) the child is unaware of any errors they have made or in the case of the latter have little opportunity to explore decoding or sight reading for themselves. For guided reading to be effective research has shown that it needs to be structured carefully to ensure that the texts chosen are matched to each group of children within the same developmental reading stage (Homsby 2000: 26). However, Ford and Opitz (2008) note the importance of assessing and reforming these groups where necessary to continue to meet the needs of the individual child.

The benefits of reading out loud during guided reading sessions were discussed by Anderson et al. (1991: 417) who suggested that 'a child learns more at moments when he or she is taking an active turn reading aloud and answering the teacher's questions, particularly when the child's reading fluency is low'. This view is supported by validated research which shows that reading out loud in guided reading has a significant beneficial impact on word recognition, fluency and comprehension (Gagen 2007). In addition to guided reading, directed activities related to texts (DART), have been shown to have a significant impact on comprehension skills (Verster 2003). Verster advocates the use of reconstruction and analysis activities to improve comprehension skills by encouraging children to interact with texts to enable a deeper understanding of their construction and meaning. The use of DART is supported by the DFES (2005) who state that comprehensions is a crucial aspect of learning to read therefore in order for children to fully engage with texts they must be given the opportunities to reconstruct and analyse what they have read whilst also drawing on their prior knowledge. This metacognitive view of reading directly opposes the traditional view where reading is seen as a passive activity based on decoding words to make sense of a text and comprehension is seen as 'a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that sequentially build toward comprehension ability' (McCarthy 1999).

The literature within this review revealed the variety of complex skills which all contribute to the early development of reading. Much of the research literature used however was based in Canada or America as very little British research was available, particularly with reference to guided reading. This research aims to draw on the findings of the literature discussed as phonic knowledge, guided reading and directed

activities related to texts have all been shown to have significant links to progress in reading.

Research Methods

Action research can be defined as a 'practical, cyclical, problem-solving' way to effect change to improve a situation (Taylor et al. 2006: 5). The Head teacher was concerned because reading levels were poor throughout the school. Tracking data also showed that only 1 of the Y1 cohort was working within expected levels for reading. To ascertain the reason why, I undertook phonic assessments which indicated that there were large gaps in children's phonic knowledge. It was decided that I would focus on the 11 children in the Y1 cohort as the Head teacher and I were concerned that they were not making satisfactory progress. I designed an action plan to follow in order for the research to be organised and well planned.

It was important to consider the ethical issues for this research in line with the British Educational Research Association (2004) and the Bishop Grosseteste University College guidelines (BG 2008). Due to the nature of the interventions being within the normal remit of the classroom, it was felt by the Head teacher that it was not necessary to obtain written parental consent for this research but that her written consent would be sufficient. Also, in accordance with the University College and BERA guidelines, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained at all times.

Due to the fact that this research was carried out on a small scale, I was aware that the results would only be 'concerned with effecting change locally, *in situ*' (Taylor et al. 2006: 5). Koshy (2005: 39) suggests that although small scale research may not 'change the world' it can be effective in bringing about improvements or implementing changes within your own setting.

The research took place over a period of 3 months and took the form of three cycles. Initial data was gathered in the form of Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) grids and phonics assessments prior to the commencement of the first cycle. This information gave a baseline from which progress could then be measured. The first cycle was the introduction of daily 20 minute phonic sessions with the children working in groups according to the gaps in their phonic knowledge as indicated from the baseline assessments. Four of the children were still working on set 5 of Letters and Sounds phase two whilst the remaining seven were working at the beginning of phase 3. The second cycle involved continuing with the daily phonics sessions but also introducing twice weekly guided reading sessions with children being grouped according to their phonic knowledge as assessed from cycle one. Although it is recommended that children undertake guided reading on a daily basis, (Thompson undated) limitations with time and staffing meant that these sessions could only be carried out twice weekly for each group. The purpose of the guided reading was to provide opportunities for the children to use their phonic knowledge and also to develop their understanding and comprehension skills. Although the children were already participating in guided reading, the grouping and text levels did not reflect the phonic stage which they were currently working at. The aim of addressing this in the second cycle was to help to consolidate the systematic phonic work from cycle one by putting it into context. The third cycle involved the introduction of directed activities related to texts (DART) which were carried out as independent activities on the days the children were not taking

part in guided reading. These activities were based on texts read on the previous day or at the end of the previous week for those children who read on a Thursday.

The research methods used within this study straddled both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. The qualitative method incorporated phonics tracking which was carried out each day, guided reading records which were completed following each session and samples of the children's marked, directed activity work. This triangulation helped to ensure the reliability and validity of the research by drawing evidence from three different sources. Jick (1979: 603) suggests that 'researchers can improve the accuracy of their judgements by collecting different kinds of data bearing on the same phenomenon'. The qualitative paradigm also included APP assessments carried out at the beginning and at the end of the research to show what, if any, progress had been made. Koshy (2005: 86) suggests that qualitative data can provide 'rich insights into actions and their consequences'. The qualitative data gathered within this research highlighted specific areas of reading where individual children were experiencing difficulties which could then be addressed by adjusting the phonics and/or guided reading groups they were in. By using qualitative methods of data collection which incorporated written observations of the guided reading sessions and also marked work samples, I was able to use the depth of information gained to inform more accurately the APP grids for reading. The grids were then used to provide quantitative data in the form of average point scores for each child at the beginning and the end of the research. Data for the phonics assessments at the beginning, middle and end of the study were also presented in the form of a graph to show comparisons between each cycle. This quantitative data was used to illustrate the progress in reading which had been made over the course of the research by each member of the target cohort.

Findings and Analysis

Prior to commencing any action, the cohort of 11 Y1 children were assessed on their phonic knowledge using the Letters and Sounds (DCSF 2007) assessment sheets for phase 2 and phase 3. The average point scores as shown in figure 1 were calculated based on each child's reading level which was assessed using the Lincolnshire School Improvement Service APP grids at the beginning and end of the research.

Figure 1: Average point scores for each child at the start and end of the research period

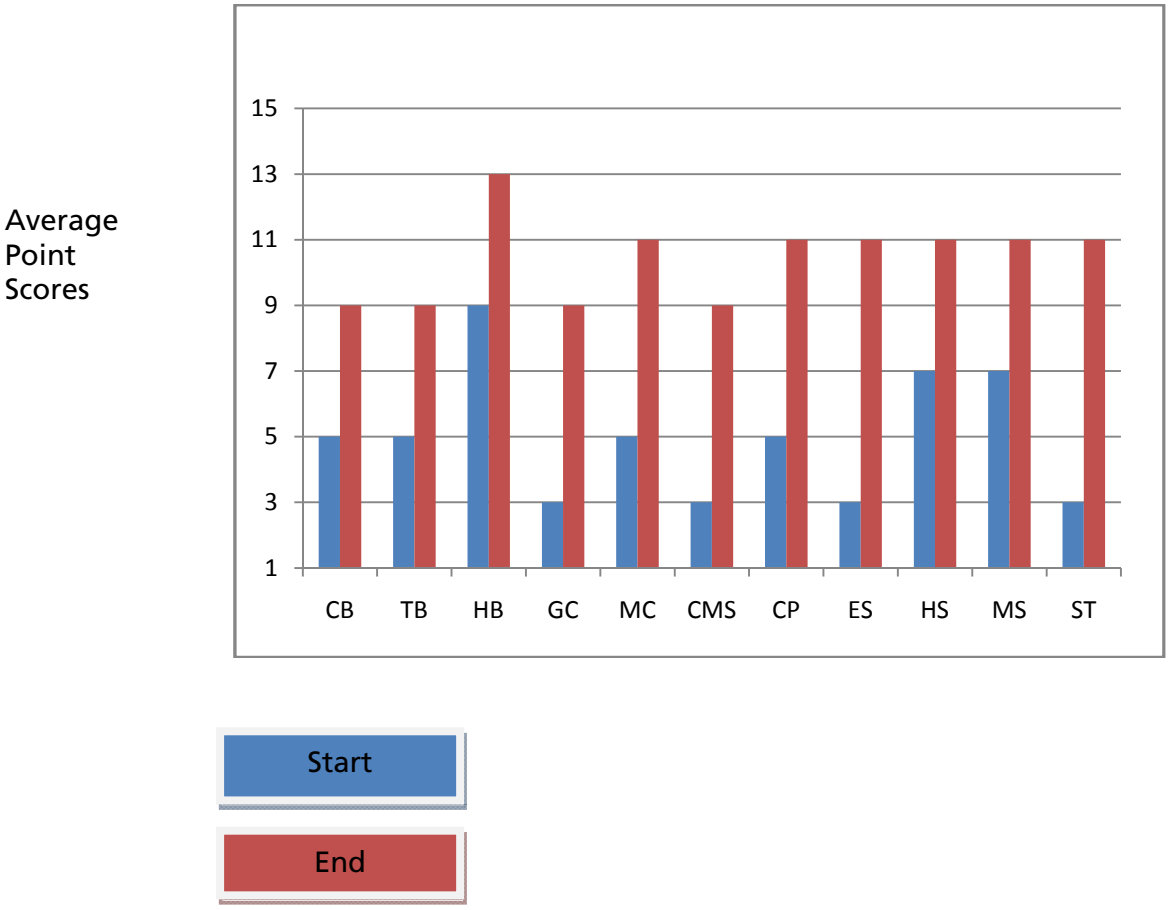


Figure 2: Average point scores and corresponding reading levels

Average Point Scores (APS)	Levels
3	P6-7
5	P8
7	1C
9	1B
11	1A
13	2C

My findings show that every child made at least 4 average point scores improvement in their reading between the beginning and the end of the research, with the 4 lowest achieving children improving by at least 6 average point scores.

