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'It's Good to Talk': Does Paired Discussion Enhance Pupil's Participation Within the Classroom?

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Abstract

The aim of this research project was to find out whether paired discussion enhances children's participation within the classroom in a Year Three setting through conducting a mainly qualitative study. Four children were the main focus of the study: two boys who disliked partner work and two girls who were very shy and rarely participated in classroom question and answer sessions. Previous research hinted at paired discussion being unsuccessful due to irregularity of use. As a result, paired discussion was introduced during a five week teaching placement in order to determine if regular use would prove more successful. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were employed primarily to canvass pupils and staff for their opinions. The themes explored incorporated the benefits of partners; the type of talk needed and what factors can influence its success. The findings of this research appear to suggest that paired discussion did enhance participation of some. With only one exception, all the children were positive about working with partners though this did highlight some unexpected results. All staff use paired discussion in most subjects but had varied opinions on its dissemination. It was recommended that although regular use of paired discussion is preferable, further consideration needs to be given to its monitoring and structure.

Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore the use of paired discussion in the classroom and to determine whether it enhances pupil participation. This issue was chosen as a result of my findings in previous research about pupil engagement in mathematics (Cowan 2010), which suggested partner work was unsuccessful due to a number of possible reasons; one being infrequent use. Though paired discussion is used within my workplace in Key Stage 1 on a daily basis through Read Write Inc (Miskin 2006), its use throughout Key Stage 2 varies from class to class. As a student teacher I was very aware of current literature and thinking about collaborative learning but was not seeing it first-hand. School placement offered the opportunity to not only implement regular partner work across all subjects but also provide possible insights as to why its use is so variable in Key Stage 2. I felt that this study should be approached in an evaluative manner, through the views and perceptions of the children, staff members and myself. Staff and Year 3 children were canvassed for their opinions about partner work via questionnaires and informal conversations; their responses were analysed, evaluated and compared with reflective observations made in situ.

There is a plethora of research expounding the virtues of collaborative learning and how social interaction between children in the classroom can promote learning and understanding. Indeed, as Tunnard tells us, the findings of such research have 'had a major influence on classroom practice and organisation' (2010: 2). Communication is recognised as a key skill by the National Curriculum which includes speaking, listening, reading and writing as 'essential to effective learning' (DfEE 1999: 20) across the curriculum. Indeed, the Primary National Strategy for Speaking, Listening, Learning (DfES 2003: 11) adds '…[these skills] are not only interdependent, but also mutually enhancing'. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (DfES 1998 and 1999)

compound this with recommendations for peers to work collaboratively to become more autonomous in their learning.

The benefits of collaborative working seem varied and many. As far back as the Plowden Report 1967, recommendations were made for group working in classrooms; this allowed children to help and learn from one another, recognising each other's strengths and building trust. Such relationships can help an insecure child feel more confident and willing to share ideas without the risk of proffering a 'wrong' answer; paired discussion offers everyone a 'voice' (Clarke 2005; Jones and Hodson 2006; Miskin 2006).

Further collaborative research highlighted the type of talk involved in small groups and whether it was this rather than the physical interaction that proved to be the dynamic for success. Barnes (1976) defined exploratory talk as the language used when formulating new ideas. This notion has been built upon by further researchers such as Mercer and Littleton (2007: 2) who acknowledge there has been much research on classroom talk but not on the 'relationship between the quality of talk and learning outcomes.' Other factors influencing participation include which ability pairing is best while others suggest it is the classroom environment and how children are seated that can determine effective participation (Wheldall et al. 1981).

Prior to placement, four children were identified by their initial responses to partner work; this provided a focus for informal observation of their participation during partnered sessions. The group consisted of two boys and two girls of differing ability out of a class of 32 children. The findings of this study may be limited due to the small scale of the research and the fact that all the children are members of the same class; offering only a sample of opinion. Perceptions of the researcher, as to whether paired discussion enhances children's participation, may also limit the findings. The consensus of the literature is that collaboration is beneficial but suggests that successful collaboration is a complex subject; something I feel my research will show.

Literature Review

The general consensus of the literature was that collaborative partnerships were the ideal way to enhance learning and understanding in children. Indeed, I found it difficult to find any research that disagreed. I therefore decided to look at the different ways researchers focussed their studies, such as: benefits of talking, what kind of talk should be used its implementation and what can influence its success or failure.

The benefits of collaboration can be seen in successful initiatives such as 'Talking Partners' (Kotler et al. 1999) delivered through specialist training, originally developed as an intervention programme for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Now adapted to support those for whom language presents difficulties, it involves small group intervention work over a number of weeks. Learning supported by talk is the core principal of the programme and mirrors the Speaking, Listening, Learning documents (DfES 2003) by enhancing and enriching language and encourages full participation. This should not be confused with 'talking partners', an assessment for learning tool featured by Clarke (2005), who advocates it can be used regularly in a lesson to articulate and extend learning as well as fostering a more co-operative and respectful ethos. Complete participation through talk is encouraged by Miskin (2006: 8):

> When we start to say something aloud, we often realise that the original thought may need to be reconsidered or refined. Talk is important.

Further benefits of working in pairs can help fill gaps in knowledge and lead to the development of new understanding (Bargh and Schul 1980; Webb 2006) by sharing their strengths and weaknesses; leading to better awareness of their understanding or lack of it (Cooper 1999; Ritchie and Thomas 2004). Kutnick believes however, it is not just about two people solving a problem together; rather it is about developing camaraderie, 'an underlying sense of closeness or trust that allows for sensitive interaction between partners' (1994: 23).

Another benefit according to Jones and Hodson (2006: 26) is that hesitant children are more encouraged to participate when addressing 'an audience of one rather than the whole group'; talk is less conspicuous when everyone is engaged in the same activity. Likewise, it teaches a child who is over confident to listen to others (Clarke 2005). Although these previous examples of theory are based in literacy, sharing work with others through talk can benefit children's learning in other areas of the curriculum (DfES 2003; Dawes and Sams 2004). This is further acknowledged in the Rose Review:

> Due attention must be given to the prime skills of speaking and listening as essential in their own right and crucial for learning to read, write, to be numerate and, indeed, to be successful in virtually all of the learning children undertake at school and elsewhere (Rose 2008: 7).

Interestingly, Dawes and Sams argue that while the focus on speaking and listening skills seems paramount, the reality is that the rigidity of the curriculum and the emphasis on target setting, 'standards' and testing '…have meant that the space and time for learning conversations has diminished'(2004: 4).

Though the benefits of talk in group/partnered work are many, research suggests that it is not necessarily the right type of talk. Barnes defined the term exploratory talk as being:

> … hesitant and incomplete … [enabling] the speaker to try out ideas, to hear how they sound, to see what others make of them, to arrange information and ideas into different patterns (2008: 5).

Mercer agrees this collective thinking is an effective use of language, and the education process 'should ensure that every child is aware of its value and able to use it effectively' (Mercer 2004: 133). He advises however, that observational research has found this does not occur naturally within groups rather, that much of it is unproductive being more 'cumulative' and 'disputational' than exploratory (ibid: 133; Alexander 2000). This was discussed in further research by Mercer and Sams (2006: 6) who suggest that children are offered no guidelines on how to talk effectively in pairs or groups, as 'there may be no real understanding of how to talk together or for what purpose'. Further types of talk in the classroom are elaborated within 'dialogic teaching' (Alexander 2004). By encouraging children to discuss their ideas, errors or misconceptions, the teacher can extend a sequence of dialogue based upon such matters. The apparent consensus of all seems to be that establishing meaningful talk takes ongoing perseverance and dedication on the part of both student and teacher. It is a complex matter, involving:

> … discussion between pupils and teachers of the ground rules which are to apply and of the pupils' own perceptions of their roles, the learning task and its purpose (Corden 2000: 144).

By establishing some form of structured guidance for implementing talk how do we ensure its success?

There are many factors that can influence the success or failure of paired work. Research seems to agree that ability can influence success but it seems conflicted about which ability groupings work best (Schmitz and Winskel 2008). Piaget (1932) theorised that a child's learning could be hindered by their own limited outlook and when presented with a problem only see their own solution. However, through cognitive conflict and peer interaction they are able to shift and diverge in their thinking (Forman & Cazden, 1998). On the other hand, Vygotsky (1979 cited in Schmitz and Winskel 2008) believed it was co-operation and language that was important, not conflict. Through his Zone of Proximal Development, learning takes place through co-operative, social interaction with another more knowledgeable significant other, thus extending and facilitating learning; this forms the basis for peer-mentoring. Rather than challenge Vygotsky's theory, Mercer's (2000) Intermental Development Zone (IDZ) re-conceptualises it, suggesting that two children of similar ability can still facilitate each other's learning; inter-thinking helps individuals think and solve problems together and transform it into new knowledge. On the other hand research by Webb et al. (1995, in Schmitz and Winskel 2008: 584) found that high ability homogeneous groups 'appeared to exhibit a know-all attitude and put less effort into the task'. Conversely a low-medium pairing appeared to fair better using more conflict and negotiation. Barnes (1976) pointed out that success was not determined by ability alone; like Corden (2000) earlier, he believed it was a complex mixture of things that effected quality talk that were 'all open to influence by the teacher' (Barnes 1976: 71). Here Webb (2006: 20) holds a similar viewpoint that a teacher with a transmission view of teaching 'may be reluctant to use student collaboration to further academic development'. Wheldall and Glyn (1989) suggested that working in rows rather than groups could be more beneficial for encouraging focussed work, especially for those who may be easily distracted, but believe that overall, seating arrangements should be flexible for different tasks.

The literature paints a multi-layered picture of factors that contribute to successful collaborative talk. This study analyses the perspectives of children and staff alike and their experiences. It attempts to uncover insights as to how paired discussion is used in primary schools and its effectiveness.

Methodology

The aim of this small scale research project was to explore whether paired discussion enhances children's participation in the classroom. The literature has highlighted that measuring the success of collaborative learning is complex and difficult, so I have not attempted to do so here. Rather, I have drawn upon the opinions and perceptions of staff members and the children themselves, supplementing them with my own personal observations to determine the merit of paired discussion. This constitutes a mainly qualitative study which would afford a more interpretive approach to data gathered.

The ethical issues for this research were considered in line with the Bishop Grosseteste University College guidelines (BG 2008) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2004). Verbal permission was granted by the Head Teacher upon submission of a research proposal. Parental consent was not deemed necessary as the research was considered 'part of normal professional practice for the researcher' (BG 2008: 4); permissions were obtained from all participants. The real names of the children have been substituted for letters of the alphabet such as Child A, D, L and J thus maintaining confidentiality through anonymity.

This research took place in a medium sized suburban primary school, where all the children were members of the same Year Three class. Paired discussion was introduced at the start of a five week placement and then implemented on a regular basis, sometimes planned and sometimes spontaneously. To ensure the children understood what was expected of them during paired discussion, myself and the Teaching Assistant (TA) modelled our expectations. Through role play we demonstrated active listening skills using visual cues and turn taking, as well as demonstrating poor listening skills and how to spot them. Although four children were the focus of this study, all the children completed the questionnaire; paired discussion was not previously used on a regular basis so I felt it important to find out the children's overall opinion. Prior to the placement, when asked if they liked to work in partners, the children demonstrated their answer with a show of hands; they voted 30:2 in favour of working with a partner. The two boys (Child D and J) not in favour proffered their reasons and formed part of the target group; the other two participants were girls (Child A and L) who were quite reticent and shy about participating in discussion. During the five weeks my personal observations of the children's partnerships were included within the normal lesson evaluations. The intention was to canvass the opinions of the children at the end of placement and staff during the placement.

Data were gathered from staff and children by questionnaires; responses were to be followed up by a further questionnaire with open questions for the children in the target group. Although this was a qualitative study, quantitative methods were employed to 'use the strength of one method to enhance the impact of the other' (Fox et al. 2007: 22), helping build a bigger picture of opinion about partnership work (Denscombe 2003). For this purpose I felt it was necessary to canvass all the children in the class for their opinion of paired discussion to add credence to the views of the subject group and staff. This range of methods would provide a holistic viewpoint (Cohen et al. 2007) allowing triangulation of the data, which Thomas (2009) suggests is a powerful argument to ensure the variety of evidence is corroborating the other.

All the children completed a questionnaire that consisted of questions based on the Likert scale, a technique developed to measure attitudes (Likert 1932). The questionnaire was short and simple, something Sharp (2009) recommends for children and three smiley faces were used as the criterion response for each question. The latter made the questionnaire easy to complete in a short time. Omitting open questions and reading them aloud meant all abilities could take part; depending on the comprehension and reading ability of the child, the effectiveness of the questionnaire can be compromised (Hopkins 2002). My intention here was to provide a quick gauge of the children's general opinions.

Following this, I questioned the target group together using an adapted questionnaire based upon the first one. The questions on this one were all open ones, providing me

an opportunity to reword any question they did not understand. I also felt it may allow the children to elicit more information and provide some insight into their thoughts about partner work. There was a risk that some of the children may have been a little shy about sharing their views in front of others as some strong personalities could dominate the conversation making 'it difficult for less assertive members to speak' (Bell 2005: 163). I felt, however, after considering the personalities of the children under focus, that they may be more inclined to open up and 'spark' off one another. The children were made aware that there were no right or wrong answers and if they did not want to participate and share their views they could be excused; happily they were keen to share their thoughts.

I informed staff about the research and they volunteered to complete a questionnaire thus denoting implicit consent. The questionnaires, consisting of closed and open questions, provided anonymous data and staff could complete them at their convenience. Some questions required a simple Yes or No answer, while another, based on the Likert scale (1932) asked them to rate paired discussion as an effective practice. After eliciting questionnaire replies I realised that although their opinion was sought about the advantages of using partnered discussion, I had not sought their views on the disadvantages. I therefore followed this up with informal conversations with staff about disadvantages and used this as data, but only after carefully clarifying statements and gaining verbal permission to use it. To preserve anonymity they are represented as Participant 1 and 2. I opted for pen and paper methods for notations as I felt recording responses may be more intimidating and in the case of the children, may alter their behaviour making them feel self-conscious. I realise that by recording in this way there was the possibility of missing information and that it may not truly reflect what was said but I considered it was worth the risk to be able to put everyone at their ease.

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

At present the children have three different seating positions within the classroom for different lessons: maths and literacy are same ability groupings whereas places for registration and all other subjects are based on a random basis, which they know as 'normal places'. The results show that mathematics seemed to be the most popular choice, which was surprising as we did very little paired discussion in mathematics. Partners were used during our maths investigation where they not only had to offer suggestions for solving the problem but work together throughout the session. The success criteria specified they listen to each other's ideas to work in a logical sequence so as to reinforce about turn taking and active participation. A possible reason for the higher volume of votes for maths could be that some of the children did not feel particularly confident in this subject; working with a partner presented an opportunity to share the expertise of someone else rather than risk a solitary answer. Child L opted for maths partners on the class questionnaire but indicated on the target questionnaire she preferred normal places. This could be due to the fact that her partner is Child D. Although they generally work well together, Child D often rushes ahead with work, striving to complete it as fast as possible. Unfortunately accuracy and understanding is sacrificed for speed, frustrating Child L who prefers to talk through what is to be done. Child D, upon observation, relies for the most part on Child L to tell him what he needs to do rather than discuss how to achieve the task; he quite often does not listen to the teacher input. I believe this may be the result of his Specific Learning Difficulty; his short-term memory presents a challenge as do his literacy skills. This particular maths partnership does not seem to reflect Mercer's (2000) IDZ where same ability pairs

scaffold each others learning. It would appear, however, to reflect Child L's preferred partnership for normal places as she recognises his qualities being similar to her own:

> Q: Do you like working with a partner? Why?
> Child L: Yes, I do. I like working with (names other child) we share ideas.
> R: That's in Maths? (R denotes Researcher)
> Child L: No normal places.
> R: Which do you prefer?
> Child L: Normal places because (names other child) listens to me and we work out together what we need to do. He's quite clever.

It could be argued here though, that although there is a mutual reciprocation of ideas she may be allowing this perceived 'clever' partner to take the lead. Throughout partnered sessions, it was noticeable that regardless of how much Child L may or may not be contributing to the collaborative process, I could see her confidence was growing. Once where she would have been reticent, she began over the five weeks to be among the first to offer suggestions or solutions to a problem. Here the views of Clarke (2005), Miskin (2006) and Jones and Hodson (2006) ring true; being able to share her thoughts and opinions with a smaller audience enabled her to find her voice.

Interestingly, only two of the target group (J and L) listed the quality of a good and preferred partner as being 'clever'. It is hard to fathom here whether they mean a partner cleverer than themselves or a partner clever like themselves. As Bell (2005) suggests it is difficult to know the reasons behind the thoughts. This could also mean a lack of confidence in their own abilities; do they seek to work with a higher ability partner because they may learn more or so they can 'coast'? In the case of Child J, I believe the latter could be a possibility as his maths partnership is high ability and he enjoys a competitive relationship with his partner and others sitting in the group. Although work is differentiated to the correct level, sometimes this group produce less work than other groups in the class. This lack of effort could be what Webb et al. (1995 in Schmitz and Winskel 2008: 584) meant as exhibiting a 'know-it all attitude'. This also may be why Child J does not like his normal place partnership because his partner is a boy of medium ability and often they argue about ideas or just do not speak. Again, it could just be a matter of personality; Child D hinted at the same thing.

> Q: Do you think you are a good partner. Why?
> R: What about you then D, are you a good partner?
> Child D: Hmmm…well…sometimes.
> R: Why only sometimes?
> Child D: It depends on the partner… whether they like me or not.

In a similar conversation, Child A saw a good partner as someone with particular qualities. This echoes Kutnick (1994) who suggested that mutual trust and sensitive interactions are the key to partner work. Child A has also developed in confidence over the placement, not just proffering answers but her articulation of method has developed. Her knowledge seems to have deepened as a result of this partnership, which according to Mercer (2000), will help generate new knowledge. The participation of the boys was a little harder to gauge. There seemed to be no significant improvement, although Child D changed his opinion of partner work believing now 'two brains were quicker than one'. Child J, though acknowledging his maths partnership was useful, maintained that he preferred working alone. When asked what

kind of partner they would choose, three out of four immediately opted for friends; usually with a particular one in mind - a clever friend. Only Child D preferred the teacher to choose the partner as they would pick someone who would work well rather than talk.

Although the target group were my main focus another issue came to light while canvassing the whole class. When asked the questions "Are you a good listener?" and "Do you share your ideas?" three boys circled the sad face each time, 'No' and 'Not very often'. All three of them find concentration a challenge; two of them have attention deficit problems and one suffers a medical condition which affects concentration. Having witnessed them involved in partner work, I was a little surprised at their responses as they have often made good contributions. Wheldall and Glynn's (1989) theory about classroom seating arrangements may hold the answer and during placement I frequently rearranged the furniture. Each group consisted of three tables, which together formed a larger rectangle, and six chairs. They were grouped this way for science and art in order for children to share resources. The remainder of the time groups were arranged into 'C' shapes, separating them into connected 'rows' positions when the task dictated. On these occasions the boys were quite focussed and produced quality work with minimum distraction. Their response also raised a concern, that by frequently being encouraged to listen may inadvertently suggest they are 'bad listeners'; they may decide to accept this label with the result of not bothering to try.

The views of the staff were fairly positive about partner work as all ten teachers use it in most subjects. The results of the questionnaire indicate there is an even split between using discussion partners everyday or three or four times a week. All of Key Stage 1 staff use it at least once a day due to Read Write Inc (Miskin 2006) where the children have nominated talk partners. They are used at other times, but predominately during literacy; partner work is important for building team skills, used frequently in Reception. Some staff felt that care needed to be taken with pairing, that it needs to be varied not just by ability, but also by language skills and personality. This reflected not only the children's responses earlier, but mirrored the findings of Clarke (2005) who believes partners should be changed regularly. In Key Stage 2, however, this is not really seen as a priority as children have varied partnerships due to the variety of lessons and it is seen to be enough.

The majority of the staff felt that paired discussion enhanced speaking and listening skills but still only used it as a strategy three or four times a week: only one staff member was hesitant to agree. Her concerns for careful monitoring echo the sentiments of Mercer (2004) and Alexander (2000) that effective or exploratory talk does not come naturally and needs guidance. Further concerns about the time needed to dedicate to monitoring was picked up by another member of staff. She felt too much time was spent teaching to the test rather than teaching children how to talk, which was indicative of the research of Dawes and Sams (2004). It seems ironic that in order to teach effective speaking and listening skills we do not appear to have the flexibility in the curriculum to teach the vital skill of conversation, particularly effective conversation. Though paired discussion proved fruitful in a variety of subjects, I found it impossible to not only monitor the talk but discern what kind of dialogue was taking place.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research was to explore the use of paired discussion in the classroom and to determine whether it enhances pupil participation through insights gained from staff members and children. Overall staff and children alike were positive about the use of paired discussion and their views of the benefits were similar. The participation of Child A and L certainly improved dramatically. Child D discovered the benefits of working as a team and therefore changed his previous viewpoint.

One finding was that the children equated a successful partnership with a clever partner; though they preferred to work with a friend, they had to be a clever friend. Though this may suggest they hide behind their partner's perceived ability, contributing little themselves, it could also indicate a taste for elitism. Some see work as a competition for individual success rather that a team effort in understanding. Clarke's (2005; Miskin 2006) recommendation for partner work is to change partners frequently; this fosters a more tolerant and co-operative approach, promotes turn taking and enriches the learning experience.

Further recommendations to improve co-operation and social interaction, is to consider the classroom environment itself. Being prepared to rearrange seating arrangements for different types of learning can bring out the best of those who find learning a challenge. Partners who find themselves in dispute with one another may find when seated in a 'row' situation they must learn to negotiate and listen to each other.

Though there were examples where Mercer's (2000) IDZ seemed to work, it was not conclusive. A bigger study than this would be needed to fully appreciate the findings of his research; ability is not enough to determine the success of paired learning as found by Barnes (1976) and Corden (2000). Rather, personality and personal characteristics were held in high esteem by some and regarded as being important.

Another finding was that although staff agreed that paired discussion brought many benefits, it could be onerous, without direction and difficult to monitor. Further Professional Development across the school regarding guidance on structured talk would be beneficial; this may at least provide better insight as to what children are talking about. As talk is central to teaching and listening, getting the basics right is fundamental. For my own practice, I discovered that modelling speaking and listening skills and following up with reminders is not enough. I need to consider my own teaching style, which is only just starting to emerge, and reflect on how it may influence the children's perceptions of learning.

This research has shown me the potential of using regular paired discussion but I must agree with the Mercer and Littleton (2007) that more attention needs to be dedicated to exploring the quality of talk in the classroom. However, in today's climate of targets, testing and league table results, it remains to be seen who will be brave enough to teach the art of conversation; after all "it's good to talk".

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Teachers Know Best…Or Do They? An Exploration of Year 8 Pupils' and Teachers' Perceptions of the Value of Self and Peer Assessment

Nikki Hurst

Abstract

This research study examines the values held by teachers and pupils of a key element of the government's Assessment for Learning Strategy. Self and peer assessment have been identified as valid means of gaining and enhancing skills within both cognitive and affective domains. A small mixed methods project investigates a mixed gender and ability cohort of Year 8 pupils, and staff from a local secondary school. Through individual questionnaires appropriate to status, a picture emerges to show how staff believe pupils' skills and attitudes can be affected by including self and peer assessment as an approach to effective learning. Pupil comments contribute to understanding how they view self and peer assessment activities. Questionnaire response rates were high providing good feedback, coded analysis provides a reasonable sample of both quantitative and qualitative data. Findings showed concurrence with the majority of literature and research, particularly in relation to studies containing pupil voice at their core. Critical analysis of both the data and the questionnaire design highlights the difficulties of interpretation and comparison of adult and child responses. Suggestions are offered as to how these difficulties may be minimised for future enquiries. Implications for the school and wider research communities are considered together with comments concerning the ongoing debate between summative and formative assessment. Although this study has a number of limitations and is inconclusive as to whether the values held by staff and pupils at this school are similar, it does add to the evidence gained from using questionnaires with children and presents a platform from which to attempt further research.

Introduction

> We know what a difference it makes to pupils' learning when they and their teachers have a really good understanding of where pupils are in their learning, where they need to go next and how best to get there – which is what Assessment for Learning is all about (DCSF 2008: 1).

In 2008 the above strategy introduced the concept of true personalised learning for all pupils. Assessment for, and of, learning takes various forms: formative, summative, accreditative and evaluative (Farrell 2001: 7-8) the blending of which should produce a detailed, refined picture of what has been accomplished and how it happened. Each plays an integral part in the school life of a pupil, however, for the purposes of this study, formative assessment will be concentrated upon because of its potential impact on teaching and learning on a day-to-day basis, possibly of high importance to all teachers. Much of the literature has been generated since the mid 1990s making this a highly relevant, contemporary issue. Empirical studies of assessment such as those of Kulik and Kulik (1987), Crooks (1988), Black (1993) and Black and Wiliam (1998a) have shown how assessment can influence pupils both positively and negatively. Perhaps most importantly Black and Wiliam (1998b: 4) advocated that 'improved formative assessment helps the (so called) low attainers more than the rest, and so reduces the spread of attainment whilst also raising it overall'. In their key work on formative

assessment (1998a and 1998b) they went so far as to list key elements, which, as part of an ongoing cycle, determine prospective steps in learning and how they might be achieved. One such element is that of actively involving pupils to assess their own work to identify strengths and areas for improvement (Harlen 2007: 120-121). Thus this study, situated at a semi-rural academy secondary school with pupils from an even mix of abilities (Ofsted 2007), examines self and/or peer assessment in relation to both staff and pupils and questions whether they have similar or different values attached to it. There may be teaching and learning implications for staff and pupils in the study school if there are marked differences in values held. It must be highlighted however, that the study is of a very small scale and therefore unlikely to be of significant value generally. That said, it does add to the evidence from questionnaires obtained via children of which there is, according to Lewis and Lindsay (2000: 190-197) paucity.

Review of literature

Literature analysed shows substantial amounts of research have been undertaken into the value of formative assessment, of which self and peer assessment are key elements. Emerging themes include cognitive and affective improvements, trust and issues or constraints in using self and/or peer assessment effectively. Teachers and pupils offer different perspectives on each, forming an overall picture of the realities pre and post the inception of the Assessment for Learning strategy.

Black and Wiliam's (1998a and 1998b) work on formative assessment (including self and peer assessment elements) followed on from studies by Natriello (1987) and Crooks (1988). Perhaps because it was highly extensive, covering studies on five year olds to undergraduates in several countries and across a range of subjects it is referred to in a number of further texts such as those by Sadler (1998), Sebatane (1998), Dann (2002), Wiliam et al. (2004), Noonan and Duncan (2005), Harlen (2007), Sebba et al. (2008) and Blanchard (2009). This seminal work suggested that the classroom was like a 'black box'; government policy was interested about what went in but more overtly interested in what came out in the form of summative data. They espoused that inside 'the box' assessment for learning (as opposed to assessment of learning) could be used to improve all students, fostering strong student involvement in the classroom, better teacher/pupil relationships and huge gains in pupils' affective domain. Specifically in relation to self and peer assessment further work by Johnson (2004) indicates congruence with Black and Wiliam in that participation encourages tolerance for other students, allows practice of giving and receiving of feedback and, possibly most importantly, provides motivation to continue practice until a skill is mastered. Ross and Starling (2008) add weight to the argument by discussing how pupils' confidence is enhanced by self-assessment and resulting higher self-efficacy leads to positive visualisation of task completion. This in turn leads to 'increased effort contributing to higher achievement' (Ross and Starling 2008: 186); probably the most enviable outcome for today's teachers. Ross and Starling's comparisons with other studies showed that findings were validated by similar results across a spectrum of subjects thus reinforcing Black and Wiliam's similar claims from their review. Sebba et al.'s (2008) later review of evidence on the impact on students of self and peer assessment augments findings by asserting that pupils develop dialogue, have better ideas of their strengths and improvement areas, and become more 'accountable for their learning' (Sebba et al. 2008: 16). This review however, concentrated in the main on evidence from the USA with only 2 studies contributing from the UK, thus it may not have as much weight as a review undertaken using primarily British sources because of its cultural relevance.

However, if it is supposed that learners of all ages, genders and nationalities might learn similarly, then, arguably, its credibility is validated. Thus via triangulation of results of different studies, reliability and validity of the positive contribution to affective domains is strong.

Despite the evidence in favour of self and peer evaluation appearing overwhelmingly heavy, studies such as those of Schunk and Ertmer (1999) and Ross et al. (2002) found some negative results. Schunk and Ertmer's outcome correlated self-assessment with self-efficacy and confidence but actual attainment did not rise. Ross et al. reported that self-assessment heightened awareness of unsuccessful outcomes thus leading to a drop in self-confidence. Both studies linked the quality of teacher feedback and training of pupils in how to self assess as being influential to success. Thus, although these studies are inconsistent with other findings in literature, they do have positive congruence with more recent projects such as that undertaken by Pollard et al. (Pollard 2009: 4) in highlighting the importance of the quality of the teacher's dialogue and the fact that pupils may need an element of coaching and practice before their self-assessment skills are adequately formed.

Although Black and Wiliam did follow up their research review by being involved with the King's Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (Wiliam et al. 2004) they dealt very much with teacher actions and responses in the text. Similarly James et al.'s (2006) project 'Learning How to Learn' was centred on teachers and their practices but, significantly, included data from questionnaires completed by year 5 and year 8 pupils (Black et al. 2006). If the pupil is to be at the centre of the learning, perhaps then, in the true spirit of AfL, their views must be equally considered in this review if a true picture is to be obtained. The aim of finding pupils' values and beliefs related to learning proved difficult for Black et al. (2006) because of issues surrounding a complex subject and the use of simple language; a concept of significance to the study undertaken after the examination of this literature. Published studies containing actual pupil views of formative assessment and particularly self/peer assessment are relatively scarce (Harlen 2007: 41-42), however, that of Leitch et al. (2008) specifically shows pupil preferences for learning and comments surrounding both self and peer assessment.

Accounts (CPAL 2007: 5) of learning being 'active', learners having 'a role as teachers', a listening teacher and feeling safe enough to get things wrong, are healthy descriptors for the promotion of learning, however the concern with self and peer assessment and the values it held for the pupils are particularly relevant. Responses here were mixed despite positive learning environments, some pupils found it 'very difficult' (Dann 2002: 91) to self assess and pupils liked feedback from peers but only if it was confirmed by the teacher (CPAL 2007: 7-8). This perhaps indicates the fragility of the value held by pupils of self and peer assessment. Thus although it is meant to foster self-esteem, greater understanding and learners taking responsibility for their own learning (National Curriculum 2007), care must be taken that these are actually being achieved rather than merely being paid lip service to. Perhaps of some significance is that there are no comments in the CPAL's summary (2007) regarding whether the pupils think their attainment is improved because of the teaching and learning strategy. That they enjoy the learning more and feel positive about feedback is not in dispute; whether they believe their grades will be higher because of it is not clear. Questions concerning self-efficacy may be answered to a degree however, there appears to be no attempt to correlate this with higher attainment. Whether the pupils' awareness of this correlation was of value in this study might be debatable but it may have been interesting to

compare findings with Ross's (2008: 186) model of how self-assessment contributes to higher confidence, higher goals and greater effort thus resulting in higher achievement.

Ruddock et al. (2006) endorses Leitch (2008) in that the comments of pupils are valued as a means to understand the benefits of self/peer assessment. Pupils expressed that using self-assessment may mean faults go unrecognised, but peers finding them provided useful 'feedforward' and a basis for improvement. After a term of using peer assessment one of the teachers observed that the same group involved in the study was learning at a much faster rate and covering the curriculum more quickly. This could be seen as highly important in that there are 'many conflicting priorities absorbing teachers' time' (Flutter and Ruddock 2004: 10). Any practice that promotes more effective use of time must doubtlessly be of significant value thus peer assessment may have far reaching consequences for teachers as well as pupils.

With such valuable properties on offer it seems difficult to understand that not all schools (Ofsted 2008: 4-6) appear to have embraced the strategy of AfL as a way to promote learning, develop pupils personally and raise attainment (Black 1998: 133). Harlen (2007: 44) reveals that although many teachers value forms of assessment (including self/peer assessment) that promote pupil autonomy, dialogue and critique, only 46% were active in practising it. Literature shows a variety of reasons for this resistance. Rolheiser and Ross (2002) echo Black and Harrison (2001) in presenting teachers' doubts about the usefulness of practice and the concept that only formal testing is a valid form of assessment. Sadler (1998) adds that training of pupils to give and receive constructive feedback and using it to inform their follow up work requires an element of time for assimilation and practice; difficult to accommodate in a content driven curriculum. Teachers and trainees at the Ofsted Conference (2002) recognised the extra training implication that would be required if they were to develop the skills needed to fulfil effective and useful self/peer assessment. Even Black (2007: 4), one of the drivers of the King's Medway Project (Wiliam et al. 2004) stated that the challenge of rethinking one's role in promoting learning made 'heavy demands' on teachers and it would take much time before change became embedded. Black's observations appear to confirm Torrance and Pryor's earlier commentary (2002: 43) that teachers regard 'assessment as a distinct activity from teaching' in that both acknowledge the difficulties in breaking traditional pedagogy. Ofsted's more recent comments (2008: 5) that teachers had 'not understood how the approaches were supposed to improve pupils' achievement' are perhaps a little disappointing in view of the fact that the strategy has been shown to have such promise. This may imply that training and resource materials are not adequate or that 'the strong currency value of traditional qualifications sees off top-down, well-meaning, even well-funded efforts' (Blanchard 2010). Perhaps this highlights how research and the practicalities of changing educational cultures may not easily converge.

A final theme to be examined is that of trust. In much of the literature containing pupil input it resonates as an unequivocal issue in relation to peer assessment (Sadler 1998, Butler and Hodge 2001, Suffolk Advisory Service 2001, Flutter and Ruddock 2004, Cowie 2005, Ruddock et al. 2006, PMB 2007, CPAL 2007). Comments such as 'friends don't tell you the truth' (PMB 2007: 28) and 'some liked giving negative feedback to the 'smart' ones' (CPAL 2007: 8) provide insight into how important trust is because if peer assessment is to be useful clearly pupils must have some belief in the opinions of classmates. Facilitating an environment where trust abounds could present problems

for teachers, possibly more so for trainees and inexperienced staff, as they may tend to focus on controlling atmospheres to stave off disruptions. Additionally, as suggested by Flutter and Ruddock (2004: 102-109), friendship groups are not always stable thus tensions within classrooms might fluctuate to the extent that peer groups struggle to achieve regular cohesion.

The literature has highlighted a diversity of reasons why self/peer assessment holds great potential to change teaching and learning cultures, nevertheless it also presents sufficient barriers to prevent teachers from fully engaging with the concept thus obstructing change. By analysing data it is intended to gain an up to date picture of the values held by teachers and pupils in a contemporary local setting to ascertain the merits, or otherwise, of these key elements of AfL.

Methodology

Twenty-five Year 8 pupils participated (Boys n=13, Girls n=12) with 9 teachers of various subjects. Informed consent was sought from the mentor allowing individuals to complete semi-structured questionnaires devised by the researcher. This accommodated the ethical requirements of confidentiality and anonymity, (highly advocated by Walonick 1993, Lambert 2008, Judge, Jones and McCreery 2009, Bell 2010) and was in accordance with Bishop Grosseteste's (2008) ethics policy. Completion was voluntary and anonymous ensuring there was no pressure exerted as might occur in interview situations. The school's pupils are randomly allocated to forms thus providing a general mix of abilities in subjects. Gender numbers are kept even so an ordinary form was likely to provide unbiased gender and ability answers. A Year 8 form was chosen because they would not be affected by impingement on revision time, nor would they be affected by an additional person in their classroom due to some previous experience of this. This 'purposive sample' (Walliman 2004: 164) was thus deemed ideal by both researcher and mentor as it was likely to offer 'typical' responses.

Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires were considered carefully before deciding upon this data collection strategy. Issues such as appropriate language and phrasing (Sharp 2009), the difficulties associated with open and closed questions, layout (Cohen et al. 2010) and possible response rates (Walliman 2004) were contemplated before implementation. These were balanced by time constraints for data collection; 'the desirability of matching child to method' (Greene and Hill 2005: 17) and the fact that personal presence helped mitigate misunderstanding. The questionnaire was also piloted as suggested by all proponents.

For ease of comparison the structure of the pupils' questionnaire was similar to that of the staff. A simple mixed methodology was used; questionnaires collected numerical information (providing quantitative data) and individual thoughts and ideas (qualitative data). Each individual methodology has inherent strengths and weaknesses: quantitative methods can be 'precise and sophisticated' or 'obstinately conservative and narrow-minded' while qualitative methods can be 'innovative and socially responsible' or 'mere common sense' (Stewart and Shields 2001: 307). However, as this project intended to investigate perceived occurrences of, and values attached to, self and peer assessment it seemed a 'pragmatist' (Murray Thomas 2003: 7) viewpoint would be most appropriate because it offered to combine the strengths of 'mini studies' within a single project (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004: 20).

Completed questionnaires were then subjected to a coding and categorization procedure to facilitate reduction, analysis and comparison of the 'raw data' (Denscombe 2003: 119).

Presentation and analysis of findings

After coding the questionnaires it appeared that the findings could be grouped into 3 main themes:

Quantitative comparisons of pupil and staff data.
Qualitative outcomes of pupil and staff data.
Flaws in the study and arising issues.

These findings will be examined in turn with accompanying analysis.

Quantitative comparisons of pupil and staff data
Twenty five questionnaires were given out to the mixed group of Year 8 pupils and yielded a 100% response rate. Of the 10 questionnaires handed to staff, 9 were received providing a 90% response rate. As response rates are reported as problematic the decision to be present was seemingly justified. Such a strong response rate perhaps reflects that the overall design of the questionnaire was time and language appropriate for the pupils and the presence of the researcher to mitigate misunderstanding was worthy of merit. Staff response was equally encouraging which may show that their questionnaire was similarly appropriate.

Both questionnaires contained a question relating to frequency of self/peer assessment use. All subject teachers returned the answer of 'often'. A total of 18 pupils from the 25 recognised participation in self or peer assessment. These corroborating figures suggest that the DCSF (2008) strategy has been implemented in some way in this school. Pupils identified a range of subjects where they took part in evaluation: PE and English were the most mentioned by both genders however, apart from these, boys referred to only maths, science and business studies while girls identified a greater range in adding French, music and drama. In view of the fact that all classes are mixed gender it is difficult to suggest reasons for this difference. However, the question asked for the subjects they used self/peer assessment in the most. It is therefore possible that the boys merely decided that the other subjects were not as frequent in their activities. 7 pupils answered that they were never asked to consider their own or anyone else's work (n=4 boys, 3 girls). All were currently in bottom sets for English, maths, science and PE. Potentially this could point to an issue, chiefly because the huge gains for low achievers, as reported by Black and Wiliam (1998a: 54), may be being minimalised by lack of practice. It must also be considered however, that although the researcher described self and peer assessment prior to the task, the language used may not have been clearly understood by the pupils resulting in 'embarrassment' (CPAL 2007) a 'lack of confidence' and inability to answer accurately (Haydn in Capel et al. 2006: 332).

Broadly speaking, quantitative findings from staff and pupils validate the fact that this school is using elements of AfL, including self and peer assessment, on a regular basis. Pupils have identified the majority of subjects, as advocated by the National Curriculum (2007), however, if subjects have not been named this may be because pupils have not undertaken any recognisable activities recently. Staff have elucidated a variety of reasons why self/peer assessment is not always used; these will be examined shortly.

Qualitative outcomes of pupil and staff data.
When questioned as to which skills might be both gained and enhanced via self/peer assessment, teachers reported a range of cognitive and affective behaviours. Communication and building knowledge and understanding were the most consistent answers given. 89% (n=8) of teachers rated these as the top two skills. Other cognitive skills of evaluation and observation were specified by 4 teachers as being both attainable and improvable. This relates well with studies reviewed by Black and Wiliam (1998a: 21-24) and Ruddock et al.'s (2006: 26) work thus providing validity of findings which have remained consistent over 12 years. The gamut of affective skills and behaviours was similarly consistent with research. The following chart (figure 1) denotes the responses from teachers concerning the affective domain.

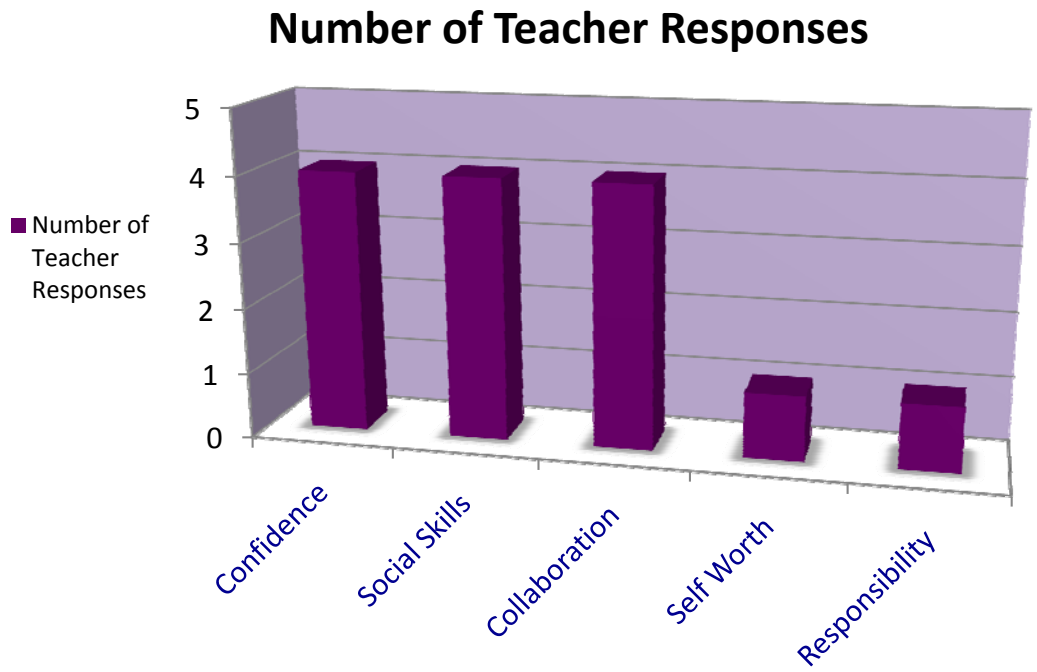

Figure 1: Number and Diversity of Teacher Responses Regarding Affective Behaviours

All teachers' answers fell within at least 3 of the 5 categories. Johnson (2004), Ross and Starling (2008) and Sebba et al. (2008) all reported similar findings from their work, potentially showing that this local school is concurrent with others both at home and abroad. It perhaps also shows that staff may be in touch with their pupils, showing a willingness to engage with them individually as opposed to treating them 'like a statistic' (Ruddock et al. 2006: 13). Possibly if staff were only interested in summative assessments such as incremental testing these observations would not have come to the fore in such supportive numbers.

Despite this perhaps supportive evidence, another, admittedly more cynical idea arises. Arguably it is possible that resource materials and training have informed teachers that this is what is expected as a result of using self/peer assessment. They may conceivably be paying lip service to the strategy by incorporating activities into lessons while not actually using it to inform learning in subsequent sessions. It is entirely possible that practices are falling short of being AfL in its purest sense because they are 'enacted in a procedural, ritualistic manner.' (Swaffield 2009: 4). Although not part of this study, general observation by the researcher (in PE lessons particularly) highlighted this; pupils were not questioned about their ideas of progress until the end of the module. How this could inform learning for subsequent different sports and activities was not explained or alluded to in any way, making the researcher doubtful as to the true values held by teachers in this school and prompting this investigation. Concurrence with Harlen's (2007: 44) study appears to be inevitable in that although teachers perhaps value self/peer assessment they do not actually use it to help pupils plan their next steps.

When teachers were asked why they would not use self/peer assessment, again a variety of answers were forthcoming. In support of literary evidence (Sadler 1998, Torrance and Pryor 2002, Ofsted 2008) teachers cited pressure of targets, lack of time, lack of trust and capability of their pupils as reasons why they would use other forms of assessment (such as questioning or observation) to monitor learning. In further endorsement of literature was the comment that pupils must have some knowledge of evaluation procedure and dialogue before effective feedback can be given and received. This suggests the teachers recognise that an element of 'training' must be undertaken and practiced before peer assessment in particular, in order that pupils avoid offensive comments and inappropriate feedback (Ruddock et al. 2006, CPAL 2007), thus providing honest, correct and effective assessment (Johnson 2004). Incorporating this 'training' into the curriculum could prove interesting due to the constraints of time already mentioned, however, if this could be offset by speedier learning, as advocated by Ruddock et al. (2006: 23-24) then perhaps teachers might be willing to accept the short term pain for long term gain. The idea of 'sacrificing' small sections of the curriculum to facilitate confidence in knowledge and understanding (as advocated by teachers in Black and Harrison's 2001: 7) study may also be a way forward, however this may conflict with teachers' ideas of progress.

One teacher reflected that her own confidence was low in relation to managing self/peer assessment aspects, thus she felt she needed more practice in order to gain confidence. This teacher perhaps embodies Black's assertions (2007: 4) that teachers need much time and regular, 'sustained support' from colleagues in order to prevail against failures. Swaffield's (2009) summation that teachers face a context that encourages 'rushed curriculum coverage, teaching to the test and a tick box culture' does not appear to sit well with the concept of learning from failure. If this is to be at the heart of real learning for pupils, then arguably, it should be at the heart of learning for staff too, however, some might suggest this is direct anathema to the summative culture dominant in education today.

When asked how much staff believe pupils value self/peer assessment the majority (n=6) concluded that pupils do value it. One teacher had 'no idea' whether they valued it or not and the remaining staff did not answer the question in a manner in which it was intended (a possible flaw in the language used perhaps). In an attempt to elicit pupil values, answers concerning why they thought they were asked to participate in

self/peer assessment, and whether teachers, peers or selves are best for highlighting strengths and weaknesses were combined. 15 pupils said that they were asked to participate in this way because they could improve. 7 pupils said that it was because they (as pupils) needed to know how they were doing. These figures tentatively suggest that pupils know that this strategy will make a difference to their a) improvement and b) self knowledge. They also broadly agree with findings from Dann (2002: 108-109), which helps with validity of the results. In terms of strengths and weaknesses most (n=14) believe that the teacher knows best about what can be done to improve. 8 pupils believed in themselves and only 3 believed in the assessment from their peers. Analysis of these results revealed mixed gender and mixed ability preferences for each i.e. there were no correlations relating to whether the answer was from a boy or girl, or whether they were top, middle or bottom sets. These are in support of Black and Wiliam's findings (1998a) where pupils, regardless of their gender, age or ability, made improvements. However, the pupil results from this study probably do not comprehensively describe how, or even whether, the pupils see the value in self/peer assessment activities. Defining value may be problematic and mean different things to pupils and staff, hence the attempt to simplify the pupils' questions in order to ascertain their thoughts may have been commendable but ultimately worthless without adding some form of definition for them. It is questionable as to whether pupils knowing they improve at something equates with value because pupils may suppose that all school activities are there to help them improve in 'something', even if they do not know what that 'something' is. Teachers were able to comment on the changes to cognitive and affective skills in order to measure their ideas of 'value' in this study however, pupils were not given the same opportunities: leading to a fundamental flaw.