Figure 2 shows how average points score correspond to reading levels. At the beginning of the research, 8 of the 11 children were still only working within the p-scales when assessed using the APP grids, with only one child working within expected

levels. Phonic assessments carried out at the beginning of the research showed that they had large gaps in their phonic knowledge which attributed to these low levels. This reflects the view of Bradley and Bryant (1985) who believe that poor phonological knowledge can be a factor in delayed reading. By Y1 children should at least be working within phase 4 and beginning to move on to phase 5 of Letters and Sounds (DCSF 2007). A contributing factor to this lack of progress was a history of poor teaching in that class which meant that children had never been exposed to regular phonic teaching or had the opportunity to cover as wide a range of texts as they might have within their reading. These children had also never undertaken any comprehension activities prior to this research.

The first cycle involved the 11 children taking part in four twenty minute phonic sessions each week, targeting the letters and sounds where there were gaps as identified from the initial assessments. The ideal would have been to carry out the phonic sessions every day but due to Planning, Preparation and Assessment time this was not possible. The children were split into two groups according to the stage at which they were working, one group working with myself and the second with an experienced Teaching Assistant. A tracking sheet was maintained to ensure that all of the sounds were being covered and to show how the children were progressing and which stage they were at, at any time. The sessions involved revisiting and then learning new sounds using different methods such as sound buttons to illustrate the phonemes or instruments to demonstrate long and short vowel sounds. Tricky words for each phase were also covered during these sessions.

The phonic assessments carried out at the end of each cycle show that by the end of cycle 3, all children were secure with phase 2, with 5 of the children who had gaps in this phase having filled them by the end of cycle 2 as shown in figure 3. The results also show that all children made sustained progress from the initial assessments to the end of cycle 3, with 4 children having moved on to phase 4 by the end of cycle 2 with this number rising to 6 by the end of cycle 3 as shown in figure 4.

Figure 3: Levels children were performing at within phase 2 Letters and Sounds (DCSF 2007) following initial assessment, cycle 1 and cycle 2

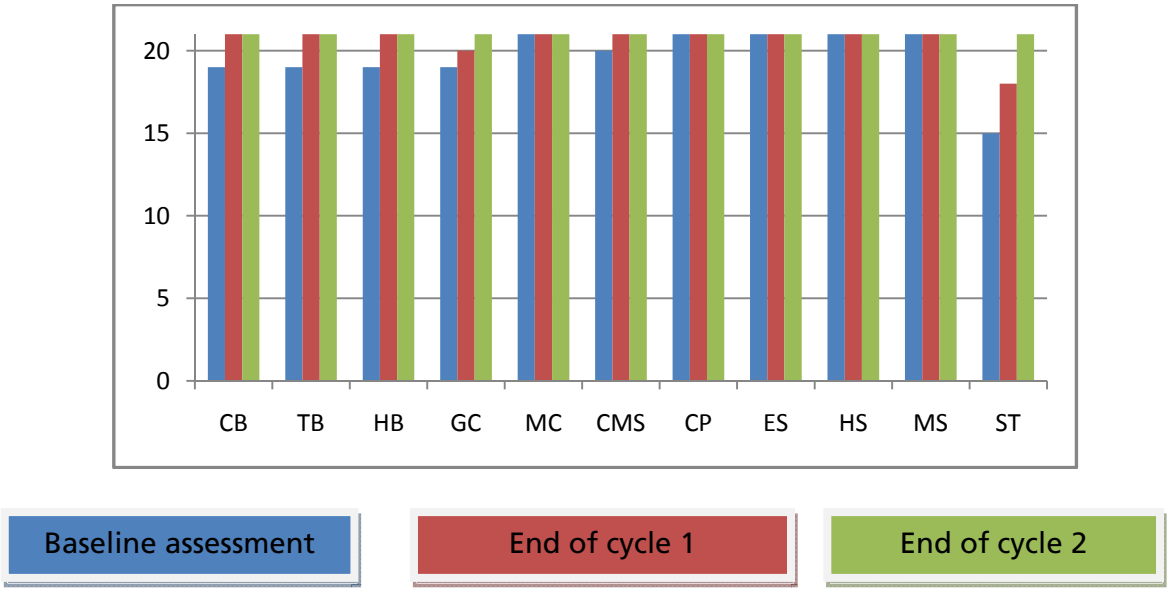
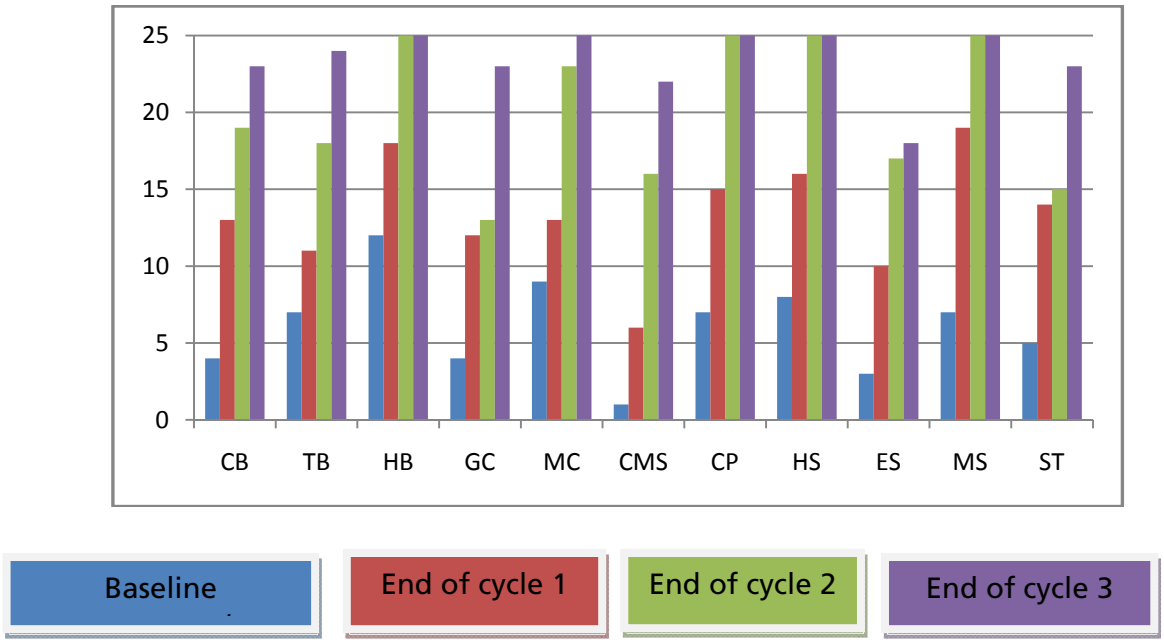


Figure 4: Levels children were performing at within phase 3 of Letters and Sounds (DCSF 2007) following initial assessment, cycle 1, 2 and 3



The accelerated progress seen in the reading of all the Y1 cohort could, as supported by Bradley and Bryant (1985) and Blevins (1998), be due to the sustained improvement in their phonetic knowledge. This would seem to be more probable than the phonic knowledge improving because of the guided reading programme as advocated by Morais (1979) and Goswami and Bryant (1990), as the structured guided reading sessions did not begin until the second cycle when significant improvement in phonics had already been made. It is interesting to note from looking at figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 that whilst the high ability children have made good progress, the lower ability children such as CMS, GC, CB and ST have all made equally as good progress and although ES has not progressed quite as well as the rest of the cohort in phonics, her reading level has improved significantly.

The second cycle consisted of continuing with the daily phonic sessions but also saw the introduction of twice weekly guided reading sessions with children grouped according to their phonic knowledge. Although guided reading had taken place before, it had only been once a week and some of the children were in groups where they were struggling. The Rigby Star reading scheme which is a progressive scheme covering a variety of different texts was used. This not only enabled children to use their phonic knowledge but it also provoked discussion about different types of texts and conventions within them and presented opportunities to assess children's comprehension skills. Renzulli (1998) suggests that the primary purpose of guided reading is to learn to read for meaning. Although this is an important facet of guided reading, I would suggest that in the early stages of reading or for those children who find it difficult, securing decoding skills and word recognition are perhaps of greater importance. One of the benefits of guided reading however is the discussion that takes place which enables those children who are perhaps not able to read fluently to grasp the meaning of the text by listening to others.

The data gathered from the baseline and end of cycle one phonics assessments and APP grids was used to decide which group each child should be in. The comments on the guided reading sheets show that the children began to relate the sounds they had learnt in their phonics to the words they were reading. Examples for this can be found on the record sheets for ST, CMS, MS, HS and ES. Interestingly, the children who were secure with phase 2 of Letters and Sounds and working well within phase 3 tended to rely on phonic strategies less than those children who were not quite so confident. This could be because they had passed this stage and were now recognising words by sight or it could be attributed to the focus of what they were reading being more based on other aspects of texts rather than phonics.

On reviewing the data following the second cycle, GC and ES were both moved on to a higher group as they were both using their phonic knowledge well to decode words and reading confidently. Although the comments show that ES needed support focusing, it was felt that she was not focusing due to the texts being too easy for her. Conversely CB and TB were moved back to an easier level as both were having difficulty using their phonic knowledge to sound out words. These two children also changed phonic groups at this point to revisit the sounds they were both struggling with. Assessing and re-grouping in this way reflects the findings of Ford and Opitz (2008) who stated 'it is important to assess and reform guided reading groups where necessary to meet individual needs'.