Flaws in the study and consequent implications.
Analysis of the data provided by the study has indicated that several flaws are apparent. The issue of value for the pupils has already been mentioned but there are others that have arisen as a result of critical thought and reflection after the initial collection of data.

Some of the issues have arisen from language deficiencies, not in a way to affect understanding of the question per se but rather in that the vocabulary has not provided a specific, transparent answer. An example of this is in question 1 on the staff questionnaire. Although all staff answered 'often' as to their frequency of use of self/peer assessment it is now clear that this is a rather vague measurement. Staff may have differing ideas as to the numerate value that 'often' might have. The pupil variables were more definite and perhaps easier to consider, the staff question should have been the same to facilitate stronger comparison. Even though both the pupil and staff questionnaire were piloted and the subjects consulted afterwards, it was not apparent that this was an issue until critical appraisal was introduced.

Additionally, some answers have led to further questioning being required in order to fully understand the thoughts of staff. This may be most apparent in the question concerning staff thoughts on how much pupil's value self/peer assessment activities. Although the response was a favourable one (thus supporting existing evidence) the question as to how they recognise this positivity and what attributes they attach to 'value' rises as a result, thus perhaps questioning the validity of their replies.

Thus, it emerges that although the questionnaires have some value in supporting empirical evidence, they alone, in the existing format, are not sufficient to answer the question posed for this study. Clearly, staff were able to apply ideas regarding cognitive and affective improvements to the concept of value while the pupil questions did not truly reflect their concept. Perhaps in the light of this a question including a 'tick all that apply' list would be pertinent to the study, together with a brief discussion or definition of what constitutes 'value'. Following the examination of several reviews e.g. Black and Wiliam (1998a), Sebba et al. (2008) and Flutter and Ruddock (2004) it transpires that the majority of studies including children have an element of direct pupil contact (in the form of interview or focus group). At a time when there is 'unprecedented national and international support for the idea of listening to young people' (Ruddock and McIntyre 2007: 3) this study would probably have benefited from this additional method of qualitative data collection. It would have given the chance to tease out more precise answers, especially from the pupils.

Conclusions and implications

The aim of this study was to ascertain if the values held about self and peer assessment were similar for teachers and pupils. Because this forms a key element of the Assessment for Learning Strategy (DCSF 2008), arguably one of the strategies most likely to affect classroom practice in contemporary learning arenas, I felt it pertinent to investigate whether a typical local school's pupils and staff had similar outlooks. Staff identified many of the improvements to cognitive and affective domains drawn together through reviews, studies and projects such as Black and Wiliam's (1998a), James et al.'s (2006) and Blanchard's (2009). This consolidates the existing evidence and probably illustrates staff values reasonably well. However, although attempting to safely follow the 'dos and don'ts (Flutter and Ruddock 2004: 143-144) of questionnaires for children: keeping it short, allowing space for writing, a mix of open and closed questions and simple phraseology (the latter of highest importance) the values of the pupils were not pinpointed very well thus making it difficult to compare with those of the staff. Thus, although questionnaires can form a basis for research, if this study were to be repeated, and time was less constrained, it seems sensible to follow the leads of key researchers in this field and include an opportunity for interview or focus group.

It is important to understand how pupils 'make sense of assessment' (Dann 2002: 109) and how they see themselves as learners because this may ultimately lead to more cooperative classrooms and better teacher/pupil relationships. If Black and Wiliam's assessment for learning work could be seamlessly joined with the late Jean Ruddock's pupil voice ideas and Robin Alexander's (2007) dialogic principles, and somehow be absorbed by teachers and pupils, then teaching and learning would, in all probability, be a completely different experience for all concerned. However, until this unlikely time, ongoing research, support for teachers (new and experienced) and the understanding that it might take 'years before change becomes embedded' (Black 2007: 4) in school practice appears to be the way forward. Further implications for the future possibly include the fact that it may be difficult for those who view summative labelling practices as 'the learning equivalent of pulling up the growing plant in order to check its roots' (Black 2007: 4) to be reconciled with those who believe teaching young people to be 'successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens' is 'nonsense' (Woodhead 2009: 7). But just because something is difficult does not mean we should give up trying. As to whether teachers really do know best: probably, but possibly not for much longer.

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What Effects Does Outdoor Education Have on Children's Behaviour?

Gemma Leigh

Abstract

This research project explores the ways that children's behaviour is affected by outdoor education, with a particular emphasis on the children who are more disruptive when learning in a mainstream classroom setting. The nature of children's behaviour was considered alongside approaches to outdoor learning in order to form the theoretical basis for the research. A small-scale research project was then carried out to further investigate the link between outdoor education and children's behaviour. This involved observations of children both indoors and outdoors during lessons. Meaningful insights into teachers' opinions of the behaviour of their own class in outdoor settings were compiled from questionnaires and this was later triangulated when children discussed the teacher's views in an unstructured interview. Questionnaires were filled out by teachers from a range of different education based settings including schools, outdoor pursuit centres and forest schools. Despite a fairly low participant response rate some meaningful information was still gained from all aspects of the research and could be triangulated in order to provide a clear view. The research concluded that disruptive behaviour is less of an issue when the children are engrossed in outdoor education on a regular basis; however it needs to be effectively integrated into a school's curriculum in order for it to really have any positive effects.

Introduction

Behaviour: the word itself is one which we all think that we understand, but when looking further into it do we really know what behaviour is? The Oxford Advanced English Learner's Dictionary (Hornby 2000: 244) defines behaviour as 'the way somebody or something acts or functions in particular situations.' I found it interesting that in this short and concise definition of the word it was specified that behaviour changes in different situations. This sparked my interest to investigate the effects that outdoor education (a different situation) can have on children's behaviour.

When I began thinking about the kind of research that I wanted to do, I asked several different teachers what they thought about outdoor education. I was shocked to hear how little time many teachers spend outdoors with their class. One teacher (Jones 2010) said, 'I very rarely take my class outside because they are too naughty.' I found it hard to believe that the entire class in question would misbehave when taken outside; this led me to want to research the changes in behaviour when children are in an outdoor setting. When I began looking at information from outdoor education facilities it appeared that many of them believe that 'the change in environment can facilitate learning' by removing "behaviour disordered students" from the classroom setting which they may already identify with failure; thus their behaviour will be improved when learning outside in a more natural setting (Lappin 2010). If this is the case then why are teachers not willing to educate their children outdoors more regularly?

This provided a basis which was the influence for the project as I wanted to investigate the effects that outdoor education can have on behaviour. The aim of this small-scale research project was to explore the link between children's behaviour and outdoor

education. I wanted to see the effects, if any, that learning in a more natural environment can have on the more 'disruptive' members of the class, as these few individuals seem to be the ones preventing the teachers from wanting to take their children outdoors more regularly.

According to Cooper (1996) 'disruptive behaviour' is when a child is 'uncooperative and prevents themselves and other children from working in class', this is supported by a report written by Creative Education (2010) who add that disruptive behaviour 'prevents children achieving to the best of their ability'. Thus when discussing disruptive behaviour throughout this project I am looking at the 'somebody' acting in a way which distracts and de-motivates other children, preventing them from fully achieving in their learning.

Before beginning the research I wanted to be clear on the term 'outdoor education' and what I perceive its meaning to be. There are many different views, definitions and opinions concerning 'outdoor education' and exactly what it is. A report by the Outdoor Education R and E Centre (2009) states the different definitions that the term can have, including physical educational based activities or educational based activities from wider sources. For the purpose of this project, I have seen outdoor education to mean any school based activity, lesson or curriculum enrichment which takes place outside of the school building; this could either be on the playground or other areas of the school grounds or further afield on a school trip.

After establishing a clearer understanding of both behaviour and outdoor education I was able to examine the two aspects together to begin to look at how they can go hand in hand. Over the past few decades many different theories of behaviour management have come into practice. But does changing the environment for a child affect the way in which they behave in school?

It is widely thought that the best way to ensure good behaviour in a classroom is through a well planned, well structured, interesting lesson which takes place in a safe and exciting environment (Stone 1990 and Hewett 1998). If this is the case then it poses the question why, over the past few decades, in this country have we taken to teaching most lessons constrained within the walls of the classroom? In some areas of the country outdoor or forest schools are now being set up to enable children to learn in their natural environment, using natural materials, making lessons much more interesting, practical and applicable to life outside of school. Throughout this project I looked at the effects that these schools have on the behaviour of children and whether or not children's behaviour is affected by outdoor education.

Literature Review

The review of literature focussed on behaviour management techniques and reasons why children behave in the way that they do and also upon outdoor learning, the reasons for it being useful to children and the influences that it can have on their learning. These two sections were seen mostly as separate concepts, but included where possible links between the two. It was rare to find published sources looking at the effects of behaviour when outdoor education is concerned. Most of the literature came from original theory from decades ago as the basis for more modern ideas. Most of the research from this area was found in journals and a lot of the other research was carried out in the USA. When looking at outdoor education, I found a lot of the

research was carried out in Finland, a country where outdoor education is more prevalent than elsewhere.

Behaviour is a very important contributing factor towards effective teaching and learning in any classroom; if behaviour is not managed effectively, it is very difficult for in depth learning to occur (Skinner 1957). In order to analyse the effects that outdoor education can have on children's behaviour, I felt that it was important to have a clear understanding of the ways that children behave, the reasons for their behaviour and theories concerning behavioural difficulties in children.

In 1949 Skinner proposed his theory that children learn behaviour through operant conditioning, whereby they must learn that positive behaviour relates to receiving rewards (Jarvis et al. 2004). In his later work Skinner (1953: 23) went on to say that all behaviour is emitted not elicited and that all behaviour is caused by something. He described this 'cause' as an independent variable and the effect (the behaviour) as a dependent variable. Thus Skinner (1953: 25) stated that all behaviour is predictable because if you closely 'take note of and analyse' the causes (for example, what is going on in the classroom) you can predict how the children will behave in relation to these causes (the outcome of their behaviour; be it positive or negative). He believed that if teachers closely follow what is going on in their classroom at all times they will be able to predict the changes that will elicit a change in a child's behaviour and therefore will be able to act upon this to pre-empt bad behaviour before it occurs. However all classroom practitioners today will know that with the number of things going on in a classroom it is not possible to be able to follow all of the causes and therefore act upon a situation before disruptive behaviour occurs (Frude and Gault 1984).

According to an article written in 1974 (Swaim) Skinner stated that his theory of operant conditioning rests squarely in the behavioural tradition. The theory has later been described as a mechanistic approach which emphasises the importance of 'stimuli from external, natural environments'. This approach sees man as an 'organic machine that works from the environment', thus in terms of behaviour humans need a natural, outdoor environment in order to behave in the best way possible to them (Kids Development 2008). It is thought that Skinner's method required manipulation and 'environmental stimuli' in order for individuals to reinforce working towards a predetermined goal (Swaim 1974). Thus if targets for a particular pattern of behaviour are set, the child will require this kind of natural reinforcement and being in touch with their natural environment in order to reach their full potential and meet the required targets.

Many people today (Adams 2009, Knight, 2009, Waite 2010) believe that children are not only well behaved in order to receive a reward, be it intrinsic or extrinsic, but some children will behave differently in different settings or when involved with different people. It is now known that there is more to behaviour than Skinner originally thought (Armitage and Conner 2001).

In 1959 Rogers (Russell and Jarvis 2003: 44) proposed his humanistic approach to behaviour. Rogers suggested that humans are primarily motivated to become the 'best human being' that they can. Rogers believed that humans need to be in touch with the natural environment in order to be able to grow to their full potential. Although this is mostly done subconsciously, Rogers believed that all human beings do this throughout their lives. In order to reach their full potential human beings are required to behave in

the most appropriate way. Rogers stated that providing all children were in 'touch with nature and the realisation of their need to actualise' they will behave well in school. Rogers later stated that some children can become slightly 'out of touch' with nature at times in their lives, thus the job of a teacher is to play the role of learning facilitator in order to ensure that maximum learning occurs. This aspect of the humanist approach to learning will only be successful if the learning environment is adequate and children do not feel threatened by external factors (Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development 2011). These theories form the basis from which more current research into understanding behaviour and behaviour management are derived.

In 1984 Paley published some research which suggested that children are more likely to engage in more complex peer play outdoors rather than indoors, he suggested that this can affect their behaviour in different ways. Around this time outdoor education began to become more popular in schools in different countries such as Finland and Denmark (Tornio Adventure 2007). Outdoor education appears to be a new concept which is becoming more popular again (Knight 2009: 2). Obviously 'in the past before schools looked the way they do today', children did learn outside and 'lessons took place in a more natural setting' due to a lack of modernised buildings and the funding that schools have today, this is still the case in many other areas of the world. This makes it somewhat surprising that in England we are only just beginning to see the benefits that outdoor learning can have for children and it is now becoming increasingly popular in schools today; with some schools, known as forest schools, being set up particularly for this purpose (Garrick 2004).

There are many benefits that outdoor education has to offer (Waite 2010: 112),

> '...learning outdoors addresses broad aims for education such as physical wellbeing, emotional and social wellbeing and deeper levels of learning.'

In addition to this, outdoor learning also simply roots children into nature (Beames and Ross (2010: 95). If children are learning about leaves, why take the time and effort to do this inside when they could be outside with the leaves in their natural setting (Waite 2010)?

Within existing research, there is a strong theme related to the connection between children's education and their use of the outdoors. According to Senda and Kuwabara (2007) and Waite (2010) a reduction in the amount of time that children spend outdoors whilst at school has significantly affected their mood and altered other aspects of their livelihood, including the amount of energy and concentration that they have.

Beames and Ross (2010: 95) point that, 'learning should be rooted in an engagement with the 'real world,' rather than a world constrained within the classroom, it becomes apparent that children will automatically learn more if they do engage with the environment (Munoz 2009: 14). It is interesting to link traditional and modern theories of behaviour and the best ways to manage behaviour with the concept of outdoor learning. Do they fit well together and should an outdoor environment have a positive effect on children's behaviour?

In 2007, Chawla (cited in Munoz 2009: 16) carried out extensive research into the effects that the use of the outdoors as a child can have on 'environmental attitudes' as

an adult. This research showed that there are significant links between childhood outdoor experiences and behaviour as an adult. Wells and Lekies (2007) research (Munoz 2009) stated that adults who spent more time in the outdoors as a child are generally calmer in their adulthood and still enjoy outdoor pursuits thus not only does outdoor education improve health for children but it can have lasting, life changing effects later in life.

More recent studies have begun to look into the effects that outdoor learning can have momentarily on children's behaviour during the time of the lesson. Kerry (2011: 196) further developed Munoz's (2009) ideas to go on to suggest that more recent studies are beginning to understand the 'behavioural decisions associated with children's activities and the use of outdoor spaces'. Kerry suggested that the children make a subconscious decision as to how to behave when they are outdoors, however this is influenced by the change in environment, this links to Skinner's theory of operant conditioning discussed previously.

When linking the research on outdoor education with that on behavioural issues, there are some things that suggest reasons for children being 'calmer in a more natural environment' (Paley 1984). In 2004, Hughes (cited in Plummer 2009: 244) looked at the effects of open-air schools in Germany, similar to forest schools which we have in the United Kingdom and the effect that these types of schools have on children's attitudes and behaviour. He linked the idea of children getting more physical activity with higher levels of concentration and an improvement of overall grades at the end of each key stage. However, does occasional outdoor learning effect children's behaviour instantly? Do children behave differently for the lessons which take place outside?

About twenty years ago, the Elton Report into discipline in schools (Department for Education and Science [DES] 1989) found that teachers were mostly concerned about the cumulative effects of disruption caused by persistent, but individually 'relatively trivial incidents of misbehaviour' (Hart 2010: 353). Recent research agrees that teachers today still find these types of behaviour the most disruptive to the class as a whole. The 2005 Ofsted report (2005: 56) lies in accordance with this view as they state that 'low-level disruption is the most common form of poor behaviour,' which is believed to have the most cumulative effects on learning. Reasons for this 'low-level disruption' should be assessed in order to discover whether or not outdoor learning can have effect on this.

According to Dix (2009: 132) most cases of regular disruptive behaviour caused by an individual pupil are due to; lack of understanding of the given task; boredom due to a task which has not engaged the pupils or showing off to impress and fit in with friends and peers.

When looking at the link between the causes of disruptive behaviour and what outdoor learning has to offer, it becomes apparent that the two go hand in hand. Knight (2009: 2) discusses the effects of 'a lack of fresh air' and 'freedom of movement', that children can experience when spending all day learning within the constraints of the classroom, can have on their behaviour and therefore on their learning. A study by Margaret McMillan in 1999 (cited in Knight 2009: 45) noticed the positive effect that outdoor nurseries can have on young children. It is thought that the freedom to move in an open space enables the children to be much more active and 'let off steam' as well as learning more effectively through investigation.

There is the need to investigate the effect that children's engagement with an activity can have upon their behaviour. Bridgwater Centre for Education (2011) began the development of forest schools in England in the 1990s following a trip to Denmark in 1994. Whilst in Denmark they saw 'children playing outside in the woodlands'. Bridgwater saw the benefits that working outdoors in a more natural environment had to offer, including improved self-esteem; confidence; well-being and behaviour. These are all elements which were later addressed in the Every Child Matters documentation (DCSF 2004).

The Bridgwater Centre (2011) went on to discuss the positive effect that outdoor learning can have on children's engagement during an activity. If the children are left to come up with the ideas to drive what happens, rather than being 'prescribed the curriculum' they will be much more engaged in an activity, thus their behaviour will be improved as they will be so engrossed in exploratory and investigative learning. This study went on to suggest that outdoor education also encourages creativity as children are more 'open and free to develop their own ideas' offering individuality and more 'personal development'. Children are free to 'initiate ideas' with the adults being used as learning facilitators to encourage the children's own thinking. Knight (2009: 63) suggested that if children are busy initiating their ideas and working in a creative way, they will be more interested in their activities, thus there is less room for disruptive behaviour. Whereas, if children feel that their environment offers 'insufficient challenge' they will seek to discover these challenges elsewhere and this is thought to be the most common cause of disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

The sources of literature which I have discussed during this review have brought up many issues which have confirmed my decision for my study on the effects that outdoor education has on children's behaviour. I have reviewed literature regarding theories of children's behaviour, the benefits of outdoor education and the links between these two issues. This has provided the baseline for my study regarding outdoor education in relation to behaviour. I have taken into account the different ways of improving children's behaviour and the reasons for disruptive behaviour, this has formed the basis for my study and the ways in which I intend to carry out my research. The lack of research published on the effect that outdoor education has on children's behaviour leaves my study quite open; however, taking into account the key points that have emerged throughout the reading, I intend to delve further into the matter in order to look at why outdoor education often has a predominantly positive effect on children's behaviour.

Research Methodology

The research carried out took place in two different settings in different areas of the country. One being a large first school in Suffolk with children ranging in age from three to nine and the other a small primary school in Lincolnshire, where the children range in age from three to eleven. The methods used for carrying out the research were observations, interviews and questionnaires. The observations were based on selected individual children whom were observed in different settings including outdoors and indoors. The questionnaires were filled out by a variety of teachers from different age phases within the two schools and these were triangulated during interviews with a selection of children who participated in the lessons which were observed. The nature of the research being carried out; to seek the views and opinions of staff on the effects that outdoor education has on behaviour and also to observe

and seek opinions of children in a similar area, brought up the complex issue of eliciting informed consent for ethical purposes. Before any of the research took place, the appropriate consent was gained from all participants according to Bishop Grosseteste University College's Research Ethics Policy (2008).

In hindsight I have realised my mistake of thinking about which methods to use before deciding my methodology. As an inexperienced researcher it took me a long time to gain an understanding of exactly what methodology is, as stated by Heppner et al. (2008: 56) for many people it takes several research projects before they fully understanding what a methodology is. However after completing the research I have a much clearer understanding of this aspect. The chosen methodology for the research was qualitative however some of the methods adopted a mixed-methods approach. Despite the different types of data, it all fits under the umbrella term of a qualitative research paradigm.

The decision to use interviews and questionnaires in order to gain qualitative data was considered to be the most pertinent method to obtain the most detailed and factual information and opinions of the participants. Qualitative data enables us to 'make sense of the data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation' (Cohen et al. 2007: 461). Despite the small scale of the research project, there are elements which in effect elicited quantitative data in the sense of 'reducing the facts to numerical analyses,' these aspects of my research came predominantly from the observations collected from some children in different environments (Bell 1989: 56).

I choose to use interviews as one of my methods of research due to the fact that 'interviewing is a very flexible technique' (Drever 2003: 1). The interviews that I chose to carry out with children as the interviewees were semi-structured in the sense that I had a format of which questions I wanted to ask and where I wanted the interview to go. However I wanted to gain high quality information from the children from their own perspective, thus the children were enabled to go off task slightly and give their own views and opinions on the matter, this worked well and produced some interesting results. Although there was a mixture of different styles of questions asked, most of the questions were open and 'elicited discussion' from the child participants. Drever (2003: 13) states that by asking open questions to young children in an interview you will get a more honest answer. The main questions were set beforehand in order to create the overall structure of the interview but the interviewees had a fair degree of freedom of what to talk about and how to express their views. The decision to undertake some group interviews with children meant that the children were given the time to discuss. Hopkins (2003: 109) suggests that when children are interviewed in groups the individuals 'spark themselves into sensitive and perceptive discussion' with each other. In effect this elicits a more accurate account and ideas are discussed more thoroughly in order to produce more effective results.

Questionnaires were the chosen method for gaining information from a variety of teachers. I wanted to discover their opinions through questionnaires and the participants were more likely to answer truthfully due to the anonymity involved, unlike with interviews. According to Hopkins (2003) questionnaires are easy to fill in and you can receive quick results from a larger number of participants, this enables the researcher, through analysis, to gain quantitative data for the project. The questionnaires were designed for self-completion to enable me to send off as a fairly large number in order to get as much feedback as possible (Verma and Mallick 1999).

Most of the questions on the questionnaire were closed questions in order to gain factual information from the participants, this gave them fewer variables which should enable the results to be analysed more simply (Burton et al. 2008). I managed to get back a sample of twenty questionnaires which were correctly completed.

Structured questionnaires were distributed to thirty teachers from a range of schools including the ones where the observations and interviews with the children took place. These were chosen in order to see a variety of thoughts from teachers from different areas and from different types of schools, including some which lend their curriculum towards outdoor learning and others which don't so much and also a small sample from schools abroad. The teachers also ranged in age and in the length of time in which they have been teaching in order to broaden the results and make the research more generalisible, this is a method suggested by Bell (1989) and Burton et al. (2008).