The final cycle involved introducing directed activities related to texts which the children carried out on the days on which they did not read. This normally meant that the children would complete either a reconstruction or an analysis activity related to the text they had read on the previous day as advocated by Verster (2003). This data was used in order to establish how well the children had remembered and engaged with the text and their ability to read and understand set tasks. However, due to the fact that the reading took place on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, because of the way the timetable was organised, there were disadvantages for those children who read on a Thursday as they had 3 days in between reading and completing the comprehension task. In hindsight, I could have tried to re-arrange the time-table so that the reading took place on a Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday so leaving shorter gaps in between reading and carrying out the text related tasks.

From reviewing the directed activity sheets following cycle 3, it was apparent that 8 out of the 11 children were displaying good levels of comprehension, being able to sequence and answer questions about the texts they had read. Interestingly, 2 of the 3 children who found these tasks difficult were the same 2 children who had been moved to lower reading and phonics groups due to their difficulty in remembering and using sounds from phase 3. However, the guided reading records show that these 2 children were able to talk about the texts and showed a good understanding of fiction, non-fiction and characters etc. Their main difficulty appeared to be with reconstructing stories in the correct order which, whilst not directly affecting their ability to read, did mean that they were not able to make sense of stories by thinking through a logical sequence of events. Although the remaining child who had difficulties was of high ability and in the top group for reading, the errors she made appeared to be in either not reading the questions properly or from not understanding what she was required to do. This is reflected in her guided reading records where she has made occasional 'silly mistakes' when reading. However, due to the nature of guided reading, we were able to discuss those mistakes with her and talk about why some words would not

make sense. Gagen (2007) suggests that by supporting children in this way, they learn more about word recognition and comprehension than if they were reading silently.

There is evidence in most of the work samples where children have written answers to show that they have used their phonic knowledge and spelt words correctly. This supports the view of the National Reading Panel (2000) who say that in order for phonics to make sense, children must be able to apply it to their reading and writing. The majority of the focus children were able to do this effectively, however it is interesting to note that HS and ST formed some letters in reverse. The fact that HS confused the 'b' and the 'd' in his writing could have implications for his reading when sounding out words.

Although I was able to show that I had used triangulation within this study, there were limitations as to the effectiveness of some of the evidence collected. The DART work samples only gave a 'snap shot' of children's comprehension skills and may not have been a true representation of their ability. This could have been due to the children working on them independently and perhaps not understanding fully what they were required to do, or the fact that on the sequencing activities children often lost pieces they had cut out so making ordering them difficult. Because the children completed the DART activities whilst myself and the TA were hearing the remaining groups read, there is also the possibility that some children may have copied the work of others so not giving a true representation of their own ability or understanding. The guided reading records however do provide more reliable information as to children's comprehension of texts following discussions within the group. I would suggest that it is therefore not only the children who learn more from guided reading with regards to word recognition and comprehension as argued by Gagen (2007) but also the teacher, who is able to make professional judgements based on listening to reading and discussions arising from the text.

The evidence for each child's progress is further supported by data which shows the mapping and attainment of the 11 Y1 children from January to April 2010. In January, only 1 child was working at expected levels for reading. However by April, from the data collected at the end of this research, all children were working at expected levels with 1 exceeding them.

Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of this research was to examine whether the implementation of a structured programme of systematic phonics teaching, guided reading and directed text related activities would have an impact on the reading levels of a cohort of 11 Y1 children. From the data shown in figures 1, 3 and 4 and the supporting evidence from the guided reading records and DART work samples, I would suggest that the strategies used to support and improve reading for this cohort of children have had a positive impact on reading levels with all children showing accelerated progress over the course of the research. However, it is necessary to consider whether the improvements made were purely because of the programme implemented or whether there were any other contributing factors such as extra reading practise at home. From looking at the children's reading records, I could see that only 6 of the 11 children read at home on a regular basis. Interestingly, one of the children who had made the most improvement was rarely heard read at home at all. Reading at home is therefore unlikely to have had a bearing on the results of this research.

The evidence gathered shows a significant improvement in the phonic knowledge of every child within the cohort over the course of the research with all of the children being secure with phase 2 Letters and Sounds by the end of cycle 2 and 5 children being secure with phase 3 and moving on to phase 4 by the end of cycle 3. These findings support the view of Liberman et al. (1989) and Lundberg et al. (1980) who state that the best predictor of a child's reading performance is that of their phonological knowledge.

Following this research, the systematic approach to delivering structured phonics, guided reading and related comprehension activities has been firmly embedded within this class. However, adaptations have been made to the timetable so that guided reading is now carried out on a Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday to reduce the amount of time in between reading and carrying out the comprehension tasks. As the children have become more used to working independently on these tasks, the work they are producing is now giving a much more accurate picture of their ability to understand, reconstruct and analyse different texts.

After looking at data for reading and phonic knowledge across the rest of the school I would recommend that a similar strategy be incorporated throughout to target those children who are performing below expected levels. At present, guided reading is not carried out on a regular basis in KS2 and phonics is only taught up until Y2. As a school we are specifically targeting reading due to the reasons already mentioned. I therefore intend to share this study with the Head teacher and class teachers to establish whether it could be implemented within each class. Although I am aware that this was only a small scale study which may be difficult to transfer to a larger setting, I would suggest that on a local level it would be fairly straightforward to implement within my school to work towards improving reading levels throughout.

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Does Gender Influence Children's Risk Taking Play Amongst 4 and 5 Year Olds?

Sally Forster

Abstract

This small scale study set out to explore whether gender influenced risk taking play amongst the 4 and 5 year old children attending my setting. Qualitative data were gathered through the individual semi structured interviews. The research attempted to analyse to what extent social, emotional and parental influences impacted upon the children's propensity and desire to engage in risk taking play. The questions were designed to afford sufficient reliable data to be collected and analysed; thereby providing evidence on which to base valid and ethical findings. Although this project produced some useful and informative data, these do not allow for any generalisations; my research merely provided contextual findings specific to this particular cohort of children. Nonetheless, the evidence would appear to suggest that emotional determinants are the primary predictors to children's tendency to engage in risk taking play as opposed to stereotypical biases and gender discourses.

Introduction

The Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF 2008) has put emphasis on the Early Years Professional to ensure all children have the opportunity and motivation to engage in play that promotes problem solving challenges and risk assessment opportunities (DCSF 2008). An extension to the outdoor provision at the setting where I work, to include a more naturally wooded area, created a learning environment where children were able to explore and extend their learning within surroundings that possessed the potential for the promotion of active risk taking opportunities. According to Eke et al. (2009: 186) such opportunities enable children to develop cognitively, emotionally and socially and subsequently acquire the strategies necessary to become risk aware and cope with modern life (Eke et al. 2009: 177).

Key thinkers in the field suggest that boys are more likely to engage in physically risky activities than girls (Sax 2005, Jarvis 2007) and this propensity intensifies as boys get older (Morrongiello and Rennie 1998). I therefore viewed the addition to our outdoor environment as an opportunity to investigate this theory; seeking to explore the question 'Does gender influence children's risk taking play amongst 4 and 5 year olds?' I subsequently employed a semi-structured interview method of research to acquire a deeper appreciation of how gender has the potential to impact upon this type of play and utilised the findings to challenge stereotypical gender discourses and inform future practice within the setting. This study was of particular relevance as the setting offers provision for children from 0-8 years. The research has explored and analysed societal, emotional and parental influences on children's inclination to engage in risk taking play and evaluated the disparities and similarities in children's perspectives across the two age groups and different educational establishments.

Literature Review

A recurrent theme throughout the literature reviewed is that children benefit from risk taking opportunities in their play and overprotection, limitations or restrictions can impact upon all aspects of children's development (Gill 2007, DCSF 2008, and Stephenson 2003).

A report by Gill (2007) discusses the implication for children's development when there is limited access to play provision that supports an element of risk taking; arguing that 'childhood is being undermined by the growth of risk aversion and its intrusion into every aspect of children's lives.' By citing additional research Gill suggests that such a limit on risk taking opportunities constrains children's '…exploration of their physical, social and visual world.' Furthermore, Gill (in BBC 2007) proposes that:

> …through encountering risks, children learn how to overcome challenging situations, nurturing their character and fostering a sense of adventure, entrepreneurialism, resilience and self reliance.

A further perspective is proposed by Little and Wyver (2008) who advocate that children who are denied the opportunity to engage in positive risk taking play are fundamentally less likely to develop the decision making skills necessary for accurate risk judgements, with implications for not merely physical risk taking but also for social and intellectual risks that underpin future learning (Tovey 2007: 101). A viewpoint endorsed by 'Play England' (DCSF 2008) who recommend that children should be engaging in activities that promote exploration and freedom and subsequently '…learn how to judge risks and manage them for themselves' (DCSF 2007: 37). It is through this exposure to risk taking play that, as well as being considered integral to children's drive for physical capability, children learn the skills that are essential for eventual autonomy (Little and Wyver 2008, Stephenson 2003).

According to Tranter (2005) and Kennedy (2009), taking risks in play enables children to continually push the boundaries of their physical, intellectual and emotional development and learn at the edge of their capabilities (Tovey 2007: 103). Empowering children to gain proficiency in and consolidation of new skills, facilitating a sense of self belief and confidence in their own abilities, which then provides the impetus to seek further challenges and explorations to develop their problem solving skills and social competencies (Little and Wyver 2008). A medium scale study of young children undertaken by Morrongiello and Matheis (2007) draws upon the concept of emotional disposition and the implication this has for subsequent risk taking behaviour. The research explored the significance of cognitive and emotional development when associated with children's desires or reluctance to engage in risk taking activities. The research concluded that emotional factors directly influence actual risk taking behaviour, a potentially limiting feature in children's propensity to engage in risk taking play, even at its initial concept. However, Morrongiello and Matheis (2007) acknowledge the limitations of their research, suggesting that the children's previous experiences of risk within a sociocultural domain were not considered and such determinants have the potential to influence any risk taking behaviour to a greater or lesser degree. This provided an interesting aspect to consider within the research project.

Key authors in the field of risk taking behaviour and perception of risk, suggest that children actively seek out risk taking opportunities in their play. Research by Stephenson (2003) highlights the children's use of the word "scary" in relation to their risk taking experiences; with increased height and speed within play being considered the common denominators in any risk taking occurrences, in addition to 'being dared' by peers (Stephenson 2003, Sandseter 2009). Furthermore, research suggests that some children actively and deliberately create situations that result in incidences of feeling 'out of control' (Stephenson 2003, Sandseter 2009). This is encapsulated by one girl during interview who stated that she deliberately encouraged the boys to chase her because it made her "*eyes go dizzy*". According to Sax (2005: 42) the catalyst for children to engage in exciting risk taking play is the element of danger and increased possibility of injury that exists. However, as Stephenson (2003) explains, an activity that is considered challenging and scary for one child may be within the developmental range of skills and abilities for another. Therefore risk taking should be viewed within the concept of subjectivity, both by the participant and the observer.

Sandseter (2009) in a Norwegian Preschools study of children engaging with risky play in two separate environments, concluded that all children appeared to seek thrills suitable to their level of acceptable risk. The research indicated that the level of intervention by staff within differing environments can be variable, with those staff operating within a Forest School environment often less averse to children engaging in risk taking play than staff within conventional settings (Sandseter 2009, Waters and Begley 2007). This is a scenario that may in part be due to the higher adult/child ratios in operation or a greater affinity, on behalf of the staff, to the Forest School philosophy. Thus, children may experience limited opportunities for risk taking dependent upon a variety of factors not least, adult perception of risk and the insufficient opportunities for challenging and stimulating experiences that arise, to promote learning and development (Little 2006, Waters and Begley 2007, Gill 2007, Sandseter 2009, Kennedy 2009, Tovey 2007). Conversely, such limitations are also considered a factor for children engaging in negative risk taking, potentially resulting in children seeking more hazardous challenges associated with an increased risk of injury (Kennedy 2009, Gill 2007, Stephenson 2003, Tovey 2007).

According to research conducted by Morrongiello and Rennie (1998: 40) 'boys engage in significantly more risk taking than girls.' They propose that not only do boys have greater confidence in their own ability but the findings of their study also indicated that boys are more prone to attribute any injuries to 'bad luck' rather than inferior judgement and rated their risk of injury as lower compared to that of girls. Morrongiello and Rennie (1998) however, concede that the quantitative data utilised for analysis was extrapolated via a laboratory based, hypothetical risk interview method as opposed to ethnographical evidence obtained through children's actual physical involvement in risk taking play and the associated emotional factors that ultimately contribute to any participation. Subsequently the findings were unable to determine if the risk judgement results constitute a true reflection of children's risk taking attitudes and perceptions. Nonetheless, these findings are substantiated by Sax (2005: 41) who suggests that 'girls and boys assess risk differently and differ in their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviour.' Later research by Morrongiello and Matheis (2007) similarly concurs that emotional motivators are key predictors to risk taking behaviour. Moreover, Sax (2005) continues to explore the concept of emotional determinants in association with risk taking. He hypothesises that most boys are impressed by other boys who take risk, especially if the risk taker succeeds, thereby

concluding that boys who engage in risky behaviour receive elevated social status from their peers (Sax 2005: 41).

According to Thom et al. (2007: 3) 'gender is a major determinant of expectations for risk taking…' with risk being considered a gendered experience that mirrors the gender role stereotypes within society (Thom 2007: 44, Archard 2007, McNaughton 2000). This is a viewpoint endorsed by Browne (2004: 63), whose research offers an insight into how children view aspects of their play within the context of 'appropriate' gender behaviour, with findings of play preferences and expectations mainly consistent with stereotypical western discourses of gender (Browne 2004, Archard 2007). Furthermore, if that gender identity is strengthened through children's desires, or even coercion, to play with other children who share similar interests and behaviours of play (Neppl and Murray 1997, Riley 2007, Browne 2004, Francis 1998, Jarvis 2007), then this would appear to support research by Sax (2005) who infers that boys are more likely to engage in risk taking behaviour especially when playing within a group.

Controversially, a comprehensive research study conducted by Kindleberger Hagen and Kuebli (2007) contend that fathers are the socialising agents of gender where risk taking is concerned. The research exposed how it is fathers, not mothers, who exhibit greater differentiation between the risk taking of sons and daughters, with greater assistance and monitoring of play afforded to girls (Kindleberger Hagen and Kuebli 2007). Moreover, the research proposed that although mothers were the more risk averse they demonstrated equal concern towards both boys and girls. In contrast, fathers' perception of risk had greater correlation to actual risk, but they exercised gender bias in relationship to the perceived ability of the individual child. These findings however would appear to be refuted by earlier research suggesting that mothers are more tolerant towards, and encouraging of, risk taking by their sons compared to their daughters (Ball 2002, Morrongiello and Dawber 2000); a concept that presented potential for further analysis within this study. Nonetheless, the findings continue to corroborate the literature which suggests that parents hold deep seated perceptions of their child, based on gender (Equal Opportunities Commission undated), and risk taking is a socially constructed behaviour (Kindleberger Hagen and Kuebli 2007, McNaughton 2000, Browne 2004).

This literature review has highlighted some of the complexities and determinants that impact upon children's risk taking play. A potential limitation of the research to date is an apparent oversight by researchers to seek the views of children regarding their understanding of risk taking behaviour within the context of gender bias. It was therefore proposed that this premise would provide the rationale for the research project.

Methodology

The chosen methodology for this study was the use of semi-structured interviews. The nature of the research project; to seek the views and opinions of young children aged 4 and 5 years, brought to the forefront the complex issue of eliciting informed consent. Acquiring informed 'assent' from children, who are deemed too immature to give informed consent, is considered central to ethical research (Morrow and Richards 1996: 94), particularly if, as Dockrell et al. (2000: 36) state 'practitioners are the gatekeepers to children's views and opinions.' Therefore, in order to counterbalance these ethical considerations, I sought permission from the parents of those involved, in addition to

informing the children of the nature of the questions prior to the interview and seeking their verbal consent. Before commencing each interview I demonstrated to the individual child how the recorder operated, a process that subsequently alleviated any negative distraction posed by the presence of the recorder. Further to this, the use of the audio recorder enabled me, as the researcher, to remain attentive to the needs of the children throughout the period of the interview, acknowledging the rights of the child, to be protected, within Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The sample size of 16-20 children, equally divided between boys and girls, was deemed appropriate for this small scale project within the limited time scale available. Although I remained conscious to the possibility of selection bias and the potential for generating distorted data I nevertheless selected children who I considered the most confident and capable to communicate their thoughts and opinions. Whilst considering that, with this sample size, any refusal from children to participate would continue to afford a quantity of data suitable for analysis. My ongoing relationship with the children, created through daily contact, was advantageous in gaining the children's trust and full participation for these interviews. Furthermore, the decision was taken to conduct individual, rather than group interviews, so as to eliminate the possibility of evidence being tainted by peer influence, or domination by one particular child (Robert-Holmes 2005: 113).

The utilisation of a semi-structured interview to gather qualitative data was considered the most pertinent, in light of the proposed research topic and age of children. The flexibility of this particular paradigm enabled the questions to be tailored or rephrased to accommodate the language acquisition of the individual children involved, utilising a combination of open and closed questions or statements to obtain a detailed understanding of the children's views and recollections. Furthermore, as Bryman (2004: 320) suggests, unlike a structured interview this particular method provides scope for new questions to be asked in response to interviewees' replies or for clarification of information. This was deemed imperative if quality, usable data was to be extrapolated from the interviewees, particularly if, as Dockrell et al. (2000: 55) infers, that children have a tendency to agree with the interviewer or 'invent' an answer. This conundrum highlights one of the potential weaknesses associated with interviewing children and the difficulty in obtaining reliable and valid research data, particularly if coupled with any failure on behalf of the researcher to employ unbiased questions. This was an element of the chosen method I initially considered problematic, with a potential for the questions and statements to be either leading or biased and thereby lack ethical validity. Nevertheless, the pilot test was beneficial in refining the questions for greater relevance and legitimacy (Saunders et al. 2000: 305), although there was a necessity for continual appraisal and modification throughout to ensure suitable qualitative data continued to be generated. As Lincoln and Guba (1994) in Bryman (2004: 273) propose 'trustworthiness and authenticity' are the primary criteria for assessing a qualitative study.

The use of an audio recorder provided the means for evidence collection on this occasion; thus endeavouring to mitigate any possible discrepancies in data recording and offer the validity of evidence associated with qualitative research as proposed by Mason (1996) in Bryman (2004: 272). That is, to base the research analysis and findings on a true account of the interview data. Nevertheless, the manual transcribing procedure was a time consuming process, not merely due to the quantity of data

compiled, but also the quality of evidence gathered. As Bryman (2004: 284) asserts, analysis of qualitative data is often considered by quantitative researchers to be too subjective, because of a reliance on the researcher to remain unbiased in their assessment of the data; whilst simultaneously staying attentive to the importance of objectivity in generating findings.