Despite being known as being a long, complicated method for carrying out research (Bell 1989: 88) observations were chosen for part of the research as it seems that for the purpose and style of the research being undertaken, they are the most suitable method for producing accurate and valid results. The observations required careful and meticulous planning in order to ensure that they were carried out in a precise and ethical way. The observations were carried out in two different schools. One class was observed in each school with a particular emphasis placed on three individual children from each of the classes. All of the children in the class had given consent beforehand and the observation was carefully carried out in order to affect the lessons taking place as little as possible (Bishop Grossteste University College 2008). I carried out pilot studies prior to the observations in order to work out the best way to record data and get the best of the research.

Two observations of each class took place on the same day. The children were first observed in a lesson inside and then later they were observed outside during an outdoor learning session. The focus of the observation was to record the children's behaviour in both situations, noting any incidences of disruptive or inappropriate behaviour. Observations were chosen in order to try to get a clear understanding of how and if behaviour changes when children are learning outdoors. Although it may have been more valid if the sample of individual children who were selected to be observed had been selected randomly (Hendricks 2006), due to the lack of time and need for quick information in this small scale project the children were chosen by their teacher for being particularly disruptive, in the hope that these children would produce more definite visible results for the research. The children from the school in which I have worked previously were chosen by the researcher as a select sample appropriate for the purpose of this study. After the observations had taken place, I then discussed the findings with the teachers in order to discover their opinions on the matter and what they had discovered or seen when teaching the class; this was useful for checking bias within the research and ensuring that it is generalisable to everyday life in the classroom (Hendricks 2006 and Cohen et al. 2007).

During the observations, I was careful to ensure that where possible the children in question were not disrupted in any way through being observed, however due to the inquisitive nature of the children they were interested in what I was doing in their classroom, thus it is possible that their behaviour could have been affected by the researcher being in the classroom. In hindsight if given the chance to do this again, I would perhaps have asked someone familiar to the children to be present in the

classroom carrying out the observations or I could have become directly involved in the lesson to prevent them asking questions about why they were being observed, however this again brings up more ethical issues surrounding the matter.

Analysis of Findings

For the purpose of this study all of the names of the children discussed within this section have all been changed to protect the identity of the children, random names have been allocated to each child to ensure the flow of the text for the reader.

The different methods of research that I used produced some interesting findings, most of which were expected given the reading that I had done prior to carrying out the research. However, there was one aspect which surprised me slightly and was unexpected. Through analysing and triangulating the data collected, links became apparent between the amount of time that children spend being educated outdoors and the way that the children behave. Through observing the children during a lesson in their classroom and then again when participating in outdoor learning I was able to see firsthand whether there were any changes in the way that they behaved in different settings.

Before the observations began, I did several pilot observations in order to find out the best ways to carry out my observations as I knew that if there was a lot going on at one time it would be difficult to keep a record of all three of the focus children in each setting. As suggested by Taber (2007: 127) this allowed me to plan my approach to carrying out the observations 'before too much time and effort had been committed', to an approach that does not work. During these pilot studies, I discovered that the types of behaviour which I observed in the classroom fitted into common groupings. I looked deeper into different types of behaviour in children and discovered that there are several ways of 'sorting' behaviour types. The ones which I found most relevant to my study and which covered every example of disruptive behaviour that I have seen in a school based setting were: aggressive, defiant, social and emotional disturbances as stated by Livestrong (2009). For the purpose of this study I came up with a definition for each of the categories to ensure that I was clear about which types of behaviour fitted into each category, this was taken from several different definitions in order to form one which was suitable for my study (Livestrong 2009 and Rogers 2006). Aggressive disturbances are where the child is engaged in physical altercations including damaging property and intimidating or having unwanted physical contact with peers. Defiant disturbances are vocal or physical disregard of classroom rules, ignoring or refusing to carry out instructions or devaluating the teacher's judgements. Social disturbances include interrupting discussions with off-topic information or engaging in private conversation and passing notes which are distracting other children from doing their work. The final category, emotional disturbances, includes temper tantrums and emotional distress which are distracting in the class.

The observations carried out on the six children from two different schools produced fairly similar results for each child; although this was a very small scale study, the fact that all results were fairly similar and went in line with each other for all six children implies that it could be valid in many situations (Bell 1989). In order to display the effects that outdoor learning had on the individuals chosen for the observations, I worked out the mean number of occurrences for each of the children. The graph below

displays the results for the average of all of the children for each category of behaviour type.

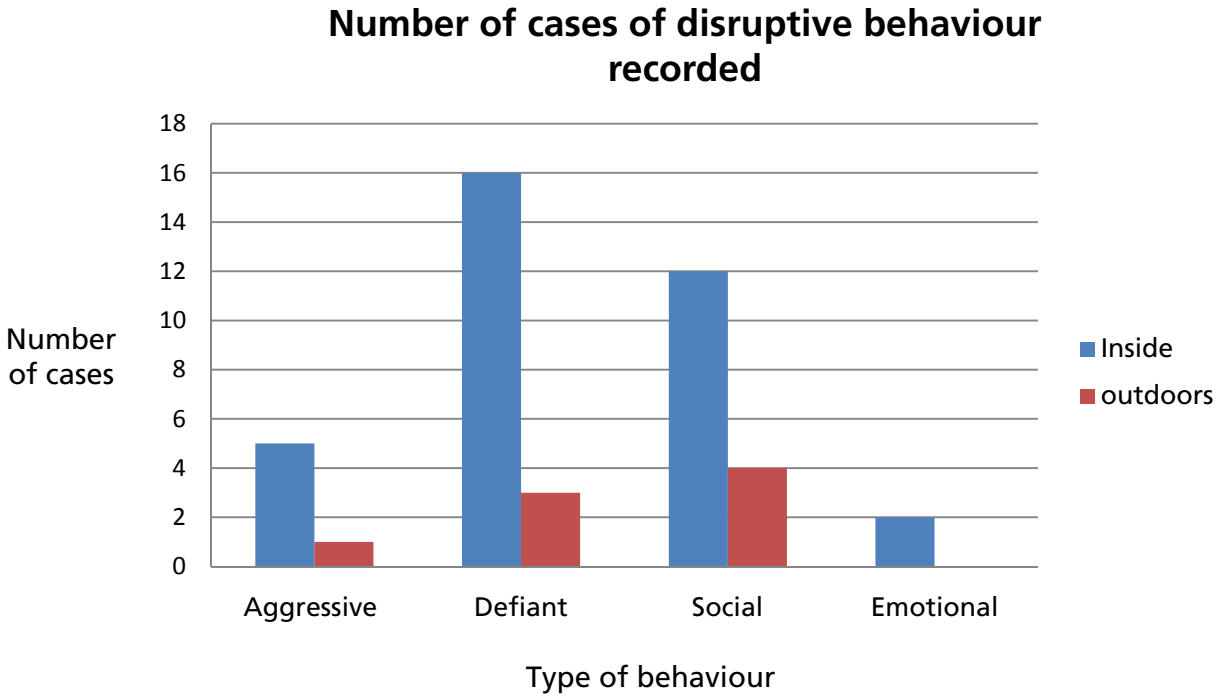

Figure 1: The graph shows the mean amount of disruptive behaviour recorded for each child both indoors and outside

It is clear from looking at the graph that the children showed less disruptive behaviour when learning in an outdoor setting, this is in line with research carried out by Beames and Ross (2010). It could be suggested that this was due to the children being much more interested in the lesson, due to its practical and explorative nature (Garrick 2004). There were no emotional disturbances observed with any of the children when learning outdoors. One problem that was noted was that it was more difficult to observe some types of behaviour when outside, for example it was more difficult to hear the children talking due to the large open space also there is less noise pollution outside because the children's voices travel and aren't contained within the classroom, this could have affected the results.

When learning outdoors the children's defiant behaviour was much improved, the graph shows a considerable drop in the average number of defiant disturbances observed during the study. One suggested reason as to why this happened is that children being observed were enjoying the work that they were doing outside and were engrossed in the activity, therefore they didn't inflict disruptive behaviour. In "Managing Challenging Behaviour" (Ofsted 2005: 10) it is suggested that children are highly unlikely to cause disruption in the classroom if they are 'enjoying the work' that

they are doing and are learning from it. Stereotypically many boys who are 'louder and more disruptive' enjoy being outside and 'actively investigating things' (Charlton and David 1993: 157). The interviews which were carried out with the children went in line with this as many of them stated that they enjoy learning outside and they 'get the chance to run around and have fun whilst learning' (Robert 2011). The aggressive behaviour observed during the study was mostly verbal aggression with just one case where a child threw a ruler at a peer; this was followed up by the teacher with the child missing part of his play time. A suggested reason for this could be that the children felt calmer when learning in an outdoor setting due to being 'closer to nature' and not in a strange and unnatural classroom (Plummer 2009: 275).

Whilst observing the children during lessons inside and outdoors I noticed that the disruptive children in the class were clearly better behaved and more on task when taken outside. However the class in general appeared to behave less appropriately, when looking at the progress of the children throughout the lesson, however, they seemed to all have clearly understood the tasks set and had all done what was expected of them. Senda and Kuwabara (2007) suggest that 'at first glance when taking children outside, teachers often panic due to the feeling of 'losing control' of the children, but often when you investigate further the children are on task. This seemed to be the case in the lessons I observed; the children were running about and speaking very loudly but this could have been due to the excitement of the task and the change in setting.

Whilst observing the different causes of disruption inside and outdoors, I noticed that the aggressive behaviour that was noticed whilst outside, although significantly less, was physical, whereas inside most of the aggression was produced in a verbal way. This could be due to the children having more space and feeling free to be more active. One child in their interview stated that 'when we are outside the teacher can't always see what we are doing so we can be naughty' (Lucy 2011). This could also be the reason for more physical violence when learning outdoors.

When analysing the data on the graph, I found it interesting that the most common cause of disruptive behaviour changed with the change of setting. When inside the type most often noted was "defiant" however in an outdoor setting, this changed to "social". This could be due to the teacher being more relaxed in the outdoor setting and allowing children to do their work independently thus there were not as many reasons for the children to be defiant (Waite 2010). The outdoor setting can allow for children to disrupt others more easily within a social group.

The questionnaires filled in by a sample of teachers were quite surprising. The main issue that I noticed when analysing this data was that all of the teachers believe that outdoor learning has significant benefits for children however when asked how often they take their classes outside in lessons other than physical education, the average was three times a year and only if 'the weather is nice'. This shocked me as if they see the benefits of outdoor education I couldn't understand why the teachers were not planning to make use of it more often, especially as the two schools in question have good outdoor provisions for all age children and plenty of space in different settings outside, one of the schools also has a very large field and woodland area which the children can access. So if the teachers aren't using the outdoor space very often, have they noticed a change in the children's behaviour on the occasions that they have been

outside? Many of the teachers answered yes to this question and felt that the children's behaviour is affected when outside.

From the observations carried out, the children's behaviour appeared to improve when involved in outdoor learning, however I wanted to find out more about whether or not the amount of time that a class spent outside affects behaviour. For this I would need a larger sample rather than just the two schools in the observations, thus this question was then added to the questionnaire for teachers. The results from the twenty completed questionnaires are displayed below in a pie chart to clearly represent the findings.

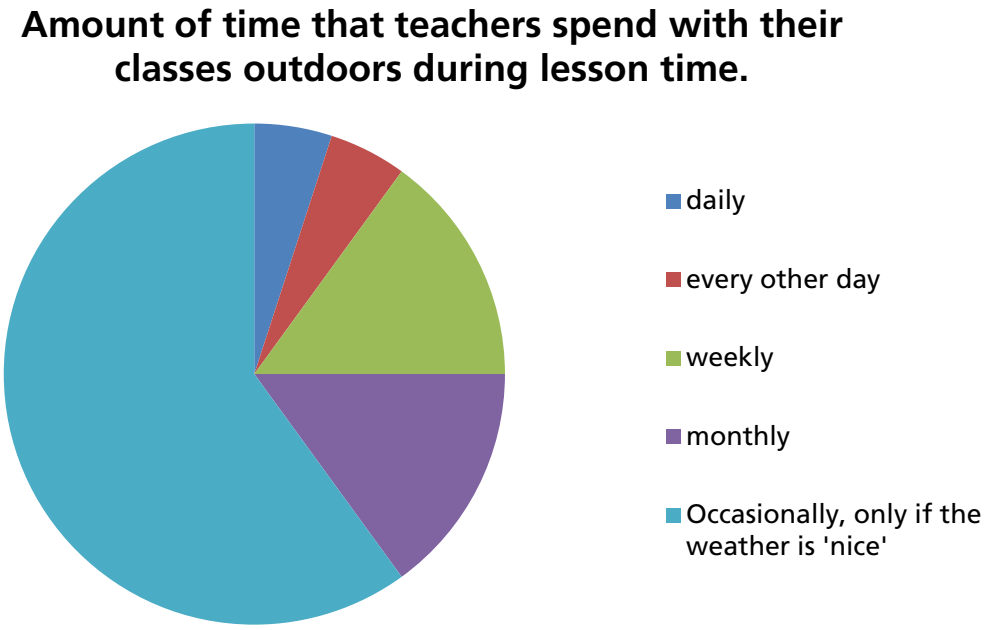

Figure 2: The amount of time that the teachers suggested they spend doing outdoor learning with their class

The chart clearly shows that the majority of teachers only plan lessons involving outdoor education occasionally if the weather is fair and most of these commented on the fact that this is only in the summer months. However due to the low sample of questionnaires which were returned this is not generalisable and further studies would need to be carried out. After being appalled by the lack of time that children in different schools are spending outside during lesson time, I wanted to find out about the views that these teachers have of their children's behaviour when spending time outdoors. The Venn diagram below (figure 3) displays the teachers' opinions on whether or not the behaviour within their class improves when they are outdoors compared to when they are inside. The teachers are colour coded in relation to their position on the pie chart above (figure 2).

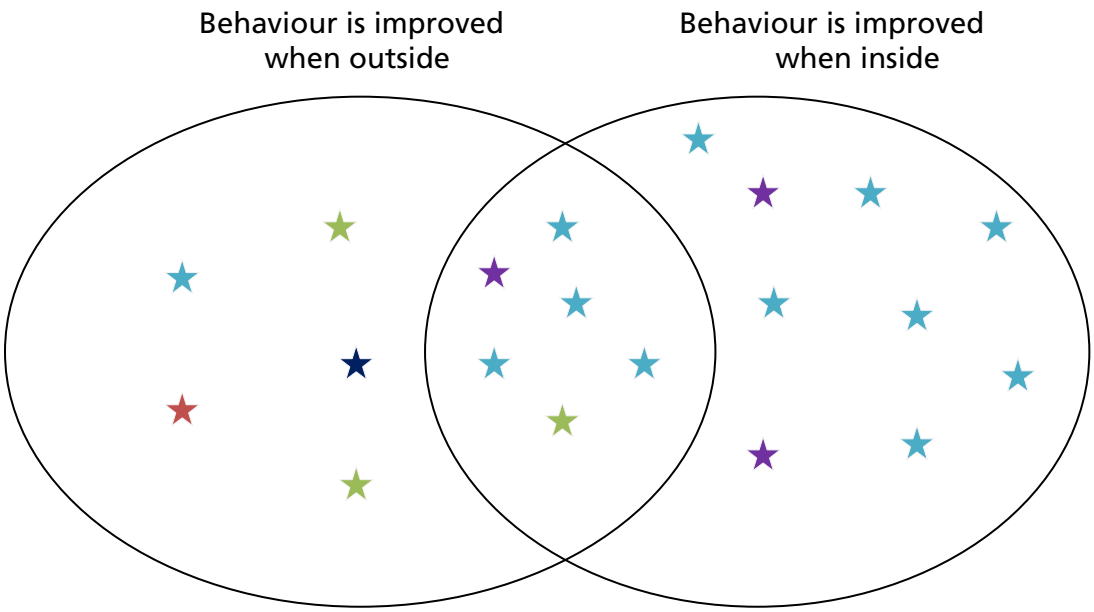

Figure 3: Teachers' opinions about pupils' behaviour inside and outside the classroom

When looking at the colour coding from the diagram above in relation to the pie chart displayed above, there is a distinct pattern in where the teachers placed themselves for this question in relation to how often they involve their classes with outdoor learning. The light blue points on the diagram show the largest percentage of teachers which were the group who only participate in outdoor education during the summer months when the weather is good. The teachers who take their children outside during lessons for at least one session every week were all placed in the section who felt that their children's behaviour improves when they are learning outdoors. This could well be due to the fact that the children are used to being outside, whereas for the ones who rarely get this opportunity, their time may be wasted with discussing rules when being outside and getting settled in a different setting (Garrick 2004: 65). Thus perhaps the children's behaviour is improved if children regularly participate in outdoor education and become familiar with it.

Once the information from the questionnaires had been obtained and analysed, I realised that there were several questions which were not directly used to support the research for my question. Thus some of the questions which were answered by teachers have not been mentioned in this write up. Johnson and Christensen (2008) state that, 'the segment of text must have meaning that the researcher thinks should be documented', thus any sections which did not have direct meaning in relation to this question have been missed out. However, this is not to say that they were not important and have been completely disregarded as many of them contributed towards the overall impression that I have obtained from each of the participants in this study and many of these sections also helped me to see what they are thinking in a less direct sense around the overall question.

After looking at the answers that the teachers gave in relation to the questionnaires, I used these to inform the interviews which I carried out with some children and I used

this for pupil validation. I undertook a group discussion where children interacted with one another on the subject of outdoor education and how they felt it helped them to learn in relation to their behaviour and that of their classmates and peers. The results for this showed that some children felt more relaxed outside and more 'able to learn'. Harry stated that 'if other children do mess around it doesn't distract the rest of us as much,' they discussed that this was because they were in a big, open space. Thus if some children misbehave the rest of the class will be not be affected by this (Plummer 2009: 198).

Robert also stated he thinks he 'gets on better when working outside because I usually enjoy the work more,' most of the other children agreed with this statement. However this of course is dependent upon the individual learning styles within the class and cannot be generalised for all children, but these children should have more opportunities than they are given in most schools to experience this form of learning style.

The study has shown that teachers who spend more time outside with their children have noticed an improvement in the behaviour of their class. From analysing the questionnaires completed by the teachers as part of the study, I would conclude that this is because the children who spend lots of time participating in outdoor education have become used to it and settled down, there is less excitement when they go outside and they are able to participate in more in depth learning at these times (Garrick 2004 and Beames and Ross 2010). They also have set ground rules and understand what they are and are not allowed to do during to these sessions. Thus this study showed that if outdoor learning is used often and is appropriately integrated into the school's curriculum it can improve children's behaviour and ensure a higher level of concentration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this research was to look further into the effects that outdoor education can have on children's behaviour in schools. I wanted to not only observe this for myself but also to investigate the opinions of teachers and children and their own experiences of outdoor education. The information obtained was gained using an adaptation of ideas read in the literature. My initial intentions were perhaps over ambitious given the time limitations and small scale nature of this study, however the results can be made relevant in many situations or could be used as part of further research into the effects that outdoor education can have on children's behaviour.

The observations enabled me, as a researcher, to see firsthand, the effects that outdoor education can have on children's behaviour in schools. I was able to compare the behaviour of individuals in different settings around the school in order to look at how their behaviour was affected by different environments. By gaining a larger sample of teachers' views from the questionnaires I was able to enlarge my sample for the research, which would not have been possible had I only used observations, due to time limitations. This also enabled me to have examples of the views and opinions from teachers working in different types of schools across not only this country but also some teachers abroad. Finally I then validated this by discussing what the teachers had thought with a small sample of children in the two schools where the observations took place. Here I discovered that the children had very similar thoughts to those of the teachers for many of the questions.

Although I had originally intended to look further into whether or not behaviour is affected by outdoor education and why this may be the case, I was shocked and interested during the research to discover the amount of time that teachers spend doing outdoor education, thus this was the cause for a small turn in my research direction part way through. The analysis of the findings showed some interesting points that the amount of time spent outdoors clearly affected the children's behaviour when in an outdoor setting. This could be due to the children gaining an understanding of the fact that they are outside for the purpose of the lesson and when doing this on a regular basis they will understand what is expected of them when outside and how to behave appropriately in this setting. In a sense it could also be that they calm down and are more relaxed and have got over the sheer 'excitement of being taken outdoors in a lesson'.

In conclusion, this research suggests that if outdoor education is well integrated within the primary curriculum and used on a regular basis, disruptive children are likely to behave better when outside. However the teacher will need to work hard to ensure that the whole class is on task and progressing in the way that it should be. If outdoor education is used regularly as part of the everyday curriculum, the children will benefit in many ways and there will be more opportunities to suit different learning styles within a class (Garrick 2004).

The implications of this study can be directly related to enhancing the life in any school by the teachers considering their use of outdoor education within their curriculum and perhaps involving their children in it. As this study showed it was particularly the more disruptive children in the class who benefitted more from outdoor education and it is often these children who are 'left out' when the teacher is considering planning (Spohrer 2002).

If I had more time, it would have been interesting to look further into the reasons for the change in behaviour in the children observed within the study. Also had this been performed on a larger scale, with a wider variety of participants, would the results show the same outcome? Also issues such as the self-fulfilling prophecy were not taken into account, could this be the reason for some of the behaviour of the so-called 'disruptive pupils? Do these stereotypes alter anything when the children are in a different setting?

Going back to the original definition of behaviour, discussed in the introduction; the Oxford Advanced English Learners Dictionary (Hornby 2000: 244) defines behaviour as 'the way somebody or something acts or functions in particular situations' it becomes clear how important the 'situation' is to the individual's behaviour. At the beginning of the project I was sceptical about the wording of this definition and how relevant it really is, however this small study has opened my eyes and made me more aware of the changes that can be elicited in a child's behaviour.

In order to gain more information as to why children's behaviour is altered by outdoor education, there needs to be much more research done in this area on a larger scale in order for it to be made generalisable. This could help us to understand more fully why children's behaviour is affected by outdoor education and the implications that this could have if outdoor education was fully integrated into a school's curriculum.

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A Critical Evaluation of Strategies Used by Teachers to Assist Children with Dyslexia to Read

Vicki Moore

Abstract

This research identifies strategies that teachers use to help children with dyslexia to read. On average two thirds of children in every class have dyslexic tendencies (Dyslexia Action 2009). Therefore this area of research is relevant to all teachers in ensuring they are aware of strategies to assist children with dyslexia to read. This research implemented a qualitative approach as the interest was in respondents' experiences rather than statistics. The methods used for this research were interviews and questionnaires; two teachers from a dyslexia friendly school were interviewed, this data was then used to inform questionnaires and the response rate for this research was poor. However there were still some strategies that the majority of respondents agreed had positive effects for children with dyslexia, such as, computer intervention, magnetic letters, word cards and coloured overlays. Although some strategies were identified, there is a need for more research to be done into methods to assist children with dyslexia, possibly through the use of more research being undertaken within dyslexia friendly schools. There is also a recommendation for more research to be completed regarding multisensory methods, as little research considers the effect they have on children with dyslexia. This project also raises the issue of the lack of knowledge that some teachers have regarding dyslexia. Therefore it is evident that more training needs to be given to teachers concerning dyslexia, to ensure those children can reach their full potential.

Introduction

This research project focuses on children with dyslexia and, in particular, how teachers facilitate their reading. The reasoning behind this topic stemmed from experience gained in schools. I had a valuable experience teaching a child with dyslexia, however initially I found that I did not have enough knowledge of dyslexia to teach this child effectively. By working closely with those concerned in school, I built up my knowledge and used some of the school's strategies to aid the child's learning. Nevertheless I felt it was essential that I had a greater knowledge and understanding of dyslexia in order to work alongside children affected by this within my teaching career.

10-15% of children have difficulties that would be described as clearly dyslexic (Lawrence 2009). However, could be as high as two thirds of children in every classroom (Dyslexia Action 2009). Therefore the likelihood of working with children who are dyslexic in my career is fairly high. As teachers will encounter a significant number of children with dyslexia, it is of high importance that every teacher can recognise dyslexia, and know how to help these children access the full curriculum (Crombie 2002: 230). This is the main reason for choosing this as the focus of my research.

Dyslexia can affect many different aspects of a child's life and therefore I needed to decide what aspect to focus on in detail for the purposes of this research project. Dyslexia is defined differently by all that have attempted a definition, however it is recognised that dyslexia mainly effects literacy skills, such as reading, spelling and writing but it also has an influence on phonological processing, working memory, processing speed, rapid naming ability and the development of cognitive skills (BDA

undated; BUPA, 2009; Rief and Stern 2010; Brunswick 2011). As most children with dyslexia have difficulties with reading (Frith 2002; Hultquist 2008; Williams and Lynch 2010), I felt that this would be a good aspect to research to coincide with the new initiative 'Reading by Six' (Ofsted 2010). Within this document it is emphasised that children should be reading at level 1A/2C when they are six, and children struggling need to have the support to overcome barriers. With this focus on reading, I believe it is important to have insight into the strategies that are used to help children with dyslexia to overcome these barriers. This does not mean that I believe reading is more important than any other aspect of dyslexia as it is vitally important to make an effort to overcome any problems that children with dyslexia may have in education. However, due to this being a small-scale research project it would not be possible or practical for me to focus on every difficulty that children have with dyslexia, therefore I am focusing specifically on reading.

During this project I will refer to the main ways of teaching children to read, phonological and Look and Say, and their benefits for children with dyslexia. I will also discuss other strategies such as the multisensory method, coloured overlays, and computer programmes. I will also briefly deliberate on the issue of the intervention that children with dyslexia need and who from. By the use of interviews and questionnaires in schools, I will build up a bank of strategies that schools use. These strategies will then be taken forward to help children with dyslexia that I will teach.

Literature Review

There is an extensive amount of literature around the area of dyslexia and reading. This literature review focuses on the literature relevant to this research; specifically the areas stated in the introduction. However, it is important to note that it does not incorporate all the literature around dyslexia and reading. It is significant to mention here that much of the literature available is from the United States of America. This may be because up to 20% of the population in US are dyslexic (Michigan Dyslexia Institute undated), compared to 10-15% of the UK (Lawrence 2009).

As mentioned in the introduction, the main ways of teaching children to read are through phonological methods or Look and Say methods. First, I am going to focus on phonological methods which involve noticing, thinking about and manipulating the different sounds in words or phonemes (smallest unit of sound) (Loh 2002). This process helps children to read because recognising the letter sounds means they are able to decode and sound out words (Morin 2010). In schools this training is received through phonics lessons, which are essential for children to read (Rose 2006; Fitzpatrick 2009; Ofsted 2010; Tremblay 2010). The importance of phonics lessons was made clear in the Rose Review (2006). This focus on systematic phonics in schools is supported by the Ofsted reports 'Reading by Six' (2010) and most recently 'Removing Barriers to Literacy' (2011).

Although the importance of phonics has been made clear, it could be seen as surprising that phonics is a strategy to help children with dyslexia. A characteristic of dyslexia is the difficulty to understand phonemes and sound out words (Rack 1994: 18; Reid 1998: 14; Huliquist 2008; Rose 2009; Williams and Lynch 2010). However it has been theorised that phonics can be very effective for dyslexic children (Hornsby 1984; Walton 1998: 3 Hall 2009: 15; Rose 2009; Savage et al. 2009). Cramer, Chief Executive Officer for Dyslexia Action (2009), states that most children with dyslexia respond very well to

phonics when it is taught correctly. This evidence makes phonics a credible strategy to help children with dyslexia.

As dyslexia is neurologically based (Habib 2000; Frith 2002) there is debate as to whether phonic intervention can have a positive effect on the brain. Richards et al. (2000) measured the brain activity in one group of 8 dyslexic boys and one group of 7 non-dyslexic children. They established that phonic intervention can reduce differences in brain activity between dyslexic and non-dyslexic children when reading. However I question the validity and generalisability of this research. In order for a study to be valid it needs to test what it intended to test (Marshall, 1997; Hinds, 2000). Although Rutter et al. (2004) found that dyslexia is significantly higher in boys; Richards' study should have had representation of dyslexic girls and also a bigger sample in order for the results to be generalised to the population. Against this, Shaywitz et al. (2003) claimed the left part of the brain used for phonetic decoding was inactive when reading. This research showed that phonics may not be the best intervention; however a year later Shaywitz et al. (2004) then found different results. After a year-long phonics intervention, there was an increase in activation of the left side of the brain and reading fluency for children with dyslexia. This indicates that phonics can have a positive effect on the brain activation of a child with dyslexia.

There have been more than 180 (and increasing) studies suggesting that phonics is the best way to teach reading to children with learning disabilities (Child Development Institute (CDA 2010). Ehri et al. (2001) looked at 52 of these studies and completed a significant meta-analysis; the information from all of these studies was collated and illustrated that phonics improves reading skills in all readers, including dyslexics. This is a substantial study as it draws the conclusions from a large number of studies, therefore it is difficult to dispute the results.

There has been acknowledgement that children with dyslexia may struggle with the phonics approach to teaching and therefore require different strategies in order to read. Brown, cited in Barker (2008), an expert in dyslexia and a head teacher of a special school, believes that phonics fails children with dyslexia and the morphological strategy (using pictures to attach meaning to morphemes, or word segments) should be used instead. However this is seen to be less effective than phonics (Cramer 2008, Dyslexia Action 2009). Oxford Learning Solutions (2008), reports that a lot of dyslexic children struggle with phonics because there is 'irregularity' in the relationship between letter patterns and the sounds within the English language. Reid (1998: 21) recognises that phonics can put even more pressure on their memories, when it is recognised that children with dyslexia have working memory difficulties anyway. A major disadvantage of phonics is some words cannot be sounded out and need to be taught by sight (Reid 1998: 21; Walton 1998: 4; BDA 2000).

Teaching children to read via the sight of the word is known as the Look and Say method, also known as sight teaching, or whole word reading. There has been much debate between phonics versus Look and Say and it will continue long into the future (Hall 2009: 15). The Look and Say method requires children to learn a whole word by its sight (Johnson and Johnson 1999: 330; Walton 1998: 4). The main strategy to teach the Look and Say method is by using flashcards with the word (sometimes sentence) that is being learnt, on it (Walton 1998:4; Johnson and Johnson 1999: 330; BDA 2000; Oxford Learning Solutions 2008) the word can then be repeatedly shown until the child has learnt it by sight. The British Dyslexia Association (BDA 2000), states that the flashcard

strategy can be taught in a dyslexia friendly way, by ensuring that the cards are connected in some way e.g. opposites, same beginning or same ending. They also stress that we should not bestow more than six words at a time to a child with dyslexia.

The Look and Say method can have benefits for example words can be recalled fairly rapidly, leading to a sentence being read fluently and quickly. This gives the child more of a chance to comprehend what they have read, whereas children who depend on phonics struggle with fluent reading, as they need to process each sound (Johnson and Johnson 1999: 330; Hall 2009: 76). Children using this method to read have higher reading levels than those being taught phonics, although when reading more complex words they can perform less well. These advantages have to be taken into consideration when deciding on the best way to teach a child with dyslexia to read.

The major disadvantage of the Look and Say method is that children cannot identify new words independently, if they have not been taught the sight of it (Johnson and Johnson 1999: 330). Children with dyslexia can have trouble with their memories (Lawrence 2009: 23) especially remembering what letters and words look like (Hultquist 2008: 35). Therefore this method can obviously put extra pressure on their memories as they are required to remember words and symbols in order to read them (Levy 2009).

An ideal teaching programme would combine the above two methods to improve reading (Levy 2009). Hatcher and Snowling (2002: 79) discuss that a link needs to be made between phonics and the written form of words (the Look and Say method). Reid (1998: 14) agrees that a combination of visual and phonic aspects is essential but it needs to be taught within a context for an effective teaching programme. Conversely, Cohen and Cowan (2007: 40) emphasise that no method is the correct way because every child learns differently; therefore it is the teacher's responsibility to assess what method will benefit that particular child.

Although Phonics and Look and Say are the main approaches to teaching children to read, there are other strategies that can be used to with these. The multi-sensory method involves using all of the children's senses, through the use of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic strategies to teach reading (Reason 1990; Thomson and Watkins 1990; Lawrence 2009: 14). A kinaesthetic activity, such as making letters out of 'plasticine, play dough or clay' gives children tangible memories of letters (Bradford 2008). The use of multisensory methods can be dated back to 1936 when Gillingham and Stillman created this approach to help children with dyslexia. This creation was based on the work of Orton and therefore was soon named the 'Orton-Gillingham method' (Ott 1997: 63). Oakland et al. (1998) and Campbell et al. (2008) found from their study that multisensory methods can significantly improve the reading of children with dyslexia. Nevertheless Campbell et al. (2008) openly admit that a limitation of their study is its validity. As there were only six participants in the study it cannot be generalised. In spite of this, these results are significant as the children in the study had resisted treatment beforehand so multisensory methods can be the only explanation for the improvement within reading.

The main advantages of multisensory strategies are that they allow children to learn via all their senses, giving them tangible memories to promote learning (Bradford 2008). The multisensory method can be implemented alongside a variety of teaching strategies, although it is mostly used alongside phonics by using strategies such as, finger tapping, and sounding out letters and words with magnetic letters (Campbell et

al. 2008). It can also be implemented by tracing around a letter while articulating the sound, (Reason 1990). It can be adopted via the Look and Say method by using the 'See it, say it, hear it and write it' strategy (BDA undated).

An increasingly popular strategy to help children with dyslexia read is the use of computers. Children with dyslexia respond well to computer intervention because they are motivated to read, it is individualised to the child, it creates an active learning environment, gives instant feedback and monitors their progress (Singleton 2009). There is also evidence that children with dyslexia significantly improve their reading skills after computer based intervention (Mioduser et al. 2000; Torgesen et al. 2009). However Olson et al. (1997) found within their research that computer intervention improved phonological awareness but led to failure to improve word recognition. It is important to note that this research is slightly out-dated and computer programmes may have improved significantly since this time.

There have been a number of studies completed on the effects of computer intervention. Singleton (2009) emphasises that the impact computer intervention has on children with dyslexia varies in studies, although he argues that there is evidence to show when targeted it can considerably improve reading and spelling skills in children with dyslexia. A limitation of this strategy is that children with dyslexia can find computers difficult to use and therefore become frustrated (Amiri 2006). The BDA (2000) state that some computer programmes are written specifically for dyslexic children, and should be used when possible to improve teaching.

Another strategy used to help children with dyslexia to read is through the use of a coloured overlay to make the text easier to read (Williams and Lynch 2010). Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (also known as Irlen syndrome) can affect 50% of children with dyslexia, it is a 'perceptual dysfunction' that can make black text on white paper very hard to read as it causes pattern glare (Irlen and Lass 1989). Within this significant research they created coloured overlays and discovered they could improve the visual element of text and significantly improve reading. Wilkins et al. (2001) found that coloured overlays improved the vision of text in more than 50% of their sample; additionally they found 5% of children read 25% faster when using them. Tinted glasses are also available with the child's preferred colour which work in the same way as the overlays and helps children with dyslexia dramatically with their reading (Christo et al. 2009: 114)

Not all studies show an improvement in reading with overlays. Evans et al. (1994) and Iovino et al. (1998) found coloured overlays did not make a difference to reading performances. The reliability of these two studies could be questioned as it could be possible that they did not have enough children within their sample with Irlen syndrome. This leads into the limitation of coloured overlays; they may only aid those with Irlen syndrome which is 50% of dyslexics (Irlen and Lass 1989). In spite of this the advantages are massive for many children with dyslexia. The National Reading Styles Institute (NRSI 2002) emphasise that it considerably improves visual discomfort and reading ability, such as helping with reversals of letters, comprehension, and reading speed and accuracy. It is dependent on the teacher to determine if this strategy has an impact on any child with dyslexia they teach.

It is crucial that children struggling with reading, including children with dyslexia, receive intervention to enable them to improve (Wadlington et al. 2008). Children with

dyslexia may receive intervention from different individuals; this may include the teacher or teaching assistant. Savage et al. (2009) claims that teaching assistants can have a significant impact on helping children to read, this study suggested that 2 out of 3 children can considerably improve their reading skills with intervention from teaching assistants. In spite of this in the Rose report for Dyslexia (2009) a recommendation was made for more specialist teachers in dyslexia to be trained. This will provide help for children with dyslexia from individuals with specialist expertise. Lawrence (2009) suggested that it is unrealistic to expect all teachers to go on a specialist course. As a result of Rose's (2009) recommendations the government announced that they are going to train 4,000 more specialist dyslexic teachers and other teachers will need to complete a course (Lipsett 2009). The government expect all teachers to have a good knowledge of dyslexia in order give children skilled one-to-one intervention. Despite this, Dyslexia Action (undated) and the Dyslexia Institute Limited (2011) are still making recommendations to the government for more specialist teachers and courses for other teachers and higher level teaching assistants. Overall, both teachers and teaching assistants need to work closely together to ensure children with dyslexia receive the best intervention possible. It depends on the organisation of schools, as to who will initiate the intervention that children with dyslexia need.

In conclusion, it is important to note that children with dyslexia will have different strengths and weaknesses, as they are all individual. This will mean that different strategies and teaching may be necessary for different children (Hall 2009) and this research will allow me to consider the range of strategies used in schools.

Methodology

This research project aimed to find the strategies that teachers use to assist children with dyslexia to read. As I required insight into the different strategies, I decided to take a qualitative approach with my methods. Qualitative methods provide rich and detailed data (Denscombe 2003: 280) to enable me to gain a thorough understanding of strategies to help children with dyslexia. Bell (2005: 7) states that researchers who adopt the qualitative approach are interested in respondent perceptions rather than statistics. This is extremely relevant to this study as I was interested in teachers' perceptions of the strategies they use. The best methods to gain this data were interviews, questionnaires and observations, as they are the most practical for a small scale study and allow for a deep understanding through seeing/discussing the strategies. However, observation was not appropriate, as you cannot observe everything that happens (Babbie 2010: 324). Therefore I felt interviews and questionnaires were the best methods to gain this insight into respondent experiences and consequently obtain the qualitative data I sought.

Stake (2010: 14) postulates that researching teacher practice produces qualitative data as it is 'interpretive, experiential, situational and personalistic' to each respondent. As I valued all the different experiences that teachers had, I did not want to reduce these to statistics, but instead gain an in-depth understanding. This increases the validity of the findings; in order for findings to be classed as valid they need to measure what it intended to measure (Hinds 2000). Consequently qualitative findings are valid, as detail is given that would not be interpreted with quantitative approaches (Covington 2008: 266). I have also endeavoured to increase the validity of my findings through the methods chosen, which will be discussed further on.

Implementing research through qualitative methods means the results cannot be generalised to the whole population, as it collects in-depth data from specific situations and the researcher cannot be sure that others would produce that same data (Lauen and Tyson 2009: 79). There are also difficulties regarding the validity and reliability of the study. Qualitative results can be biased due to answers being influenced by the researcher or interpreted incorrectly, which makes it difficult to replicate the research (Blaikie 2010: 191). When research cannot be replicated other researchers cannot check the validity and reliability of the results (Lauen and Tyson 2009: 79; Opie 2004: 151). In order to increase the validity and reliability of the results for this study, I have discussed how I have decreased the chance of bias within my methods discussed further on.

I used two methods in order to achieve triangulation within my approaches. Triangulating methods gives greater confidence that the findings are accurate and valid (Gilham 2000a; Masters Programme in Education 2001). Using different methods corroborates results and enhances the validity of the results (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). This confidence with the results leads to an increased chance of the study being reliable; whereby another researcher would receive the same results (Marshall 1997: 79). Triangulating the methods and receiving consistent results indicates that another researcher is likely to find the same. Consequently in order to increase the validity and reliability of my research I used both interviews and questionnaires. I opted to use the method of interview first and then expand the data with questionnaires. I adopted this approach to ensure that unexpected responses could be built upon through questionnaires. Marshall (1997: 91) states that if responses are varied in interviews it is beneficial to undertake questionnaires afterwards to enable themes to present themselves. As my research is on strategies that teachers used, varied responses were expected, therefore I followed this approach. Triangulating my research in this way also allows for the advantage of one method to outweigh the disadvantage of the other. For example, interviews generally receive a high response rate due to the face-to-face contact (Bernard 2006: 264; Cohen et al. 2007: 218), whereas questionnaires can receive low response rates (Gilham 2000a: 8; Bennett 2003: 59). Therefore interviews were extremely important for this study, to ensure I received some insightful data and was not solely dependent on questionnaires.

I believed interviews would be the most insightful method as they provide in-depth data (Gilham 2000b: 10; Bennett 2003; Denscombe 2003: 189). I used semi-structured interviews, which involved questions being planned in advance with improvisation according to answers given (Wengraf 2001: 5). The structure of the planned questions means that equal coverage of the topic can be achieved and results can be analysed together (Gilham 2005) to gain in-depth data. Improvisation of questions allows the interviewer to encourage respondents to elaborate on 'unexpected' information (Walsh 2001: 66; Bennett 2003), and subsequently gain more of a perceptive understanding of the topic. Interviews also give information from the way a response is given (Bell 1999: 135), questioning the meaning of a response or the way it is given ensures it is analysed correctly and consequently increases the validity of the findings.

When interviewing it is important to be aware of interviewer bias. This can occur when the interviewer gives feedback that can influence responses (Mitchell and Jolley 2010: 268). I was interested in any strategy that teachers used, therefore I would not have given an indication of a preferred answer, thus reducing the chance of interviewer bias. Interviewing is a 'highly subjective' method, as participants offer their experiences/opinions, therefore bias can occur when analysing responses (Bell 1999:

135; Gilham 2005: 6). Using semi-structured interviews eliminates some of this bias as interviewers can establish the meaning of responses. As well as the validity being questioned so can the reliability and generalisability. This limitation could however apply to any method used for this research, as it is subjective to different teachers.

A successful interview is time-consuming (Bell 2005; Gilham 2005; Lodico et al. 2010). It takes time to develop the questions/topics and practice the process (Bell 2005: 157), then transcribing and analysing the interview afterwards is usually the longest part (Kvale 2007: 47). Due to the lengthy process the sample size for interviews is quite small (Lodico et al. 2010: 122). After piloting my interview and realising the time involved, I decided to interview two people for my research. I completed these interviews within a dyslexia friendly school, which are mainstream schools that provide the best practice and high quality intervention for children with dyslexia (BDA 2000). I expected these interviews to provide detail and insight into strategies they use for children with dyslexia. The generalisability of the data can be reduced, as teachers in these schools are trained and very experienced with dyslexia, whereas those in other schools may not be so well informed. Nevertheless these interviews are extremely valuable for the purpose of this research.

After piloting my interview twice with two associates from university I made changes to the order of topics. Gillham (2000b: 55) identifies that the first run through gives rise to issues that may not have been considered. Originally I asked about support for children with dyslexia at the beginning, but the pilot revealed that this was more appropriate near the end when participants were more comfortable. Patten (2007) states that an inexperienced interviewer needs to practice before undertaking the research interviews. Piloting my interview gave me the practice and confidence I needed to follow on from responses that participants gave.

Piloting also enabled me to rethink how to record responses. I was originally going to handwrite responses, but I found it difficult to keep up with respondents' answers. Consequently I recorded the research interviews, which was better than handwritten notes (Clough and Nutbrown 2007: 130). I used audio recording as it is 'less intrusive' than video recording (Rugg and Petre 2007). Recording also reduces the chance of bias (Hinds 2000: 49) and increases the validity and reliability of the data, as I did not have to rely on my memory of what was said when transcribing and analysing responses.

A questionnaire is the best method to get information from a lot of people quickly (Bell 1999: 119; Gillham 2000a; Bennett 2003: 59). As my interviews were of a very small sample, questionnaires enabled me to triangulate the data to the wider population. Questionnaires also increased the chance of respondent anonymity (Babbie 2008:70) which means it is not possible to identify the respondent (McCaig and Dahlberg 2010: 182). Respondents are more likely to be honest and reveal more with anonymity (Takona 2002:75; Wright and Marsden 2010: 515). Honesty increases the reliability of the questionnaire (Cohen et al. 2007: 158) as another researcher will receive the same result. Ensuring respondent anonymity respects Bishop Grosseteste University College's (BG 2008) and the British Educational Research Association's (BERA 2004) ethical considerations, which will be discussed later.

Questionnaires have a low-response rate (Bennett 2003: 59) and therefore it is important to keep respondents motivated with a variety of questions (Gillham 2000a: 34). My questionnaire incorporated a mixture of closed and open questions. I used

yes/no questions related to the interview topics and open questions to provide details. Open questions provide rich data (Brace 2008: 52) which was essential to gain in-depth qualitative data regarding strategies used. Initially my questionnaire consisted of an example for each question, however during my pilot I found they biased the results, respondents used the example, with few other strategies given. Consequently, I removed the examples from my final questionnaire so the questions stood alone; which reduced the bias as answers were not imposed onto the respondent (Marshall 1997: 39). This provided a true interpretation of the strategies used and increased the validity of the results.

Although questionnaires consisting of open questions provide insightful data, this can become a limitation (Kothari 2004: 103). Although there is an absence of interviewer bias (Gillham 2000a: 6) as the researcher cannot influence answers, researcher bias can still occur if interpretation is different from the respondent's meaning. Using open questions can produce a large number of responses and consequently this can make it difficult to organise the data into categories. Gillham (2000a: 5) recognises that this is when semi-structured interviewing is beneficial to complete before questionnaires as possible answers should have been recognised. This triangulation allows the data from both methods to be analysed together.

As previously mentioned, questionnaires can have a low response rate. This affects the validity, reliability and generalisability of the data, as non-responders may not have given the same answers (Cohen et al. 2007: 157). Therefore the information received may not be accurate, and cannot be generalised to the whole population. Other causes of inaccurate data are dishonest answers (McBurney and White 2010: 264) and ambiguous wording of questions (Bailey 1994: 111). I endeavoured to reduce dishonest answers by making clear the purpose of my research and assuring respondents that any information would remain anonymous. Piloting my questionnaire also enabled me to ensure that my questions were clear. The respondents of my pilot questionnaires commented how clear the meanings behind my questions were. This assurance gave me greater confidence in the validity and reliability of the data received from my questionnaires.