According to Saunders et al. (2000: 98), by conducting a multi method triangulation approach to a research project, any eventual research findings have the potential for greater authenticity and reliability; by countering the '…weaknesses that exist in individual research methods' (Walsh and Wigens 2003: 104). For this reason, consideration was initially afforded to the utilisation of an additional questionnaire to parents; however this was dismissed at a relatively early stage. Firstly, because as Wilkinson (2000: 44) states, '…developing a questionnaire is a time consuming process' and due to the time constraints imposed on this research project I deemed this unmanageable. Secondly, concerns arose that the reliability of any such data collected may be compromised by the parents providing information they considered appropriate or acceptable rather than a true reflection of their opinion or practice. The very nature of the research; to investigate whether gender impacts on children's risk taking, would have required the parents to consider whether gender socialisation, through parental attitudes held any significance with their child's propensity for risk taking in their play. Therefore, although a multi faceted approach is considered preferential for greater validity of evidence, this was judged impractical for this specific research project.

Presentation and Evaluation of Research Outcomes

My relationship with the children as their childcare practitioner did, I consider, lead to the acquisition of truthful and insightful data. The notion of "*having a little chat*" as the interviews became known generated an air of excitement amongst the children to participate to their fullest and talk openly without inhibitions. The qualitative data obtained throughout these semi structured interviews subsequently provided an insight into the perceptions and opinions of the children, within the context of the research question. The emergent theme from the research undertaken highlighted the fact that although all the children interviewed engaged in risk taking and challenging behaviour, the extent of their participation and their perception of others' engagement appeared to be determined to a greater degree by emotional and cognitive motivators rather than gender bias or discourse. The data collected substantiates this argument. Due to the social variables existent with interviewing children from different family structures, the extent of any socio-cultural influences has undoubtedly resulted in diverse emotional dispositions and attitudes, an aspect of this research acknowledged but not evaluated. Nonetheless, evidence from this perspective has potential equity with gender influence within the context of this research project and highlights the complexities of analysing and interpreting data to answer, with any reliability, the research question. I also acknowledge that all conclusions are tentative, as judgements formulated from qualitative research are notoriously subjective (Bryman 2004: 284).

According to Bryman (2004: 410) 'the coding of data is a starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis.' Therefore, in order to appraise the transcribed interviews the use of broad analytical themes, as suggested by Bryman (2004: 410), was employed. This technique, which utilised the themes focused upon within the literature review, provided a system to label, separate, compile and organise my data for analysis

(Charmaz 1993 in Bryman 2004: 402). This enabled me to evaluate, with greater validity and transparency, the data and impart findings of note with clearer reference to current literature and researchers within the field. Furthermore, although recordings were transcribed verbatim, for aesthetic purposes the quotes referred to throughout this evaluation have excluded hesitations and stutters. I recognise that these idiosyncrasies may have significance within certain research projects, however upon consideration and reflection of this specific research topic and the language capabilities of the children, I did not consider it relevant on this occasion.

A recurrent opinion throughout the examination of data was the indication from children that all activities and challenges within the setting are accessible and available to all children regardless of gender and any limitations to participate were directed primarily at their own ability, risk awareness or propensity to risk taking.

> *Researcher: Would you like to climb to the top of the tree?*
> *Child: Not when there are soft branches, only hard ones*
> *Researcher: What's wrong with the soft ones?*
> *Child: They could snap*

This dialogue example, from a four year old boy, echoes the findings of Sandseter (2009) that children seek risks and thrills suitable to their individual level of acceptable risk and reflects results by Hillier and Morrongiello (1998: 235) which proposes that even young children are '…able to recognise varying degrees of risk…' The following example may, on the other hand, provide some anecdotal evidence of social determinants influencing emotional motivators and subsequently the child's propensity to risk taking.

> *Researcher: Would you like to be able to climb higher?*
> *Child: No, because I'm only a little girl.*

The responses from this four year old girl, throughout the interview process, frequently referred to certain activities as only being accessible to the "*big boys and girls*" who attend the setting; alluding to the primary school children who attend the after-school club. This provided an interesting insight into the views and social outlook of this particular respondent.

Throughout the interviews all children were questioned as to who they considered the most proficient at tree climbing to ascertain the level of any potential gender bias. Data analysis subsequently identified some unexpected responses. Although the girls aged five displayed some gender equity, the five year old boys were staunchly stereotypical in their answers, not only considering the boys superior but frequently denying the girls any recognition. It could be suggested that these responses merely reinforce the patriarchal discourse of western socio-culture (MacNaughton 2000, Thompson 2003). In contrast, the four year old children reported both sexes in equal consideration, regardless of own gender, citing children both from within their own pre-school group and the older after-school children. Although these disparate attitudes correlate with the age differences of the children interviewed, this alone may not be significant enough to produce these distinctive responses. The stark contrast in behaviour between the school children and pre-school children may potentially therefore be indicative of wider environmental influences. However previous studies of gender socialisation and dispositions, researched for this project, have not

acknowledged such strong division and potentially this scenario provides evidence on which to base future research.

During the interview process I elicited information from the children regarding the dangers of participation in risky activities and the possibility of sustaining an injury. The majority of children, both boys and girls, did not contemplate the likelihood of injury at all, considering everything they participated in to be relatively safe; a viewpoint supported by DiLillo et al. (1998) in Little (2006). However, when a risk of injury was acknowledged it was directed solely at the girls.

> *Researcher: Do the girls do back flips off the trees?*
> *Boy: They would hit their head*
> *Researcher: Why don't the boys hit their head?*
> *Boy: They're clever*

These findings appear to have some correlation with Morrongiello and Rennie (1998) who suggest that in comparison to girls, boys assume they are less likely to be injured when participating in risk taking activities. They also corroborate the research by Morrongiello et al. (2000: 317) which indicated that; 'Both boys and girls rated boys as having a lower likelihood of injury even though [they] were engaging in the exact same activities'. Nonetheless, the girls who did acknowledge injuries, both perceived and actual, were not apparently deterred by these incidences and continued to engage in the activity. The data appear to indicate that a child's sense of being scared (Stephenson 2003) was more frequently the determining factor in their propensity to engage with such pursuits, however, even this emotional determinant did not necessarily relate to a negative experience and, it could be suggested, often heightened the thrill.

> *Girl: The boys run after the girls*
> *Researcher: Do you like it when the boys chase you?*
> *Girl: It makes me giggle and laugh. It makes me feel really funny, like rolling around in the eyes.*

Following previous research, which has considered the socialisation by parents to be a major determinant on a children's propensity and opportunity to engage in risk taking and challenging play (Morrongiello and Rennie 1998, Kindleberger Hagan and Kuebli 2007), the extent and scope of any parental influence was judged a critical area for analysis within this research study. The majority of children interviewed did not believe their play to be curtailed excessively by their parent's attitudes. Nonetheless, when questioned who they considered the most likely to inhibit their risky play, because of extreme height or speed, the child's mother was deemed the limiting factor, regardless of whether the child being interviewed was a boy or girl. These data findings consequently appear to challenge the results of research by Morrongiello and Dawber (2000) who suggest that mothers perceive the risk taking behaviour of boys as more acceptable than that of girls and, as a consequence, are quicker to limit the risk taking behaviour of girls. However, although the findings from my study presupposes that mothers demonstrate more equal concern to both their sons and daughters, as reported by Kindleberger Hagan and Kuebli (2007), the socio-cultural dynamics that invariably impact on the children within my study may have implications for comparison of data against other research and any subsequent recommendations or reliability of findings within a wider spectrum. A proportion of the children interviewed

are from single parent families or are an only child. Therefore, such hypothesis cannot be acknowledged as a true representation of parental socialisation within society in general but merely specific to the views of the children interviewed on this occasion.

> *Researcher: How high would you like to be?*
> *Boy: Really high*
> *Researcher: Do you think mummy and daddy would let you go on if it was really high?*
> *Boy: Daddy would let me go but not mummy, she'll think I'm scared*
> *Researcher: Would she*
> *Boy: She's always a 'scaredy'*

Nonetheless, this example, obtained from interviewing a five year old boy, clearly demonstrates the potential for parental influence on the child's behaviour and stereotypical attitudes. Socialisation from parents is not merely directed at prohibiting or limiting risk taking play but, through social modelling and intimation can influence and create stereotypical attitudes that reinforce a gender bias discourse.

A further perception of gender socialisation was highlighted by two of the 5 year old children throughout the course of the interviews. Stereotypical girls clothing and hair styles were cited as potentially restrictive to girls' involvement in more adventurous play.

> *Researcher: Who do you think is better at climbing trees?*
> *Boy: Boys*
> *Researcher: Why is that?*
> *Boy: Because the girls have dresses and they could get stuck, by the sharp ones and they could get ripped and boys have trousers and they won't.*
> *Researcher: But if the girls wear trousers will that be alright?*
> *Boy: Yes, so they are rubbish and good – middle.*

As Francis (1998: 35) infers, '…as well as signalling a gender difference…clothes actively enforce it by encumbering girls and reducing their ability to engage in…activities.' As was perceived by this young boy, gender identity, reinforced through conformity to fashion or social expectations of gender, can have significant implications for girls' ability to engage in and pursue risk taking opportunities; which by default can inadvertently reinforce stereotypical gender biases. Although the extent of any parental influence on this specific aspect of socialisation cannot be evaluated through the responses given, the observations made by the children nonetheless substantiate the opinion of researchers in this field. Parents conforming to specific social expectation of gender merely strengthen the construct (Witt 1997, Browne 2004).

Conclusion

To refer back to the original research question, this small scale study was concerned with whether gender influenced risk taking play amongst 4 and 5 year old children attending my setting. As such, the data collected enabled some tentative and cautious conclusions to be drawn. Although this project produced some useful and informative data, these do not allow for any generalisations; my research merely provided some supporting or contradictory evidence of previous research and remains specific to the particular cohort.