To gain my questionnaire data, I sent them to three different schools. I had past experiences with two of the schools and as personal contact increases the assistance of respondents (Hinds 2000: 46) I decided to personally deliver the questionnaires. I anticipated this contact and the relationships I have with the schools to increase the response rate. The relationship I had with the schools can affect the reliability of the data as other researchers may not receive the same results. Despite this it was beneficial for the purposes of this small scale research as I sought a good response rate in order to take the information into my future career. I contacted the other school, before sending the questionnaires to receive permission to send them. Again this personal contact increases the chances of respondents sending the questionnaires back.
When analysing data, researchers need to reduce the information (Gilham 2005: 127) which involves 'organising, managing and retrieving meaningful data' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 26). With regards to qualitative data the best way to do this is to identify key themes and categories (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 26; Gillham 2000b: 59; Rugg and Petre 2007: 153). For my research, I believed putting strategies into categories would enable me to determine if there were any in particular that most schools found effective. Gillham (2000b: 71) highlights that information from respondents cannot be put into definite categories, and categories do not give the full meaning of the answers

given. To overcome this I decided I would categorise respondents' answers into the general topics that were asked in the interviews and questionnaires, and write the strategies mentioned under each category. I analysed my pilot data in this way to ensure that it worked effectively. Gillham (2000b: 56) makes it clear that a researcher needs to test their method of analysis so they appreciate what is involved after the research data is obtained. After experiencing this analysis process, I felt categorising the data was the most appropriate method to analyse the qualitative data received. This practice enabled me to identify the categories used to analyse the main research data. Consequently, as I received the research data I was able to analyse this into the categories fairly quickly.

Throughout this study I adhered to Bishop Grosseteste University College's (2008) and the British Educational Research Association's (2004) ethical considerations. I received informed consent from respondents; with the questionnaires I gained permission from the schools to send them. I attached a letter informing participants about the research and consequently respondents gave their consent when they completed them. I also ensured that I received informed consent before carrying out my interviews, which included explaining to the participants the nature of the research and how their data would be applied. After the interview was transcribed I asked participants to check the accuracy of the information. Bennett (2003: 80) recognises the importance of allowing participants to read and comment on the transcripts before the report is finalised. I also made it clear that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. A further ethical consideration I followed was to guarantee respondent anonymity, whereby only I can identify the participants as no names are given. I ensured that I respected participants, especially interviewees, as I came into personal contact with them, by ensuring they were unharmed and comfortable at all times.

Analysis of findings

The results for this research are derived from the data of two interviews and three questionnaires. This response rate was lower than expected as I sent 20 questionnaires out to three schools and only received three back. Although I acknowledged in my methodology that questionnaires receive low-response rates (Gilham 2000a; Bennett 2003), I also discussed my expectations for a good response rate due to the relationships I had with two of the schools. This lack of response may have been due to a number of reasons such as we live in a 'questionnaire-saturated society' and people are reluctant to fill them out (Bennett 2003: 59; Gillham 2000b: 14). Also the fact that I had not been in touch with the schools for a while could mean they felt less inclined to complete them.

I planned to complete two semi- structured interviews with respondents from a dyslexia friendly school. However, the first interview with respondent A was more like a structured interview. This may have been due to nerves as this was my first interview, apart from the pilot. There were also time issues, as the teacher had agreed to be interviewed in a break, I could not go into too much detail. My nerves and the time issues meant that I did not deviate from the prepared questions; consequently I may not have received as much insight into the strategies as I planned. Although as the respondent's answers could not be predicted and required more than a yes/no it still produced qualitative data (Ary et al. 2010: 438). With respondent B's interview I felt more confident and had more time to complete the interview, consequently I probed more into the strategies. As discussed within the methodology, encouraging the

respondent to elaborate on points enabled me to gain a thorough understanding of strategies they used.

Although I received few results this does not decrease the value of the data received. I have summarised respondents' answers and categorised these into the general topics that were asked, e.g. phonics, Look and Say, multisensory etc. Categorising the data in this way is the best way to analyse qualitative data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 26; Gillham 2000b: 59; Rugg and Petre 2007: 153). I coloured coded the completed table according to responses that are the same so that it easier to see which strategies most respondents used. As I received a limited amount of results, I have taken a fairly narrative approach to analyse my results.

It was surprising to discover that the strategies that most respondents used were incorporated in a multisensory way, such as computer programmes and magnetic letters. Although not all respondents have discussed these methods with regards to the multisensory questions, they describe using them in a multisensory way. This surprised me as within my literature review multisensory strategies had few studies completed showing that they help children with dyslexia to read.

All but one respondent used computer programmes to help children with dyslexia. This did not surprise me as education is becoming more reliant on ICT (Hall 2010: 74) and there is evidence that technology can play a major part in the inclusion of children with a special educational need and give them equal opportunities to learn (Florian 2004: 10; Hall 2010: 8). Respondent B felt strongly that the 'WordShark' programme had really positive effects for children with dyslexia, due to the multisensory elements. It is evident that most of the respondents agree that computer programmes have a positive effect for children with dyslexia, this supports Singleton (2009), discussed within the literature, that computer intervention is beneficial for children with dyslexia.

Phonic intervention is most effective when focus is put on segmenting or blending phonemes (Ehri et al. 2001: 268; Savage et al. 2009: 95). The majority of respondents found using magnetic letters effective with children with dyslexia, respondent E believed that they made it easier for a child to manipulate words into phonemes and then blend these together to read the word. This strategy is effective as it overlaps the multisensory and phonic strategies (Campbell et al. 2008) which is also evident from the questions in which respondents have mentioned them. When using magnetic letters, children are using their visual, auditory and kinaesthetic senses, which leads to tangible memories, as described within the literature. Although respondents A and E describe writing words in sand, paint and in the air, it is in the context of spelling rather than reading which is not directly applicable to this research.

One strategy that I anticipated would present itself, due to the literature, was the use of flashcards. Within the literature this was recognised as the main strategy used for the Look and Say method. Four out of the five respondents used flashcards to teach children certain words, respondent B said that they used cards for tricky words and discussed with the child that they have to be learnt from sight. This strategy is adopted by majority of respondents for words that cannot be read phonetically and, as discussed in the literature, this is the only way to learn these particular words (Reid 1998: 21; Walton 1998: 4; BDA 2000).

Although the majority of respondents agree and use the same strategies discussed above, there are issues regarding the way they are implemented. It cannot be certain that each teacher uses methods the same way (Miles and Miles 1999). Miles and Miles (1999) go on to state that a teacher using Look and Say, may be pronouncing words slowly and consequently teaching phonetically. I believe this could be true of respondent D's answer regarding flashcards. Respondent D said they used flashcards to teach the sound first and then move onto reading from sight. This is still a phonic strategy as they are taught to read the word by breaking down the sounds. Although the other respondents describe using the flashcards via a Look and Say method, I cannot be certain that they all implement it the same way. This would affect the validity of my results, as they may not be a true interpretation of how the strategies are implemented.

One strategy that four out of the five respondents used, which had to be implemented in the same way, is the use of coloured overlays/rulers. Respondent B stated that coloured overlays prevent the words appearing to jump around the page and reduce the glare of the white. This supports Williams and Lynch (2010) discussed in the literature review, that using coloured overlays can make the text easier to read for children with dyslexia. Respondent C mentioned a child who got on so well with coloured overlays that they now have tinted glasses which helps them read more efficiently. Most respondents recognise coloured overlays as being a very effective strategy for helping children with dyslexia read.

Respondent A, from a dyslexia friendly school, elaborated further and discussed how children with dyslexia do not like reading from white backgrounds so they use buff paper, change the background colour on the interactive whiteboard (IWB) and their maths books are pastel coloured. Although this respondent is from a dyslexia friendly school, if 50% of children with dyslexia suffer from Irlen syndrome (Irlen and Lass, 1989), it is important that teachers do as much as possible to reduce pattern glare. I believe more schools need to use these strategies alongside the overlays. It is important to mention that I cannot assume that more schools are not adopting these strategies, as with such a small response rate I cannot generalise to all schools. Respondent B is also an interviewee from a dyslexia friendly school and consequently mentioned strategies that I had not anticipated from my literature. I will discuss these in more detail within my recommendations for further research as it is beyond the remit of this project.

Although my results show some strategies that my respondents believe are effective for children with dyslexia, there is the question of what makes an effective strategy. I have focused on strategies which the majority of respondents find help children with dyslexia, however what works with one child may have no effect with another. Hall (2009: 9) emphasises that every dyslexic child has different strengths and weaknesses and therefore will require different teaching methods. To find the right strategies to teach a child with dyslexia to read, can be 'trial-and-error' (Caffrey 2010). Therefore even though my results show a few strategies that could be used it is important to assess which strategies works the best for each individual child, in order for him or her to achieve with reading.

With regard to support in schools, although Rose (2009) recommended that all schools need a specialist dyslexia teacher, four of the five respondents felt this was not necessary, although they recognised that schools need someone who has knowledge of dyslexia. This questions whether it was necessary for the government to spend money

training specialist dyslexia teachers. With regards to teaching assistant intervention, three respondents felt that it is essential as teachers do not have the time. However two respondents said intervention is essential, but had no preference concerning who provided such intervention. Consequently my results are in agreement with Wadlington et al. (2008) that intervention is vital, however they do not support either Rose (2009) regarding specialist teachers or Savage et al. (2009) regarding teaching assistants providing the intervention. It is important to note that the respondents of this study are an extremely small sample and therefore their opinions cannot be generalised to what every teacher/school believes.

I consider it significant to mention that it was a surprise to find that one of the respondents had never taught a child with dyslexia. This could have been another reason why others did not complete the questionnaire, as they may have felt they had nothing to share. On average two thirds children in every classroom have dyslexia (Dyslexia Action 2009). Crombie (2002: 230) also states that the 'vast majority' of teachers will teach a considerable number of children with dyslexia, therefore unless a teacher is very early on in their career it is highly unlikely that they have never experienced a child with dyslexia. This has led to me questioning whether all teachers have knowledge of dyslexia. Wadlington et al. (2008) claim that teachers have misconceptions and a limited understanding of dyslexia and often do not recognise it. This information is worrying when you consider the number of children there are with dyslexia in each class. To enable a child with dyslexia to succeed teachers need to have a thorough understanding of dyslexia (Hodge 2000). I strongly believe that teachers need to improve their knowledge of dyslexia; I will discuss my recommendations to change this further on.

Although my results have given insight into a few strategies to assist children with dyslexia to read, and some issues have presented themselves, it is important to recognise that these results cannot be classed as valid or generalisable. This is mainly due to the low response rate received. I planned to use questionnaires to triangulate the data received from interviews, however as I only received a few back, triangulation is limited. Consequently my results cannot be generalised to the entire population as I cannot be sure that non-responders would have produced the same results (Cohen et al. 2007: 157). This also means my results cannot be classed as valid as I cannot be sure this information is accurate for other teachers. However I do believe my research is reliable. Research can be classed as reliable if another researcher obtained the same results (Marshall 1997). Respondents were describing the strategies they used for children with dyslexia, and therefore I believe they would produce this same data again, even with another researcher. I also do not consider the relationship I had with some of the schools had an impact on respondents' answers as I did not ask any personal questions that respondents would feel uncomfortable revealing to anyone else.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall it is difficult to conclude what strategies teachers use to help children with dyslexia. This is due to the lack of responses from the questionnaires, consequently I only had five respondents who provided data for this research, and two of these were through interviews and three from questionnaires. Although my results are tentative and cannot be generalised to the entire population, this research has identified a few

strategies that the majority of the respondents believe have a positive effect to assist children with dyslexia to read.

From the few results received, computer intervention seemed quite popular with respondents, due to the multisensory element and increased motivation from the children. However as ICT and technologies are always changing in education (Cox 2010: 16) it is important that teachers keep up-to-date with any new programmes or technologies that may be more effective for children with dyslexia. Using flashcards was a popular strategy with the majority of respondents; this was expected as the literature had recognised that this is the main strategy to use for words that cannot be read phonetically.

This research also identified some resources that are valuable to use as a strategy for children with dyslexia, these being magnetic letters and coloured overlays. Respondents described magnet letters as being really effective to split words into their phonemes and then blend these together to read the word. Respondents of this research also supported Wilkins et al. (2001) in recognising that coloured overlays can dramatically improve the reading abilities of children with dyslexia, by reducing pattern glare (Irlen and Lass 1989). A respondent from a dyslexia friendly school took this further by recognising other strategies that can reduce the effects of pattern glare. These included pastel coloured backgrounds on the IWB, buff paper and pastel coloured maths books. If these strategies have the same effect as coloured overlays then more schools should be adopting them into their teaching practice to make reading and learning easier for children with dyslexia.

It is important to recognise that this is a tentative research project and consequently these strategies cannot be perceived as the only ones that are effective for children with dyslexia. As I received such a small response rate and the data cannot be generalised to the population, I do not believe that this research will have an effect on the education of children with dyslexia. However, upon reflection I do believe it has given rise to some issues and recommendations which schools and future researchers should consider.

The first issue surrounds multisensory methods, few studies have been completed regarding multisensory methods, and some of those are not empirical or generalisable (Campbell et al. 2008). Therefore I was surprised when most respondents described using some sort of multisensory strategy, e.g. computers or magnetic letters. If teachers are using multisensory methods it would be beneficial to have studies that show the effect they have for children with dyslexia. Hence I believe that more research needs to be done to find out if multisensory methods do help children with dyslexia to read.

As I expected, the respondents from a dyslexia friendly school provided more strategies to help children with dyslexia to read. Dyslexia friendly schools have been given the training required to ensure that all their teachers are able to identify and respond to difficulties that a child with dyslexia has (BDA 2000). Consequently, some of the strategies mentioned, particularly by respondent B, were not anticipated from the literature. Therefore more research needs to be done into these strategies, in particular with stile trays and P.A.T (Phonological Awareness Training), a programme based on rimes, as they were both described as having very positive effects on children with dyslexia. Stile trays can be used alongside stile dyslexia that provides activities specifically for children with dyslexia, although it is recommended by Dyslexia Action

(undated), there is no research done to show that this has a positive effect on the reading abilities of children with dyslexia. The P.A.T. programme was developed after research found that children learnt to read through awareness of syllables and rimes (Goswami and Bryant 1991). However there is very little recent research done on the effects this has on children with dyslexia. Therefore more research needs to be done into this area.

I also believe it would be beneficial if research was done into strategies that dyslexia friendly schools use which could be incorporated into other mainstream schools. As I interviewed the respondents from dyslexia friendly schools, they were put on the spot to answer and therefore may have thought of more strategies after the interview. Despite this they still provided more strategies compared to other respondents and therefore I believe that other schools could learn and adopt more strategies from dyslexia friendly schools. I recommend that more in-depth research should be completed into dyslexia friendly schools, so that other schools can incorporate this into their practice and give every child with dyslexia the same chances to succeed.

The necessity of this recommendation is made even more obvious when we consider that some teachers do not have the knowledge and understanding of dyslexia (Wadlington et al. 2008). The government has recognised this and expect every teacher to complete a course on dyslexia (Lipsett 2009), however it is recognised by Lawrence (2009: 2) that it is unrealistic but he does recognise that all teachers need to be familiar with how to support a child with dyslexia. Therefore I believe head teachers need to ensure that the teachers in their school are confident with dyslexia, and, if required, send them on courses or arrange INSET days. It has also been recognised that undergraduate courses need to be doing more to prepare future teachers with how to support children with dyslexia (Wadlington and Wadlington 2005). If these recommendations, alongside further research on dyslexia friendly schools is followed, teachers would consequently have increased knowledge, skills and confidence to teach children with dyslexia. This would then hopefully result in every child with dyslexia being provided with the appropriate support they require to succeed.

As this research project was not successful with receiving a high response rate, if I were to complete it again I would change the way I obtained the results. As my interviews provided me with some insightful responses, I would implement more of these if time allowed for this. Although my questionnaires did not provide a good response rate, I still believe that this is the next best method to interviews to receive the information required. Therefore if I implemented this research again I would send my questionnaire to a much wider sample and put more emphasis on the importance of the research, to enable me to become an effective teacher of children with dyslexia. Hopefully this would secure a higher response rate in future research.

In conclusion, I believe that completing this research project has been a valuable experience. Although I received few results, I have gained insight into a few strategies that I can adopt throughout my future career, through the literature and responses from participants. Despite this, I do recognise that there will be a variety of other strategies available and as part of my professional development I will partake in a course to gain a thorough understanding of how to support children with dyslexia in all areas, not just reading.

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The Gr8 Txt Db8: Is Literacy Attainment Adversely Affected by Children's Use of Text Abbreviations?

Cassandra Short

Abstract

This paper reports upon an exploratory study which investigated the relationship between children's texting behaviour, their knowledge of text abbreviations and their school attainment in written language skills. A total of twenty four 11-12 year old children from a rural secondary grammar school were asked to provide data on their texting behaviour and to complete two short, paper based translation exercises. The children's latest National Curriculum attainment in their last English written task was also obtained. Tentative findings found that those participants that used the largest number of phonetically based text abbreviations were the highest academic achievers in English. However, negative effects were found in the admission that text abbreviations were sometimes used in error in written work and the high number of punctuation errors participants made in the translation task. The ability of pupils to choose when it is appropriate to use text abbreviations are an important part of their potential attainment in English literacy tasks. The results of this study were inconclusive; it found that while text messaging could have some positive effects upon children's written work, it also had some negative influences. Further research with larger numbers of participants would be needed to form a more concrete conclusion.

Introduction

'Mobile phone text messaging is undermining children's literacy skills' (Paton 2008). The aim of this exploratory research is to investigate what the influence of children's use of mobile phones for sending text messages has had on their attainment in writing tasks in English. With the media, teachers and parents showing concern that text messaging has had a negative effect upon children's spelling and grammar use in English written assignments, this study aims to test if their fears are true or if media hype has influenced opinions.

The Labour Government's introduction of the National Strategies, specifically the Literacy hour in Primary school, was supposed to help raise children's attainment specifically in English. Why, then do Ofsted (2010) report that despite some major initiatives to raise standards in writing, the levels achieved by many children fall short of what is achievable? This small-scale exploratory research seeks to find out if there is a link between secondary school children's increased use of mobile phones and their attainment in writing tasks.

The study focused on a class of Key Stage 3 pupils, all currently in Year 8, in a rural grammar school. The group took part in a small survey to ascertain their mobile phone usage and a text message translation exercise during an English lesson. The effectiveness of this small-scale research may have been influenced by a number of factors. Firstly by the small number of children involved; secondly, by the children's cognitive ability to understand the task required and thirdly, by the limitations of having to transfer the activity into a different media in order to meet ethical considerations. However, using a larger number of participants would probably have provided a more accurate measure of the children's knowledge and the effects text abbreviation usage might have on writing tasks in English.

Literature Review

The review of the literature focused upon the popularity of text messaging, types of textisms, relationship to spoken language, relationship to written language, links to literacy development and the effects on literacy attainment in English. As text messaging is a fairly recent phenomenon most of the literature was published within the last 10 years. Research carried out internationally and in the United Kingdom (UK) has been considered.

The increasing and widespread use of text messaging is revolutionising communication in today's society. The Times (Collins 2006) reported that 85% of the adult population in Britain own a mobile phone, with 4 out of 5 children owning a mobile phone by the time they are 11. The continued growth of texting is highlighted by a 2009 daily average of 265 million text messages (MDA 2010). There is an assumption that young people are the driving force behind and at the same time slaves to a growing text messaging culture (Thurlow 2003). It is this teen market that dominates text-messaging, with 90% of teenagers claiming that they text more than they talk on their phone (Haig 2002). This is supported by Reid and Reid (2004, 2007) who found that roughly half of the young people who used text messaging actually preferred texting their friends than talking to them, particularly the more anxious. The Telegraph (Paton 2010) reported that almost 9 in 10 children now have a mobile phone. Ofcom's (2006) Media Literacy Audit of 1,536 children between 8-15 years old across the UK reported that 49% of 8-11 year olds had their own phones, while 82% of 12–15 year olds did. A significant increase was shown between the ages of 10 (40%) and 11 (78%). Eighty-two per cent of 8-11 year olds used their phones for texting, while 93% of 12-15 year olds did so. Texting was more popular than talking for both age groups.

Text speak is characterized by its distinctive graphology. Crystal (2006: 45-47) lays out the language typically used in computer-mediated communication in tabular form and how it is both like and unlike spoken and written language. Crystal does not include text messaging as an independent genre in his tables and although the language of instant messaging (IM) is often similar Ling and Baron (2007) have identified both quantitative and qualitative differences between the two uses of language among American teenagers. Crystal (2006: 49) further claims that text messaging is not beholden to shared conventions of construction such as punctuation and capitalisation or the use of grammatically correct sentences. Thurlow (2003) analysed a body of text messages produced by British young adults for the types of variant word forms used. He found 19% of the words to be textisms of some sort. For example textisms include acronyms, emoticons (symbols representing emotions, e.g., :) for happy), and the deletion of unnecessary words, vowels, punctuation, capitalisation, rebus abbreviations and other phonetically based variants (Carrington, 2004; Thurlow, 2003; Drouin and Davis 2009). However other researchers have found smaller proportions, for example about 10% (Crystal 2008a) and less than 5% (Baron 2008). Crystal (2008b) suggested that its chief feature is rebus abbreviations, words formed in which letters represent syllables. Plester and Wood (2009) found, when researching preteen British children's use of text messages, that the most frequently used textisms were the phonological reductions and the rebus/homophone types, for example 'wot', 'nite' and 'C U L8R'.

In Crystal's (2006) view, text language fulfils the criteria of spoken language as follows: it is spontaneous, loosely structured, socially interactive and, in contrast to IM and speech, not timebound, as the message can remain as long as desired; it is immediately

revisable. Text language also fulfils the criteria of written language as follows: it is space-bound, repeatedly revisable, again a departure from IM, visually decontextualised, except with image-enabled phones and it can be factually communicative (Crystal 2006). Texting has features that correspond to spoken language, in its dialogic character, with several conversational 'turns', but these messages also make use of grammatical omissions that are rarely observed in Literacy (Plester et al. 2008) and so cannot be said to be truly a written form of spoken language. On the other hand, the text messaging presents the user with an asynchronous medium similar to email, allowing time for composition and reflection, and the opportunity to manage the way users construct and present themselves in their messages while still allowing dialogic exchange in a relative short time span (Ling and Yttri, 2002; Reid and Reid 2004).

Plester et al. (2008) suggest that as texting has features in common with both writing and speaking, we might expect experience with it to relate to writing development. Research (Adams 1990; Fowler 1991; Snowling 2000) has established a relationship between phonemic awareness and reading development which Plester et al. (2008), given that the use of text abbreviations is dependent upon a certain level of phonological awareness, link to a positive association between children's performance on the different forms of written communication. However, when using textisms children revert to a phonetic language which has been suggested may have a negative effect on literacy (Ihnatko 1997 in Plester et al 2008: 137; Vosloo 2009) but may not affect spelling (Dixon and Kaminska 2007). However, there has been little research in the area (Wartella et al. 2004). Werry (in Plester et al. 2008: 137), discussed children's invented spellings and described how these are often based upon the pronunciation of spoken language, often misspellings were based upon local dialect pronunciations. Research by Plester et al. (2008; 2009) and Plester and Wood (2009) highlighted how these showed similarities to text abbreviations but that intentional misspelling, although a different phenomenon is based upon the phonological awareness at the root of variants on standard English words.

However, Plester et al. (2008, 2009) and Plester and Wood (2009) note that there has been concern about the supplanting of standard written English by the orthographically reduced medium of texting language. In general, texting has provoked a very strong, negative response from teachers, parents and language experts. It has been described as the continuing assault of technology on formal written English (Lee 2002), and the work of:

> 'vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago ... pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary' (Humphrys, 2007).

Thurlow (2006) analysed over 100 media reports, finding that the predominant themes were negative in tone about the effect of texting on standard English language. Thurlow's (2003) own work, however, has shown that the text messages of older teenagers were generally comprehensible, contained few abbreviations and showed a good sense of what Crystal (2006) has referred to as language rich from a playful use of words. Others have also been optimistic about texting (Lee, 2002; O'Connor 2005; Helderman 2003) in that it 'gets children writing' where they may have been reluctant to do so. In a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 64% of US teens

admitted that some form of texting has crept into their academic writing (Lenhart et al. 2008).