All the children interviewed, regardless of gender, alluded to elements of risk taking in their play. This scenario substantiates Stephenson's ethnographic research (2003) undertaken in two pre-school settings, which concluded that both boys and girls engage with risk taking activities within environments where opportunities exist. Any limitations to participation in risk taking activities, by the children interviewed within this research, appeared to be determined to a greater degree by their emotional dispositions rather than restricted by their own gender discourse or the stereotypical attitudes of peers. A viewpoint that corroborates the findings of Morrongiello and Matheis (2007) who suggest that '…the individual child's emotional motivators are the key predictors of any risk they are prepared to undertake.' Although these findings have not established the extent to which any innate dispositions or socially constructed determinants impact upon each other, the research has highlighted the tentative link between parental socialisation and children's risk taking behaviour. Furthermore, analysis of data has discussed the potential impact of individual family dynamics upon the attitudes and tendencies of individual children.

In hindsight, the utilisation of a multi faceted approach to this research project may potentially have generated supplementary information to either corroborate or challenge the verbal data and produce more reliable and credible evidence on which to base these findings (Cohen et al. 2003: 115); an aspect of methodology I will remain conscious of for any future research undertaken. Nonetheless, the research has produced authentic findings on which to inform future practice within the setting. Therefore the environment I create and the attitudes of staff within the setting are potentially paramount in challenging stereotypical biases and ensuring all children have the opportunity to engage in risk taking play and benefit from the social competencies and cognitive developments that undoubtedly ensue.

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The Wonders of the Outside World: the Importance of Outside Play.

Victoria Walmsley

Abstract

This small scale study arises from increasing concerns that children's opportunities for outdoor play at home are being restricted, and that some nurseries which have outdoor facilities do not fully utilise them. The research was undertaken in a small nursery located in Lincolnshire to explore staff's use of their outdoor play areas. Semi structured interviews were held with three members of staff from this setting, and one member of staff from a neighbouring school. Participant and non-participant observations were also used to identify the equipment used and how the children use the outdoor environment. The findings suggest that the staff value outdoor play and maximise the use of their own outdoor environment as well as the wider natural environment. In particular staff seem to hold positive views about the benefits of outdoor play related to the promotion of children's development, including the areas of social, creative and motor skills. However, differences in views emerged from staff working with the youngest children.

Introduction

There has been a plethora of studies and research that explores the concept of outdoor play and how important it is for young children for a variety of reasons, particularly in areas of physical, social and creative development. However, there are concerns that many children are not gaining enough outdoor play; as Hausmann (2006: 41) notes, compared to the past, children now spend considerably more time playing inside. Further, in the context of educational settings, Garrick (2004: 2) suggests that some nurseries do not have any outdoor facilities and in some that do, not all are using them to the fullest potential (Maynard and Waters 2007). Given these concerns, which may detract from the positive benefits of outdoor play, this study explores how members of staff perceive the status of outdoor play and how they use the outdoor environment for the development of children's learning.

Literature Review

Outdoor play has been widely researched by many individuals such as Clements (2004), Waller (2007), Maynard and Waters (2007) and Clark (2007). Within the context of outdoor play there are concerns about home and outdoor play with Tassoni and Hucker suggesting that 'many homes do not have large gardens', which means no space for 'swings, slides or a large space for running around' (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 11). Hausmann (2006: 41) states that years ago children spent considerable time outside playing, but now they are more likely to be playing inside, watching television or playing on the computer. It could be suggested that this has a negative impact on children's development, as it is outdoor play that aids children's physical, emotional and social development (Hausmann 2006: 41). Garrick (2004: 10) supports Hausmann's views when he states that 'Environment change has limited the opportunities for children to engage in active outdoor play'. These changes could include traffic and issues with safety (Holloway and Valentine 2000, Burke 2005, in Waller 2007). This is supported by

Defries (2009: 9) who states that:

> While 85 percent of adults said they would like their children to be able to play in natural spaces unsupervised, 74 per cent said that they were too concerned about the child meeting strangers and 59 per cent were worried about road safety.

However, it is not only play and the home life that has been focused on, for it has also been argued that:

> ...opportunities for outdoor learning by school students in England have decreased substantially in recent years (Rickinson et al. 2004 in Mygind 2009: 152).

Maynard and Waters (2007: 262) explored the topic of outdoor play and found that teachers said they were making the most of the outdoor environment, more 'than they had done in the past', however Maynard and Waters found that 'this was in a partial and limited way'. They found that teachers only used the outdoor environment in 'good weather' and 'little use was made of natural environments'.

It is well known that play is important for young children, as it aids their development (Little and Wyver 2008: 33; Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 5; DfES 2007) and it helps them to 'grow, develop and learn' (Abbott and Langston 2005: 138). Outdoor play is believed to be 'a natural and critical part of a child's healthy development' (Clements 2004). Tassoni and Hucker (2000: 5) suggest that play develops children's physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development. However outdoor play in particular has been stated to aid social development (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 178; Strickland 2003; Hausmann 2006: 41; Hopkins and Putman 1993 in Dismore and Bailey 2005). Alongside social development outdoor play also aids physical development (Hausmann 2006: 41). Tassoni and Hucker (2000: 7) suggest that play can aid coordination, develop muscles, and 'develop gross and fine motor skills'. Beith et al. (2003: 36) argue that physical exercise not only promotes the physical aspects of children's development, but also the social and emotional aspects. They explain that there are many benefits that exercise can bring such as, promoting sleep and developing 'co - ordination and balance' (Beith et al. 2003: 36).

When exploring outdoor play and the benefits it has it is important to look at the time that should be spent outside. The National Strategies (online) state that 'Young children should be outside as much as indoors', and Beith et al. (2003: 36) suggest that using the outdoor environment to aid development should take place 'at least once a day'.

Waller (2007), who focuses on outdoor play within the foundation stage, suggests that all children need opportunities for outdoor experiences. He maintains that children benefit from outdoor play and learning both within the setting and outside in natural 'wild' environments, and concludes that practitioners need to be aware of the potential that outdoor learning can hold, and to try and make use of natural environments as well as their own setting (Waller 2007). In support of this statement Maynard and Waters (2007: 257) suggest that 'wild spaces are also vital to effective environmental education', and Waite (2007) argues that adults remember 'natural contexts' with regards to their education, which is reflected in the development of the Forest School

movement. Forest Schools are 'an innovative educational approach to outdoor play and learning' and are believed to develop 'motivation', 'emotional' and 'social skills', and also enable children to learn about risks and to use their 'initiative to solve problems and co – operate with others' (Forest Schools online 2009).

When exploring the aspects of outdoor play it is important to look at the different types of play, for example, structured and free play. Structured play is 'adult led, guided and planned' (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 3), whereas free play is when the children 'choose the focus of the play without constant interference or involvement by an adult'. Free play often keeps children's 'interest far longer' and they 'often become deeply engrossed' in activities that they have planned (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 3). Further, play that takes place during structured play can still be valuable and beneficial (Ward 2009), however Clements (2004) argues that it is when children are given free choice that play becomes most successful. In support of this claim, Hooper Hansen (2008) argues that adults should not direct play, because when they do 'the delicate learning process collapses'.

This study was conducted in response to the research that has expressed concern that children are not gaining enough access to outdoor education, notably Garrick's (2004: 2) findings that some nurseries have no outdoor provision, and Maynard and Waters' (2007) findings that teachers only used the outdoor environment in good weather. This study aims to explore teachers' views on outdoor play, and to observe how the environment is used by both staff and children. The methodology is based on that of Maynard and Waters (2007) and Waller (2007) who both explored play in the early years, using semi-structured interviews and observations.

Methodology

The research took place at a small nursery located in Lincolnshire. The interviewees were four staff members and a member of staff from a neighbouring school. The ages of the children observed ranged from two to four. Semi-structured interviews were selected to enable interaction with the participants and to discuss their views. Sharp (2009: 74) explains that interviews are effective if the group of participants is small, if the researcher is eliciting people's 'views, opinions, perceptions', and if a 'high level of personal interaction' is required.

Once in the setting, it seemed appropriate to conduct the interviews informally, allowing the exploration of their views in a relaxed atmosphere, whilst note making was taking place. Initially it was intended to use a recording device but this decision was changed to rely instead on note taking. This was based on Sharp's (2009: 76) view that whilst it can be easy to miss information, it would save time later on in the process. Although there is the weakness of talk being 'difficult to analyse and interpret' (Sharp 2009: 80), it was believed that for this study talk was the most effective way to explore the participants' views.

Alongside, observations were used to examine the way in which the staff at the setting plan and use their outside resources. They were used also to focus on how the children use these resources. To record the information gained from these observations a tally chart and a written account were used. For the observations of the children, a tally chart was used to record what equipment was being used at five minute intervals; this was done twice a day. A written account was also used in order to see how the staff

used and planned their outdoor environment. Again, the method was semi-structured, which in the case of observations means that it is clear what needs to be looked for, but it is 'adaptable' at the same time (Sharp 2009: 84) which is effective for the setting the study took place, as I was aware that there might be times when something happened which would make the observation impossible at that time. Throughout the observation process both 'participant observation' and 'non–participant observation' was used (Sharp 2009: 84). This was due to the fact that sometimes I was only observing, but at others it was possible for me to join in, with a monster game for example, this enables me 'to understand the research topic at first hand' (Robert-Holmes 2005: 106).

As with all research methods there are both strengths and limitations of observations. Observations were used to enable the study to gain 'first - hand, eye witness accounts' of what was being done (Sharp 2009: 92). However, the limitations lie within different interpretations, as 'different researchers see different things' (Robert-Holmes 2005: 94). This suggests that when analysing my findings I may be seeing things differently to someone else, to overcome this I attempted to back up any findings with previous research and data, this is suggested by Robert-Holmes (2005: 94) who states that 'checking out other people's perspectives and interpretations of situations is critical'.