The research group of children now classed as 'M-agers' (Thistlethwaite 2011), those born after 1997 who never known life without mobile phones, are approaching the beginning of their GCSEs. It is increasingly important to recognise the links between texting and academic competence in general and standard written English in particular. However, anecdotal and supposition evidence are not sufficient to inform current educational practice. This study will look at the scale of the use of textisms in my research group. It will discuss if the use of these abbreviations lends evidence to the fears reported by the journalists (Thurlow 2006) or if children's increased exposure and experimentation with the written word in text messaging has a positive effect upon literacy skills, as suggested by Plester et al. (2008, 2009), Plester and Wood (2009) and supported by Crystal (2008a). The review of the literature has shown the involvement of mobile phones in the wider context of children's lives. It implies that the increasing use of text messaging could have an impact upon children's literacy skills, particularly their writing. This small scale study follows on from work completed by Plester et al. (2008, 2009) and Plester and Wood (2009) looking at the effects upon text messaging in children's written work in English.

Methodology

This small scale exploratory research was undertaken at a rural Grammar school. As highlighted by my review of the literature, children in year 8 are the first cohort to have never known life without a mobile phone. In discussion with the English department in my placement school it was agreed that the study would form a lesson as part of a year 8 groups study into the roots of language. As Cohen et al (2007: 109) suggest it is necessary to ensure access to the required sample is permitted by the school and practical. The lesson plan and all research materials were discussed and agreed with the class teacher prior to the lesson taking place. The research was completed with a class of 24 year 8 pupils (all aged 12 or 13). Due to the school's no mobile phones policy, all research was carried out as a written exercise eliminating the need for mobile phones to be used in the lesson.

McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 88) recognise that it is crucial to maintain a strong ethical practice and not to exploit the participants or the situation during research. Therefore, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2004) and the Bishop Grosseteste University College Research Ethics Policy (BG 2008) was followed. As discussed by Taylor et al. (2006) failure to work within ethical procedures can jeopardize the value of the work. Informed consent was obtained in writing from the head teacher and verbal consultations completed with affected staff prior to the start of the study. The children participating were briefed about the nature of the study including the data collection methods at the beginning of the lesson.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures that all children have a right to participate in all matters that affect them (United Nations 1989).

They were informed during the lesson brief and as part of the questionnaire that I would observe good ethical conduct throughout by ensuring anonymity. Anonymity, using Bell's (2006: 48) definition that the researcher does not know the names of the participants, was achieved by carrying out the study with a group I had not

encountered on my previous placement in the school and ensuring that no names were included upon the questionnaire and translation task sheet, so that no individual pupil response could be identified. As the study was to take place as part of a planned lesson, all children were given several exit strategies should they not wish to participate. They could either opt out of the lesson and read a library book or complete the questionnaire and translation task but withhold consent by not ticking the agreement box at the start of the questionnaire. 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. The children and schools were informed that all research questionnaires/translation task sheets would be shredded after a period of 18 months after completion of the research project and were thanked for their participation, but received no direct reward for participation.

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) consider that 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 multimethod approach. This study therefore used questionnaires and a test translation task to gather data. The children were given a short questionnaire to gain some quantitative data about their mobile phone association and habits. In order to avoid the potential disadvantages of getting the questions wrong as described by Denscombe (2007: 155) the questionnaire was designed based upon questions asked by Plester et al. (2009), discussed in the review of the literature. The questionnaire was semi-structured containing both open and closed questions. The use of an open question at the end of the questionnaire was to allow pupils to voice an opinion on the research question as Cohen et al. (2007: 151) suggest that this form of questioning allows the informants to express their thoughts more freely and enables important but unanticipated issues to be raised.

To assess children's knowledge of textisms the class was asked to complete a short translation exercise (see translation task sheet appendix 1). The elicited text messages were scored for types of textism used, and the ratio of textisms to total words used. In order to compare the results more closely with the analysis of text messages reported by Plester et al. (2009) this study adopted the classification system used by them. Acronyms, for example, refer only to formal ones such as BBC, and Initialisms is the label given other textisms such as LOL, laugh out loud, where the same principle has been used. The 12 categories used for the English to text translation were as follows:

Shortenings (bro, sis, tues)

Contractions (txt, plz, hmwrk)

G-clippings (swimmin, goin, comin)

Other clippings (hav, wil, couldn)

Omitted apostrophes (cant, wont, dads)

Acronyms (BBC, UK)

Initialisms (ttfn, lol, tb)

Symbols (@, & ,:-o)

Letter/number homophones (2moro, l8r, wuu2)

Misspellings (comming, are [for our], bolinase)

Non-conventional spellings (fone, rite, skool)

Accent stylization (wiv, elp [help], anuva)

The text to English translation task was coded into three categories as follows:

Spelling errors
Interpretation errors
Punctuation errors

In order to find out if there is a correlation between children's knowledge of textisms it was necessary to obtain quantitative data on the children's current attainment in writing tasks. The class teacher agreed to supply me with a copy of his mark book containing the group's national curriculum levels for writing tasks undertaken in October and November and participants were asked to write their most recent national curriculum level awarded onto the corner of the questionnaire. This allowed for a comparison of the levels to ensure the validity of the results. A comparison will be made to the research discussed in the review of the literature. However, it is important to remember that any findings will only relate to this small group of children.

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Although the research was planned to take place with a sample of 24 children, only 22 were present on the day. All of the 22 children who participated owned a mobile phone. The participants were a mean average of 8.3 years old when they received their first mobile phone. Research has linked early digital literacy with potential future educational success (McPake et al. 2007). However, the earliest a child in the research group had received a phone was 6 years old. This is a figure which is likely to be reduced with the introduction of phones aimed at a younger market; even toddlers can now have their own phone with text messaging, video facility and 80 metres range to talk to mum (Timtechs 2008). The quantitative results on their mobile phone usage for text messages can be seen below (Figure 1).

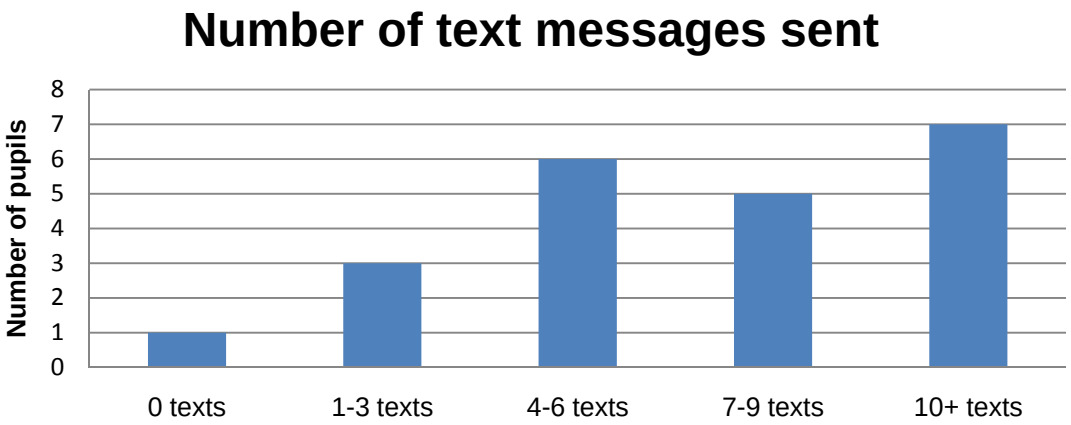

Figure 1: Average number of text messages per week sent

The median number of messages each pupils sent per week was 7-9. Plester et al. (2008) found the participants in their study sent a mean number of 3 messages per day. However they provided mobile phones for children to use over the period of the study eliminating any issues of cost, which may be the determining factor as to the number of messages sent. This may not continue to be an issue with mobile companies such as Virgin offering deals that include unlimited text messages if the customer purchases just £15 of credit per month (Carphone Warehouse 2010). As Wartella et al. (2004) emphasize the pace of change in electronic media has increased exponentially in recent years and is likely to continue to do so. The challenge for educators is how to deal with the changes in literacy skills that children are acquiring through the use of new technology, mobile phones in particular.

Mobile phones have become a significant part of the environmental context of children's lives and it is likely that the effects of interactions with them will also transform along with subsequent developments in technology. It is this increased exposure to the written word which suggests that text messaging may be beneficial to children's literacy attainment. Research (Cipielewski and Stanovich 1992; Stainthorp 1997) has demonstrated that children's reading ability at around the age of 10-11 can be predicted by a measure of text exposure after earlier reading ability and orthographic decoding scores were accounted for. Subsequent research by Wood et al. (2009) found a direct link between exposure to the written word in text messages and children's attainment in spelling. It is questionable if the relatively low numbers of text messages sent per week by the research group would have an effect upon the children's literacy skills. However, any increase in the exposure to the written word is likely to be beneficial with English children being less likely to read for enjoyment than their peers in other countries (Twist et al. 2007: 31).

It is interesting to note the difference in pupil's opinions upon the effects on their school work. When asked, only 23% answered that they had used text abbreviations in school work. However, the open qualitative question that allowed for pupils to write a personal response resulted in 46% admitting that they had sometimes used text abbreviations by accident in their school work. This could account for the negative views of teachers, parents and the concerns reported in the press (Thurlow 2006; Baron

2008: 161; Vosloo 2009). In the responses to the text to English translation exercises a number of pupils used 'u' to represent 'you' and the symbol '&' to represent 'and'. It is unclear as to the reason for this, the instructions were clear and the English to text translation task was printed on the reverse of the sheet to minimise confusion between the two exercises. Although research (Crystal 2008a; Plester et al. 2009) found that pupils thought the idea of using text abbreviations in their written school work was ludicrous it would appear from this study that they are utilising them, either consciously or inadvertently. This would correspond with the research by Lenhart et al. (2008) who found that 64% of American adolescents admitted using shortened words and emoticons in assignments. In order for educators to compensate for this inadvertent inclusion of text abbreviations it is suggested that teaching proof reading skills would minimise intrusions into written work.

Plester et al. (2009) found that the children's knowledge that they were participating in a study about texting primed them to use textisms when they could. This could account for the use of abbreviations in this task however as this study took place with older children it seems more likely that the use of these abbreviations in this task was accidental as the tasks were fully explained to them. Baron (2008) argues that the decline in standards of writing is linked to society as a whole becoming more informal, classrooms no longer set out in strict rows, dress codes are now more casual and sales personnel using first names rather than sir or madam. However, Crystal (2008a) would argue that this phenomenon is not new as a symbol similar to a 7 was used to replace 'and' in Old English manuscripts and even Shakespeare would play with language as he experimented with six different ways of writing his name.

There were a total of 483 textisms used out of a total of 959 words, which works out at a proportion of 50%. This is a similar proportion to the 53% that Plester et al. (2008) found in their study. Table 2 below shows the proportion of each of the different categories that were used in the translation task.

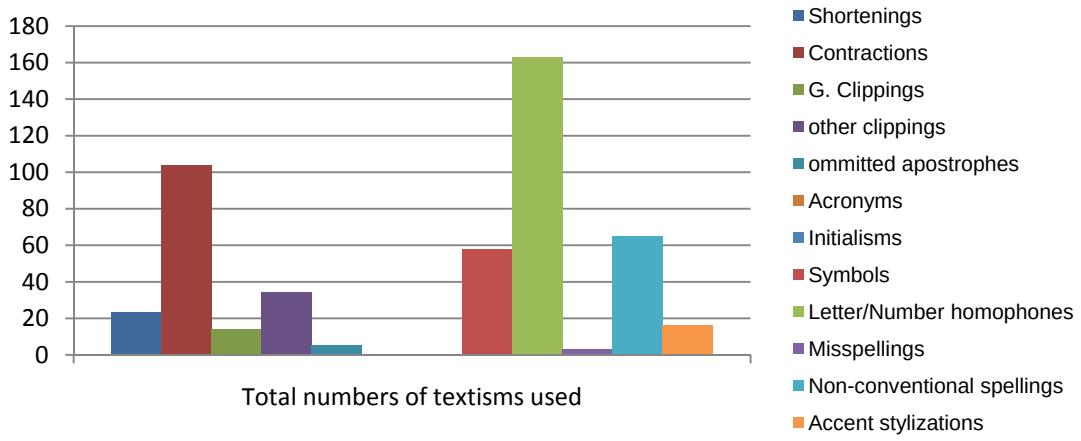

Figure 2: Children's use of textisms

This shows that the most common textism used by this group of children was the letter/number homophone classification. Plester et al. (2008) found that the strongest relationship between school language skills and text language concerned the textisms

that use phonological awareness as a key factor. The letter/number homophones are obvious candidates, but the accent stylization category is also largely phonetically based. The children's current attainment in their most recent English writing task was as follows; 2 pupils at national curriculum level 4; 14 pupils at national curriculum level 5, and 6 at national curriculum level 6. In order to correlate between the children's attainment and knowledge of text abbreviations, a mean of the translation task scores was calculated for each attainment group (Figure 3). It must be noted that this is a small study of only 22 participants and only two children fell into the NC level 4 categories.

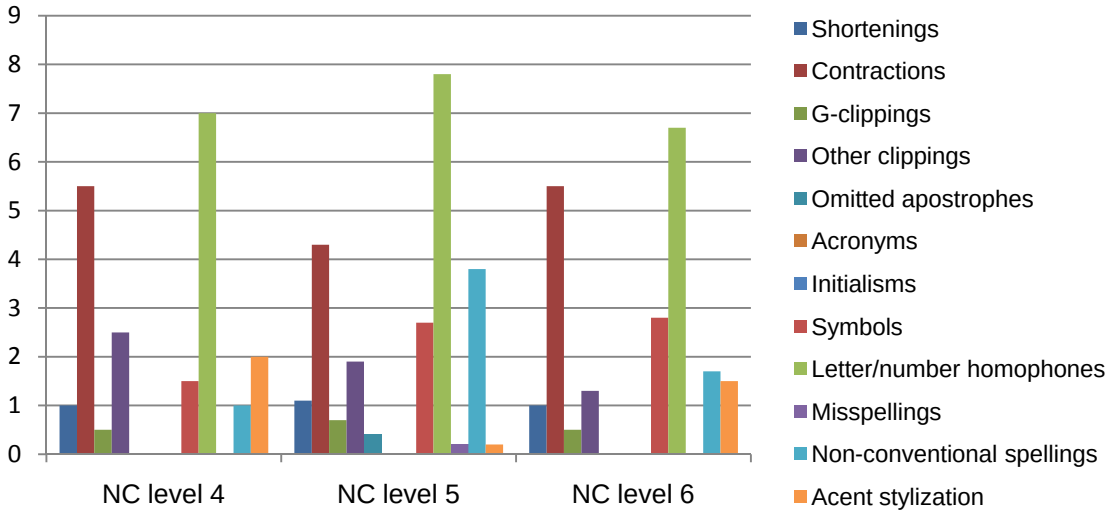

Figure 3: Mean usage of types of textisms in each ability group

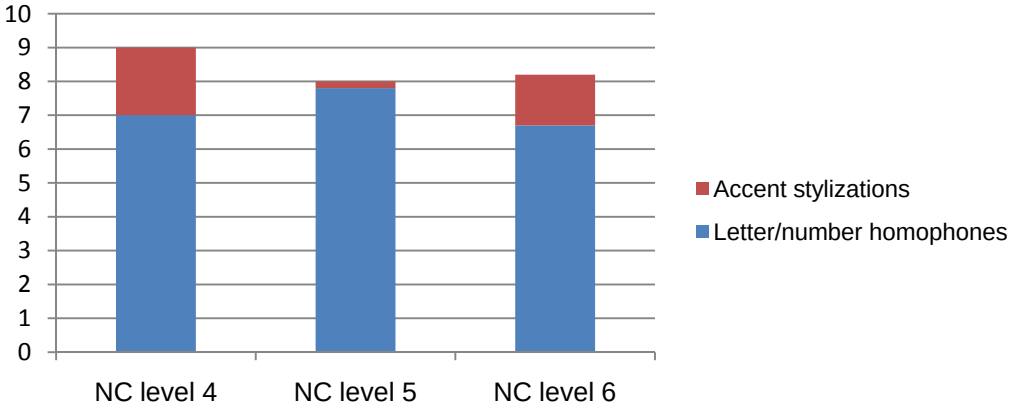

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Figure 4: Combined mean usage of phonological based textisms

The English-text translation task shows that the children who used the highest number of phonological based textisms were the lowest ability pupils in the class. Unlike the

research by Plester et al. (2008, 2009) and Plester and Wood (2009) which linked high usage of phonological textisms either with higher ability pupils or not, no correlation was found. It is possible that the results shown for this study were affected by the low number of participants (only 2 in the NC level 4 category). If we disregard the NC level 4 results as possibly influenced by the small numbers and look at the general trend, the highest users of the accent stylizations were the NC level 6 participants which would suggest that higher phonemic awareness could be linked to higher academic achievement in writing tasks. When analyzing the texts the letter/number homophones, mostly 'u', 'r' and '2', were the most dominant form. This suggests that the children know that text language requires play with the phonological rules and can enter into the playful use of the language as required. Some words received a number of varieties of reductions, for example night was abbreviated as nite, nyt, ight, sometimes in different ways by the same participant. This increased play and enjoyment of the verbal material shows an active engagement with the written word as described by Crystal (2008a; 2008b).

Thurlow (2006) analyzed more than 100 articles from journalists who are in apparent agreement that linguistic prospects are bleak. This study appears to give evidence to their fears that text abbreviations are being used in written assignments in English lessons. However the underlying cause for this is unclear, is it the increased use of text messaging or something else? Ravel (cited in Crystal 2008a: 167) found that children who texted wrote less when asked to describe a picture than those that did not use texting at all. Research into the literature and findings from this study would suggest that if text messaging is fostering a reduction in discourse skills then this is something that could be compensated for in classroom practice. Baron (2008) suggests that it is either that language users simply do not know which written pattern conforms to the rules or that we are raising a generation of language users who simple do not care about a whole range of language rules. This would in part account for the presence of the Accent Stylization category. Words like 'Dats' or 'gonna' appeared in a number of the responses to the English to text translation task, demonstrating playing with the language as described by Crystal (2008a).

A problem that the teachers in the research school had noticed was a perceived decline in the standards of punctuation and grammar. The English to text translation showed that many of the pupils did not punctuate properly even when asked to write their responses in school English sentences and the punctuation was already included in the text message. For example one participant who had indicated that text abbreviation had had no effect upon written work did not include a single question mark in their response to the translation task. The results from the text to English translation task are included in the table below.

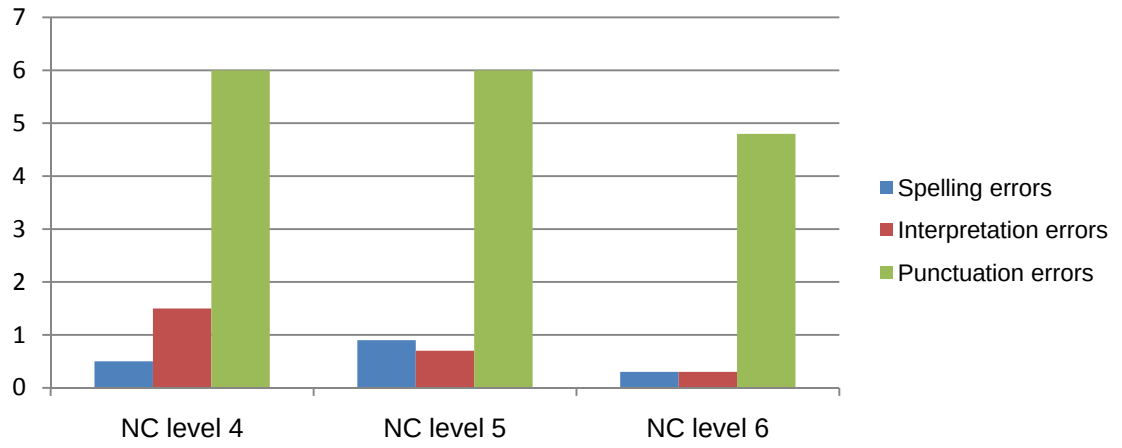

Figure 5: Mean errors in text to English translation task

This result of this task clearly shows that the higher achieving pupils made fewer errors in all categories than their less able peers. However it is expected that a child will have generally accurate spelling and that punctuation is usually correct to gain a National Curriculum level 6 in English writing tasks (QCA 2010). This in itself does not support the theory that usage of textisms has a detrimental effect upon literacy skills; Ofsted (2010: 9) cites the quality of teaching to be a key factor in impeding educational progress. Ravel (cited in Crystal 2008a: 161) compared a group of 11 to 12 year old texters and found that neither group had noticeably worse spelling or grammar than the other, but that both groups made some errors. Text messages are quite short, making use of elliptical constructions in the manner of conversational speech. Crystal (2008a) suggests that the danger here is that children think in correspondingly short bursts, so that they become less able to handle notions which require more complex elucidation and grammatical words are often omitted. There was little evidence found for this in this study as most responses to the English to text translation task participants reproduced the English sentences verbatim with appropriate textisms included.

The key focus of this research was to see what the influence of children's use of text messages on their attainment in English. It became clear that children's knowledge of textisms, their ability and choice to use them in the elicited text translation exercises, is an important part of the children's literacy profile. This ability to create alternative orthographic forms of known words, and to know when it is appropriate to do so and when it is not, demonstrates linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge. Plester et al. (2009) found that because knowledge and use of textisms contributes independently to predicting reading scores, beyond vocabulary, short-term memory, orthographic decoding skill, phonological awareness, length of time owning a phone and chronological age, that this indicated that something beyond phonological awareness was going on. However they did not look at the errors in punctuation or accidental misuse of textisms which have been highlighted as an issue by this study.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this exploratory research investigated what the influence of text messaging has upon children's attainment in English writing tasks. We do not know what effect texting and other technological advances will have on m-agers ability to succeed in traditional literacy. The inclusion of ICT within educational settings may allow those children who are particularly able with new technology, like mobile phones, an advantage in academic achievement. This study has looked at the scale of use of mobile phones for text messaging, the possible negative effects of using text abbreviations and the positive effects of increased use of the written word. It has not been able to take into consideration the social economic status of the participants which would have an effect upon children's access and use of text messaging.

This study found that although all the participants owned a mobile phone, text messaging frequency was quite low. Just over a third of the 22 participants sent more than 10 text messages a week. The inadvertent inclusion of some text abbreviations and the lack of punctuation use in the text to English translation task is a significant finding, even for this small group, which would provide evidence for the negative view that the use of text messages is having a detrimental effect upon children's attainment in English writing tasks. What is unclear is how much this unwanted effect is counterbalanced by the positive effects. The increased phonological awareness and exposure to the written word has long been argued to have a positive effect upon children's literacy attainment (Adams 1990; Fowler 1991; Snowling 2000). Text messaging is a medium in which children are happy to experiment and play with language. This ability to play with language reflects Vygotsky's (1962) view that progress in literacy has a reciprocal relationship with making previously intrinisic knowledge extrinsic, both resting on the process and contributing to it. It exposes many children to far more written words than they would otherwise encounter due to a decline in the enjoyment of traditional reading of books.