Findings and Analysis

Teachers and educators' views on outdoor play

For this part of the analysis the educators will be commented on as: participant A (placement setting), participant B (placement setting), participant C (placement setting) and participant D (nearby school).

These interviews were completed in order to explore their views on outdoor play and the importance that it has on the development of children. One aspect that was explored was the amount of time, on average, that children spend outside. Policy guidance suggests that 'Young children should be outside as much as indoors' (The National Strategies Online). All members of staff from the setting stated that the children in their care experience outdoor play at least twice a day; this amount rises in the summer. Alongside these times of outdoor play, the children also have access to the 'freeflow area', which one participant explained was 'weather and staff permitting'. This suggests that the setting more than follows the guidelines for outdoor play, as the children do seem to spend much of the day in the outdoor environment when weather and staffing allows. During the observations the weather was poor, although this was the case and the children did not spend as much time outside as normal, the staff at the setting still ensured that the children went outside. Beith et al. (2003: 41) state that children can still enjoy the outdoor environment 'even if the weather is wet, cold or windy... provided appropriate clothing is worn', the setting is able to allow children access to the outdoors in weather such as this because they have a selection of extra winter and summer clothes. However, this does not always happen in all educational settings, as Maynard and Waters (2007) found from their study that out of the schools that they studied three of them did not use the outdoor environment during cold months.

Overall, the attitudes of the staff were positive with regards to outdoor play; however, participant D did acknowledge that although teachers do value the experiences of

outdoor play, morale among the staff can sometimes be quite low when the weather is bad, although she then stated that the children enjoy being outside even in poor weather and that the 'majority of the children would choose outdoor over being indoors'. This is highlighted by Clark (2007: 352) who suggests that children believe that 'outdoors was an important place', this suggests that because of this importance children need 'adults around them to understand why outdoor play provision is essential' (The National Strategies online), this could suggest that teachers need to be 'committed' to outdoor play, even in poor weather.

During the interviews with the educators from the placement setting it soon became apparent that the setting as a whole highly understood the importance of outdoor play and the positive effects it can have on development. Participant A acknowledged that outdoor play can promote and develop all areas of children's development, which is supported by Tassoni and Hucker (2000: 5) who suggest that play develops children's physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development. She also thought that it especially promotes physical development, as children can have opportunities to develop motor skills (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 7); participant A then stated that social skills are promoted as children often work together to complete tasks. Many researchers, such as Tassoni and Hucker (2000: 178), Strickland (2003) and Hausmann (2006: 41) have suggested that social development plays a large role within outdoor play. These views were supported by participant B, who explained that outdoor play can not only develop children's large motor skills but can also aid their social development because children can take part in role play. This time for role play is important as it allows children to develop different roles (Teachernet online).

Out of all four participants, participant B was the only one to highlight the need for outdoor play in order to give children chance to exercise. With the high levels of childhood obesity (Maynard 2007; Garrick 2004: 10; BBC News online 2008), it was surprising that only one participant commented on this aspect of outdoor play when it is commented on so much in other research in the area; Hausmann (2006) suggests that this exercise is a 'undeniable health benefit' and it is also seen as 'an essential part of everybody's lives' (Beith et al 2003: 36).

The views of participant A and B were quite similar with regards to the effects that outdoor play can have on development. However, when exploring participant C's views, who worked with the babies and youngest children at the setting, the areas of development were seen as slightly different. They explained that outdoor play enabled children to develop 'gross motor skills', because there is 'more scope to do this' as there is much space outside. Participant C supports the views of Tassoni and Hucker (2000: 7) and suggests that outdoor play can promote young children's balance and coordination. The setting attempts to promote this by using a bridge for the younger children to walk across, and a balance beam for the older children. However, compared to the beliefs of the educators that work with the younger children, participant C believed that outdoor play has 'no great impact' for social skills at this age; she believed that children at this young age mainly play on their own. Strickland (2003: 60) suggested that this is because 'Toddlers tend to play beside each other - sometimes with the same toys - but not necessarily with each other'. He then goes on to suggest that by the time children get to ages three and four they will be 'more likely to play cooperatively' and 'begin to take turns' (Strickland 2003: 60). This links to the findings gained from the interviews, as the other participants, who were working with children ages three and four, stated their views as outdoor play being able to develop social

development. Instead, for children of this age, nought to two, participant C argued that being outside helps children develop an awareness of the environment, for example, it gives them the opportunity to experience new smells and noises, and they can often see airplanes and helicopters in the sky, these opportunities fit with what The National Strategies state about outdoor play, it allows children to have 'contact with the elements, seasons and the natural world' (The National Strategies Online; DfES 2007).

Although participant D is from another setting, a neighbouring school, she is working with children of a similar age, and has similar views to the other participants. Participant D does value the experience of outdoor play, she believes that it allows children to learn creative skills, social skills and gives them opportunities to take part in pretend play. When exploring the importance of outdoor play, it is worth noting that both participant D and A acknowledged the need for their settings to promote outdoor play, as some children may not have access to the outdoor environment at home. As discussed in the literature review many children do not have access to outdoor play for reasons such as having no garden (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 11) and children spending more time indoors when they are at home watching television and playing on the computer (Hausmann 2006: 41).

Using the natural environment as well as the educational settings' own outdoor environment can be important for children's development (Waller 2007) and this view was also expressed by the staff. All three participants from the placement setting were aware of the importance of using the natural environment, although their answers differed slightly. Participant B stated that they tried to go to the park twice a month, and they also have other outings, such as an autumn walk and picnics. However, during the talks with the other participants it was stated that they are 'restricted' when it comes to leaving the site, as the child to staff ratios have to be 2:1, and for the younger children there needs to be enough push chairs available. Participant C explained that when staffing allows it they go for walks to the park, to feed the ducks and see the squirrels. Although the setting is restricted it was witnessed using observations that when the setting does have the correct amount of staff they do make the most of the opportunity and the children have the chances to enjoy the outdoor environment. During previous observations I was able to see two trips to the local park, where the children were able to feed the ducks and search for different natural objects such as leaves, twigs and pinecones. These were then taken back into the indoor environment to develop their autumn theme. This is in line with Forest School development which uses 'child led' activities, which is then 'taken back to the indoor setting to be continued' (Forest Schools online 2009).

Activities that were used to promote development

Alongside exploring the staff views of outdoor play this study also looked into the activities and objects that were used to aid children's development. Both methods revealed that the setting uses a variety of activities and methods within the outdoor environment to promote and aid children's development. Observations showed that the climbing frame, which included steps, slides and a bridge, was popular among the children, along with the balancing beam. The climbing frame, which has space underneath, also gave children a good hiding place when taking part in games such as hide and seek. Linking back to the development of social skills is the use of bikes and scooters, which children are encouraged to share and take turns with. Strickland (2003)

states that it is during the ages three and four that children will start to take turns, and the observations suggest that this is an effective way to help children learn to take turns.

It was acknowledged during observations that on different occasions and depending on the activity, staff will sometimes step back and let children become engaged in their own activities, and at other times they will become involved with the activities themselves, these are described as 'free play' and 'structured play' (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 2-3). Staff members knew when to become involved and lead play, which is 'structured play' and when it was more appropriate to allow the children to lead their own play, which is 'free play'. This has been argued to be the most successful type of play (Clements 2004). However, it was suggested by Beith et al. (2003: 42) that children enjoy certain activities if educators join in with them; this was witnessed at the setting when the children enjoyed playing singing games with a member of staff.

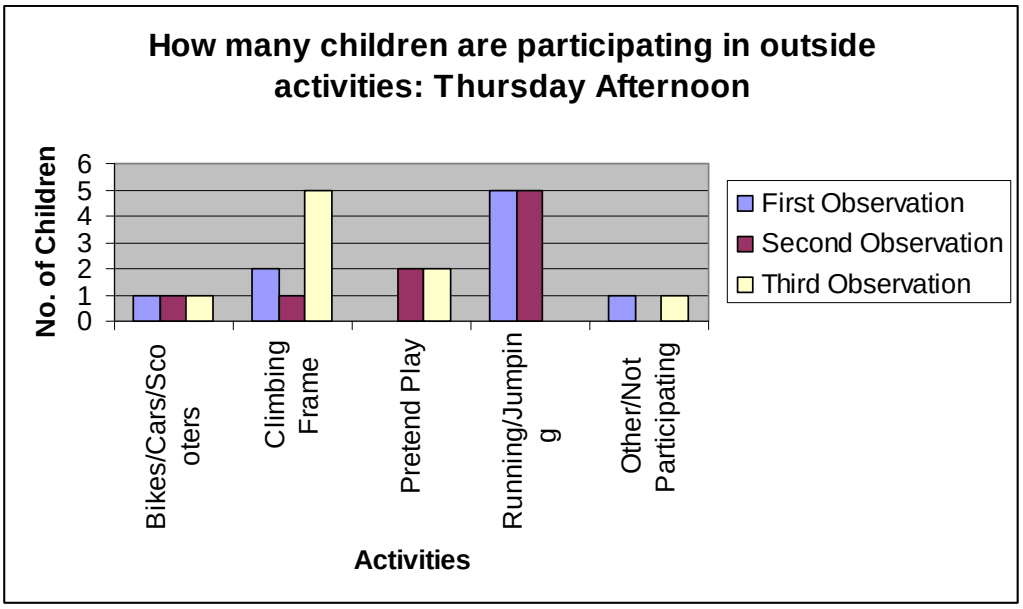
Using the outdoor environment to aid development not only took place on the field area with large toys and climbing frames, it also took place on the settings paved area where free flow play often took place. This area was where children had access to large building activities, tables and chairs where creative activities took place and an area for water activities. Participant D explained that their setting had something similar to this, she believed that the 'environments should work together' and 'mirror' each other, for example they have a music corner and a book corner both inside and out. This is very similar to the layout of the placement setting. This area allows children to become involved in sensory activities, the advantage of this taking place outside is that it allows children to be 'messy' (The National Strategies online) and these messy activities are often seen as more acceptable outside (Lawton 2008). There were examples of sensory activities seen during observations, for example, playing with porridge oats in the water tray, and mixing together flour and water where the children added as much or as little water as they wanted. This activity gave the children freedom to choose how they wanted the mixture to turn out; this enables them to take control of the activity, it has been argued that this makes learning successful (Clements 2004).

Children's use of the outdoor environment

General Information

From the observations carried out it was clear that the young children at the nursery setting enjoyed taking part in outside activities, even when the weather was poor; this can be linked back to the participants views, as all four participants believed that the children enjoyed being outside, with participant D and A suggesting that children prefer being outdoors over indoors. From the data collected it was clear that over the period of timed observations there were some children that fell into the 'other/ not participating' category, however, on the majority of occasions this was only a small number of children. Figure 1 highlights this, as there was only one child out of nine 'not participating' on the first and third observations, and none on the second.

Figure 1: How many children are participating in outside activities: Thursday Afternoon

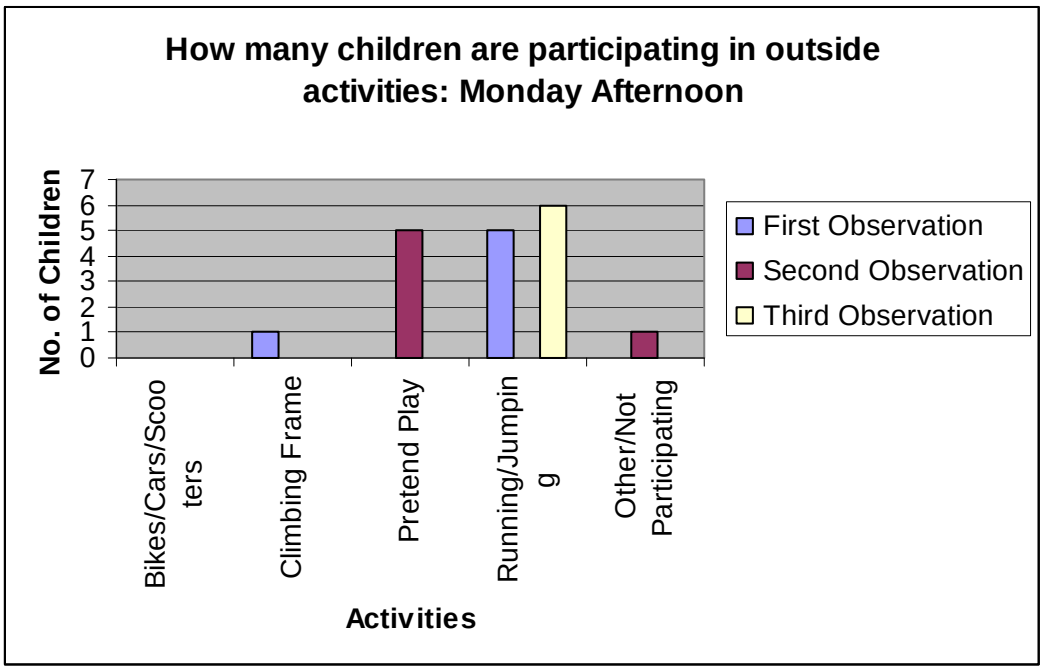


An important note to make in this part of the analysis is that during the observation week the weather was very poor and wet which meant that the children did not have access to the bikes, scooters, hoops and toys as much as they would have done during better weather. This means that the data is not as reliable when it focuses on how much the children used these outdoor toys. However, from previous observations and from the talks with the staff, it was known that these toys are popular with the children, especially the boys.

Pretend Play

During many of the observations it was witnessed that pretend play was something that many children took the opportunity to take part in whilst in the outdoor environment. Many types of pretend play were witnessed during the timed observations, including, "being chased by a monster!". During this observation five out of the six children took part in this pretend activity, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: How many children are participating in outside activities: Monday Afternoon

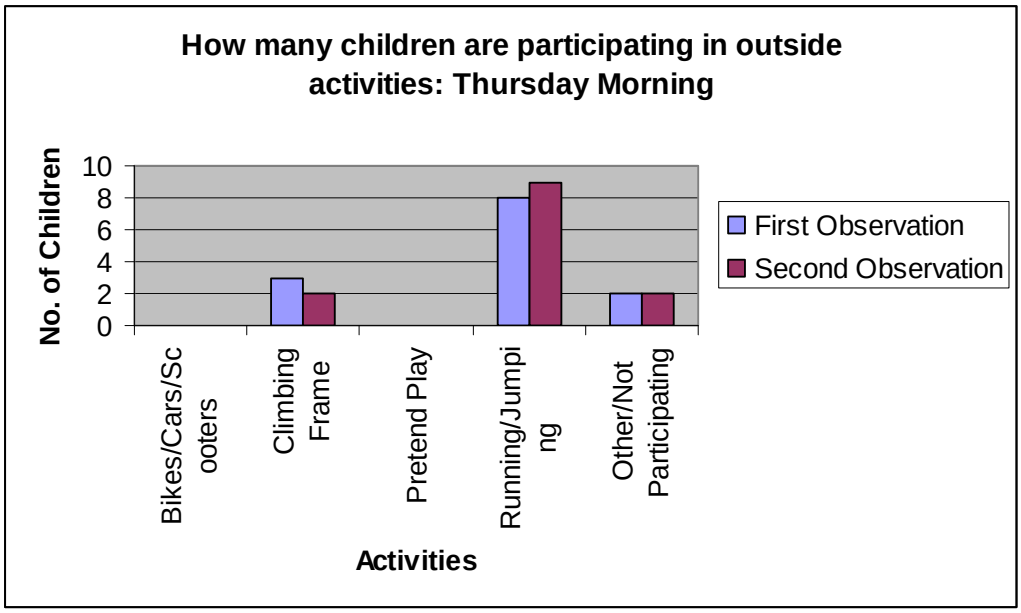


A separate occasion saw a small group take part in pretend play with relation to real life. Three out of five children were pretending to "be at work". These opportunities for pretend play are important as they allow children to take on different roles (Teachernet online), which in this case was being at work. A third timed observation saw four children out of a group of ten involved in their own game, which when asked what they were doing, involved "searching for worms for tea". Clark (2007: 358) states that the 'physical environment are very important... but they are also able to create their own imaginary spaces'. Using this it could be suggested that the children are using both the environment and their imaginations to create this game. These observations link back to participants B and D's comments, who explained that children get involved 'in a lot of pretend play'.

Running and Jumping

The observations found that many of the children enjoy having the freedom to simply run around, jump and explore the outdoor environment, this is an advantage that the outdoor environment has, as it gives children the freedom 'to move on a large scale, to be active, noisy and messy' (The National Strategies online). Figure 3 gives an example of how many children took part in this activity; it shows eight out of thirteen children and then nine out of thirteen taking part:

Figure 3: How many children are participating in outside activities: Thursday Morning



Although it was witnessed that many of the children enjoyed this type of outside activity, it is important to remember that children still need the choice of different activities, as a 'variety of equipment' will allow children to 'vary their play' and will also help their concentration (Tassoni and Hucker 2000: 189).

Using the information gained from both methods, it was found that in general the staff members have positive views about outdoor play, and they attempt to promote its use as much as possible, even in poor weather. This contradicts findings from Maynard and Waters (2007) study who found that 'teachers went outside only in good weather'. They also found that 'little use was made of natural environments' (Maynard and Waters 2007). However, these findings show that although there were restrictions due to staffing levels, the setting does make the most of the natural environment when they can, and when this is not possible they use their wide range of equipment and activities within their own outdoor setting.

Conclusion

The data showed that the participants were aware of the importance of outdoor play and the development that it can promote. Unlike the findings from Maynard and Waters (2007), this setting used the outdoor environment everyday and when the weather was poor, and they also made good use of the natural environment, for example, the local park, when staff ratios allowed. However, this study was only small scale, and only had time to explore the views of one setting, along with one member of staff from a neighbouring school; small scale suggests that the results found will not be as significant as the findings from larger studies, such as that of Maynard and Waters (2007). However, it was valuable to explore a setting's views and beliefs of outdoor play and how they use and promote the outdoor environment, especially when research has suggested that some nurseries have 'no outdoor provision' and those that do have the

'use may be infrequent, the quality poor and opportunities for learning limited' (Garrick 2004: 2). The National Strategies (online) suggests that: Young children should be outdoors as much as indoors and need a well–designed, well–organised, integrated indoor – outdoor environment. The data suggest that the setting follows this guideline, as the children do spend much of their day outdoors, and as discussed earlier the outdoor free flow area is available to children, if staff ratios allow it, to use if they wish.

This study was small scale, and therefore results cannot be generalised. However, further research could be undertaken into the differences, if any, in the types of outdoor play undertaken by boys and girls. Research into the use of outdoor facilities for play may be increasingly important if concerns about children increasingly being moved indoors for the majority of their play at home are going to continue.

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Editorial Policy
Articles submitted for consideration in educationUndergraduate, the Journal of Undergraduate Research in Education, originated as research projects undertaken by honours undergraduates in their final year of study at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln. The original submissions achieved a first class award. Enquiries relating to submissions in future editions of educationUndergraduate, the Journal of Undergraduate Research in Education, should be directed to a member of the editorial team.

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