Although the results of this study are inconclusive, further research with larger numbers of participants may be able to link concrete findings to the effects of text messaging and children's educational attainment in literacy. However, it is important to recognise how the skills children use in text messaging are linked in and out of an educational environment. The current curriculum taught in schools may not meet the needs of future digitally literate children. It would be interesting to study further the impact an increased experience of the written word is having upon children's enjoyment of reading or writing tasks. This study has only focused upon mobile phones but there is a whole range of digital technologies that children interact with daily, the internet, blogging and social networking sites such as facebook. All of these developments increase children's interaction with the written word and would prove interesting areas for further research into the effects upon educational attainment. This study has only looked at adolescents in a mainstream grammar school setting; therefore their literacy skills are well developed. This study or researchers discussed in the literature review have not worked with children with dyslexia, or other literacy development issues, and the correlation of these children's use of text abbreviations and literacy attainment may well be very different.

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Should Religious Education be Taught to Children in the Foundation Stage in Faith Schools?

Megan Smith

Abstract

The aim of this project was to determine why those involved with children in the Foundation Stage of a Roman Catholic faith school chose to teach RE, a subject not considered compulsory by the Government, and whether or not they felt that children in this age phase were capable of understanding it. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six staff and questionnaires distributed to parents. Findings demonstrated that although the majority of interviewees and respondents were positive about teaching RE itself, their views about the children were mixed. This is also supported by the research literature. While findings were useful to the school involved, the small-scale nature of the project prevented further generalization.

Introduction

Since 1944, it has been statutory for all schools in England to teach Religious Education (RE) to children from the age of 6 until their last year of compulsory schooling whether or not they attend a faith school (Cush 2008; Revell 2008; Wright 2008). However it is not compulsory for children in the Foundation Stage, aged three to five, regardless of school type (Beadle et al. 2007; Bastide 2007). This research project stems from the fact that the setting in question is a faith school of Roman Catholic denomination and the Head Teacher and governors have chosen to have RE taught to the children in the Foundation Stage. As this teaching of RE is through choice and not considered compulsory by the Government and Education Boards, the question that arises is 'Should RE be taught to children in the Foundation Stage in faith schools?'

The setting used as a basis for the research was a Foundation Stage unit within an average sized primary school in a small town. The school shares its site with a Roman Catholic Church and community centre. Many of the children at the school attend the church with their families where there is a parent-run Sunday school known as a Liturgy group where the children receive a Bible story in a form they can understand through activities before returning to the service for Communion. The school often holds mass in the church to celebrate Catholic festivals. The priest is a governor and comes into the classes to talk with the children, teachers and parents. He holds masses that the children and teachers have organised themselves. He is therefore a familiar person to the children, staff and parents.

Most children at the school are of the Roman Catholic faith. Children who are not, still receive the same Religious Education and this is also true in the Foundation Stage. There has been an increase of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) at the school, most are Polish as their main faith is Roman Catholic. As more and more faith schools are established in England and are given backing by the Government (DfE 2011), the findings from the research hope to give an insight into the views of those involved with the teaching of RE in the Foundation Stage in a faith school.

Literature Review

From the literature collected, one reason for teaching RE from a young age is that children ask difficult questions about life and death (Ashton 2000; Rudge 2004; Watson and Thompson 2007). This shows children think about complicated issues from an early age and it is important these questions are explored (Brelsford 2005). Ashton (2000) and Watson and Thompson (2007) agree that young children think more deeply than often given credit for. Bastide (2007) believes young children are keen to learn about themselves and find answers and, through the teaching of RE, practitioners can encourage children's deep thinking. This contrasts with the view of Beadle et al. (2007) and Ashton (2000) who argue that RE can be difficult to teach to young children because there are not always answers to the questions which might be difficult for children to understand. Cavalletti (1983: 30) argues that it is important adults do not 'reply on a theoretical plane' as they should not impose their beliefs on children and allow them their own decisions.

The literature argues that the concept of religion is complex and often difficult for adults to understand so teaching it to a young child could be a challenge, especially due to children's lack of vocabulary (Rudge 2004; McCreery at al. 2008). Cavalletti (1983) agrees some parts of religion are too frightening for young children to learn about. However, McCreery et al. (2008: 57) believe young children are capable of learning about RE as they 'do not worry about inconsistencies' and are accepting of new ideas. Nye (2009) argues that children do not need the vocabulary to learn about religion as it is more than just words and Berryman (2002) and Wolff-Pritchard (1992) believe children should not be sheltered from the darker sides of religion, otherwise they cannot learn the full meaning of it. Bastide (2007: 47) believes 'explicit' RE, where a child learns about religion through stories or artefacts, is the part of religion that can be difficult for children to understand; whereas 'implicit' RE, focusing on learning social and emotional skills, is important in a child's everyday life and needed to be able to comprehend religion. The literature argues that the teaching of RE needs to be done at the child's level of understanding through festivals and celebrations; experiences they can relate to and enabling them to discuss their beliefs (Teece 2001; Bastide 2007; Petrovich 2011). These views disagree with those of McCreery et al. (2008) and Cooper et al. (2010) who believe that teaching RE can be difficult as children have not had sufficient experiences that teachings can be related to.

Parker-Jenkins et al. (2005: 198) believe 'there is no such thing as a…Catholic child' as it is only their parents who are religious. The view of Dillen (2007: 37) contradicts this as he believes young children have 'their own religious ideas' although admittedly perhaps because of their family's religion or through things they have heard. Halstead (2009) takes the middle ground believing it can be important for children in the Foundation Stage in faith schools to be taught RE as for some their faith is part of their identity. Rudge (2004) and McCreery et al. (2008) agree that some children come from families where religion is a huge part of their lives and for them there is an expectation for RE to be taught in faith schools. Byrne et al. (2000: 5) believe the Catholic school supports parents in 'educating their children in the faith' and the Religious Education Council (2008) says the school provides a collaboration between families and parish. The Catholic Education Service (1996: 40) say although it is not a legal requirement for RE to be taught in the Foundation Stage, Catholic schools are expected to 'ensure all pupils experience what it is to be a Catholic community.' Yet Cush (2008: 49) believes RE is seen by some as a negative element in a school as religion has many 'negative

overtones' and some see it as controlling the child. However in England, where different religions and cultures are developing through immigration, the teaching of RE at an early age can educate children in respecting others (Beadle et al. 2007; Cooper et al. 2010).

Although the teaching of RE is not included within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum, practitioners are to support children in developing 'a positive sense of themselves and others' (DCSF 2008: 24). Beadle et al. (2007) and Bastide (2007) believe RE can contribute greatly to all areas of the Foundation Stage. The literature raises the idea that the EYFS framework has defined the three to five year age group as an important stage and recognises that young children need opportunities to experience new things as this is when they develop and learn most (Bastide 2007). Beadle et al. (2007) agree that children need to be introduced to new knowledge such as religious teachings at an early age so their experiences can grow, just as in any subject. Dillen (2007: 43) agrees 'faith is a developing process.'

There are also suggestions that elements of RE can be taught to children in the Foundation Stage as they are constantly learning new skills and knowledge (Nye 2009). Dillen (2007) believes children need the opportunity to express their views and thoughts on religion at a young age as they are encouraged to do in other areas of the EYFS. However Carr (2007) argues that RE is still seen by some as a separate subject without realising the connections it has with other areas which could be seen as contradictory as the EYFS framework was designed to be holistic.

Goldman (1964: 3) believed religious thinking 'is no different…from non-religious thinking' and so children develop their understanding of religion at the same rate as other areas of learning. He believed children were unable to comprehend God as he is an abstract concept based on the work of Piaget who believed children under the age of seven were unable to understand things of an abstract nature (Damon and Lerner 2006). The findings of Petrovich (2011) contradicts this view as her investigation interviewing children in the Foundation Stage about God found their answers depended on how they were asked. When talking to them about man-made and natural objects children believed natural objects were from God or a power, and neither were human but like air. Petrovich found that when she asked what the word God meant children replied it was a man, which makes her believe that young children can think in abstract terms and learn crude anthropomorphism from the adults around them (Watson and Thompson 2007). When contacted about her work for this research project Petrovich (2011) said children have an interest in religion and a 'concept of God'. Watson and Thompson (2007) believe this shows that young children have a deep sense of religion and personal views that tend to decrease as they get older indicating that RE can have a negative effect on the religious understanding of children. Rizzuto (1979) and Hull (1991) agree that young children have an idea of what or who God is and can see God in many different ways at any one time.

What the literature studied does not address is what those involved in the Religious Education of children in the Foundation Stage feel about whether children should be taught such a subject at that age; whether they see it as an important subject compared to other areas of learning; and whether they feel children can understand religion. This research aims to fill that gap and gather the views of those involved with the Religious Education of children at this stage in their lives.

Methodology

To address the research question a qualitative perspective with acceptance of quantitative data was used (Bryman 1992; O'Leary 2010) as the 'two approaches can be complementary' (Barbour 2008: 11). The researcher felt that a qualitative framework would provide the most beneficial basis in answering the question as it allowed for a more 'intimate understanding' of people's feelings (O'Leary 2010: 144) which was the project's aim. Interviews were held with the parish priest, the liturgy group leader, the Headteacher, the Foundation Stage teacher, a teaching assistant (TA) and the RE Co-ordinator.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out, allowing the researcher to 'expand the interviewee's responses' (Opie 2004: 118). Each participant was asked the same four questions which were open to allow for an 'extended answer' (Walliman and Buckler 2008: 175) and because the interviews were designed to generate qualitative data (Mukherji and Albon 2010). Only four questions were asked because it was a small-scale project and transcribing the interviews was time-consuming (Denscombe 2010). All the interviews were face-to-face and done over a two week period. They were recorded and the data transcribed on the same day, meaning the interview was still fresh in the mind. A dictaphone was used which was more reliable in terms of validity than taking notes and listening back to the interviews gave the researcher chance to pick up on key words that might not have been captured with a selective note (Mukherji and Albon 2010). It also took away the barrier of pen and paper allowing the interviewee to talk freely and continuously (Blaxter et al. 2006). A limitation of both methods is that neither record the body language which can affect the analysis (Walliman and Buckler 2008). Interviews were chosen as a research method as it meant participants could be purposefully selected (Creswell 2003) and allowed for more detailed answers (Opie 2004; O'Leary 2010; Mukherji and Albon 2010). As the research aimed to gather the views of those involved with children, using interviews allowed the subject to be dealt with in a sensitive manner (Denscombe 2010). It also meant data could be produced quickly (Walford 2001) which was important as time was a vital component. Carrying out interviews was an advantage in terms of validity as the researcher was in 'close proximity to a specific situation' (Miles and Huberman 1994: 10). The interviews were successful and the participants happy to voice their views, perhaps because it is a subject that they are passionate about as it is a faith school and the main part of their school ethos. Walliman and Buckler (2008) believe participants are more willing to give detailed answers when interviewed, as opposed to being asked for written responses, which is a positive research element. The participants knew the researcher through the work placement so there was trust which is vital for participants to answer honestly (Burton et al. 2008). The reliability of the data could be limited as participants may have given answers they thought the researcher wanted or was expecting (Creswell 2003). Even though the participants and researcher were known to each other interviewees may not always tell the truth (Walford 2001; Barbour 2008).

Questionnaires were used to gather the views of parents (Walliman and Buckler 2008; Burton et al. 2008). They were designed to be easy to complete to encourage more participation (Opie 2004; Denscombe 2010). The questions were mostly closed to encourage a larger response (Simmons 2008) but there was space to comment although none did thus the responses were not detailed and as they were anonymous the answers could not be clarified (Burton et al. 2008). An advantage of using questionnaires was that direct questions could be asked relating to the research

question (Opie 2004) and so the data presented information that could be compared relatively easily (Simmons 2008; Denscombe 2010). The questionnaires were also translated into Polish to ensure all parents could take part. A total of 52 questionnaires were sent out of which 25 were returned, from both English and Polish parents, demonstrating that having it translated had been successful. It did highlight that it can be difficult to encourage a response from participants if they are anonymous as there is no record of who has taken part (Blaxter et al. 2006).

A time plan was drawn up for both collection methods and the deadline was kept as time was limited (Blaxter et al. 2006). Before carrying out the research the ethical components were considered which is important when using qualitative research methods because of the 'closer relationships' between the researcher and participants (Blaxter et al. 2006: 158). To ensure the project was prepared in an ethical manner the university's ethics policy was adhered to (BG 2008). The questions were composed taking into account the need not to be offensive, insensitive or cause harm (Fontana and Frey 2000; O'Leary 2010). The participants were briefed about the aims of the research, what was being asked of them and what would be done with their answers. This meant they could give informed consent (Miles and Huberman 1994; Mason 2002; Blaxter et al. 2006; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Participants were told their answers would be kept confidential and they could opt out of the project. This meant that participants knew their answers were only known to the researcher and their names would not be used (Barbour 2008; O'Leary 2010). All were happy to take part without written consent, although that option was offered as it is recognised as good practice. An ethical issue addressed was when the participants continued talking about the subject when the dictaphone was off. When it related to the research question permission was gained for it to be switched on again and for the conversation to be recorded and used as part of the interview (King and Horrocks 2010).

Pilot studies were carried out involving people not selected as the final respondents to ensure the findings were not unreliable and unfair (Opie 2004). This meant the instructions and questions could be tested (Opie 2004; Blaxter et al. 2006; O'Leary 2010) to ensure they had the same meaning for participants as the researcher (Haralambos 1986) along with the time needed for completion (Denscombe 2010). The feedback resulted in the questionnaire questions cut from ten to six.

To analyse the data, content analysis was used as it can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003). Content analysis allowed the researcher to quantify the data (Denscombe 2010) and involved identifying similarities and common themes (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003). This was achieved by comparing the interview transcripts and colour-coding similar words, phrases and meanings. Notes were made to interpret the responses against the research question (Davies 2007). Looking firstly for similarities enabled differences or unexpected answers to be identified (Denscombe 2010). Grouping the data into themes allowed the researcher to consider why they had occurred by looking at who had said what. This gave an integrated comprehension of the overall concepts and themes (Walliman and Buckler 2008). Qualitative methods are interpretive (Creswell 2003) and the limitations mean that some themes or hidden meanings may have been missed. To analyse the data from the questionnaires the answers were arranged into charts to make it clearer to make connections between the questions. This also allowed the researcher to note if the results enhanced or explained the interview responses (Davies 2007).

Presentation and analysis of findings

From the data collected four themes emerged.

Theme 1

The first theme included that children should be taught RE in the Foundation Stage in their setting because it is a faith school and parents have sent their children there because of its faith. The teacher, teaching assistant (TA) and RE coordinator all used the word 'obviously' in their answers and referred to it being a faith school, indicating that this was an expected answer, one they thought they should give. The practitioners said they felt expected to teach RE in the Foundation Stage. The view of Parker-Jenkins et al. (2005) that it is only parents who are religious could be used to argue that the practitioners may not have given the same answer if it was not a faith school. The priest said faith was an important part of the school for all children 'including the youngest' and supported the parents' wishes to raise their children in the faith. Byrne et al. (2000) agree that the Catholic school supports parents. The Head Teacher said RE was important in the Foundation Stage as faith is an important part of the school ethos and the Catholic community which complements the view of the Religious Education Council (2008) that the school connects the families and parish. The RE co-ordinator said she felt that by sending their children to the setting, parents 'obviously want some education of a Christian nature for their child' (RE co-ordinator, Interview). Rudge (2004) and McCreery et al. (2008) agree families have expectations for RE to be taught in faith schools. This was supported by the results of the parental questionnaire which revealed the main reason for parents choosing the setting is because of its faith. The chart below (Figure 1) shows 40% of parents chose faith and 24% chose good results as the main reasons for choosing the setting out of faith, good results, reputation or nearest nursery.

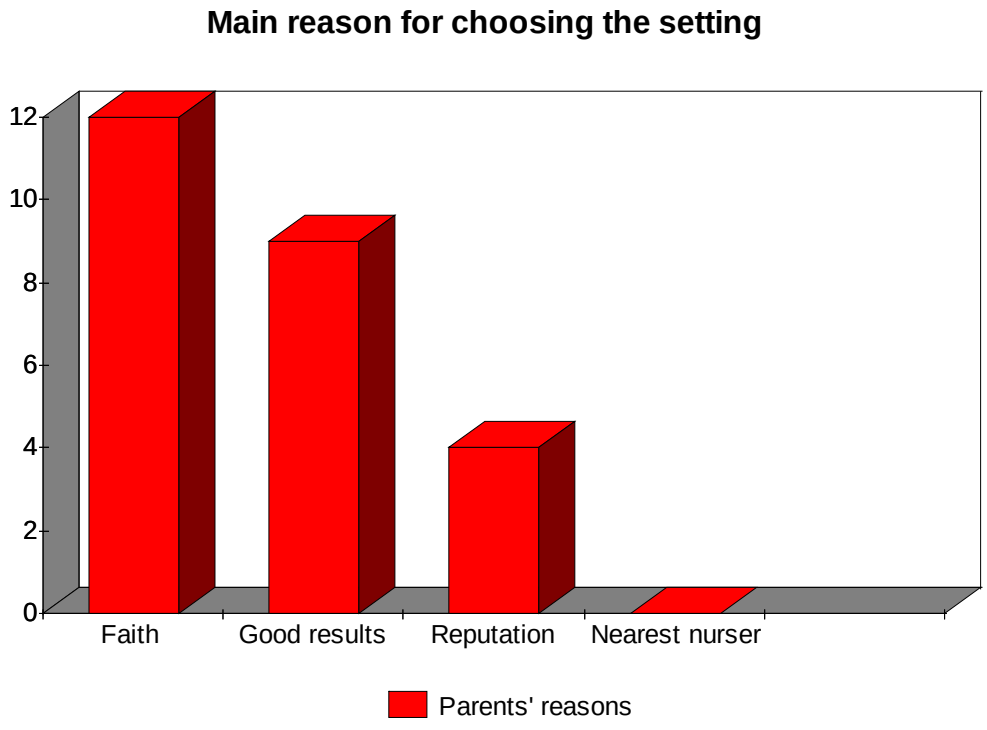

Figure 1: Main reason for choosing the setting

The result is not surprising as this questionnaire was sent out to parents of children who attend a faith school (Halstead 2009). The second most popular reason was the good results of the setting which could indicate that some parents chose the setting because of the debatable reputation of faith schools in achieving good results (Arthur 2005 and Johnson 2006).

Theme 2

The second theme included that children should be taught about religion as early as possible, even though not all agreed that children could thoroughly understand it. This agrees with the views of Beadle et al. (2007) and Aston (2000) that RE can be difficult to teach to young children. The TA and priest felt RE is important for young children as it allows them to talk about the questions they have about faith and for 'parents to think about the answers they are giving' (TA, Interview). The teaching assistant said children are never too young for RE as we are all part of God's family, 'no matter how old or young you are' (TA, Interview). The priest said religion should be taught 'from the earliest times' as children are inquisitive and observant (Priest, Interview) which supports the belief of Bastide (2007) that young children are keen to learn about themselves. The teacher felt children should be taught RE in the Foundation Stage as it gives them the 'groundings to make their own decisions when they're older.' Dillen (2007:43) agrees 'faith is a developing process.' The questionnaire found parents also felt children should be learning RE at an early age as 84% answered their child should be taught RE at this stage which the chart (Figure 2) shows below.

Figure 2: Should their child be taught RE?

This result again is not surprising as the questionnaire was sent out to parents of children who attend a faith school. It supports the view of the RE coordinator and Rudge (2004) who both believe parents want a Religious Education for their children if they choose to send them to a faith school. However, this does not explain the response from a parent who believed their child should not be taught RE at this age but answered that the faith of the school was the most important reason for choosing the setting. The parent did not elaborate on any of her answers, highlighting a disadvantage of using questionnaires in analysing data (Burton et al. 2008).

The RE co-ordinator said she felt children were never too young to learn about RE because she felt 'religion is about love' (RE Co-ordinator, Interview). Her answer could have been affected by her role as the co-ordinator of the subject (Denscombe 2010), so to her the teaching of RE is important at all ages. The teacher, Head and TA felt young

children were unable to understand the Christian philosophy but were able to comprehend the idea of God which supports the theories of Petrovich (2011); Rizzuto (1979) and Hull (1991). The interviewees' answers also complemented the views of Bastide (2007) and Petrovich (2011) that children need to be taught RE at their own level of understanding and through their own experiences. Though this contrasted with the theories of McCreery et al. (2008) and Cooper et al. (2010) that children have not had experiences for RE to relate to.

The interviews were carried out during the Christian time of Lent and the teacher and TA gave the example of teaching children about Lent as a time of becoming a nicer person. To teach them about new life they installed an incubator in the classroom with eggs and the children watched the chicks hatch. The Sunday school teacher said if RE is made 'relevant to their day to day life' then children are able to have more of an understanding complementing the view of Teece (2001) that children learn from experience. It could be argued that this could be said about teaching young children any subject (Carr 2007) but not one of the interviewees said this nor compared RE to any other subjects. However the teacher said the children get 'confused with religious terminology' and so they are careful how they teach some parts as some children pick up on words and 'use them out of context which can upset others' (Teacher, Interview). She gave the example of once calling out a child's name and another child shouting out 'he's been crucified!' McCreery et al. (2008) and Rudge (2004) agree young children do not have a sufficient vocabulary to learn some aspects of religion. However Nye (2009) disagrees and believes children do not need the vocabulary to learn about religion. The TA said they do not go into the 'gory sides of religion' and the teacher said she has stopped taking the children to watch the crucifixion play in the school at Easter time. This indicates that there are some parts of RE that a young child is not able to cope with or understand because it upsets them. It could be argued that teaching RE in this way is like showing a child a film and editing out the sad or scary parts. The teacher and TA believe young children should learn RE but only set parts of it. Cavalletti (1983) agrees that young children should not learn religion to scare them. However Berryman (2002) and Wolff-Pritchard (1992) believe children should not be sheltered from the darker sides of religion as they cannot learn the full meaning of it. Some parents too felt their children could not understand religion. As the chart (Figure 3) shows below, 68% answered that they felt their children were too young to understand.

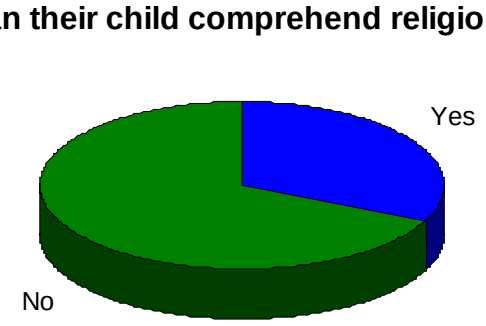

Figure 3: an their child comprehend religion?

Those who agreed that their child could not understand religion included the parents who believed their child should be taught the subject at this age. This could indicate

that parents believe children need to begin learning RE at some later stage which Beadle et al. (2007) and Bastide (2007) agree as this is how children develop. When analysing the transcripts and questionnaire results it became clear that the question should have been more defined as to what specific parts of religion they felt children could understand.

Theme 3

The third theme included that RE was considered by the interviewees to be just as important for young children to learn as other subjects. The question appeared hard for some of the participants to answer. The priest had no trouble, which was perhaps not surprising as RE is his role in the community, whereas the teacher and TA, whose jobs are to teach children religion, took longer to answer. This could be because teachers cannot justify it as important as other subjects because the Government and Education Boards have not made it compulsory to teach RE to children at that age, something the literature reviewed did not address.

The priest answered that teaching RE can 'encompass and enhance all the other areas of learning' (Priest, Interview). Beadle et al. (2007) and Watson and Thompson (2007) agree RE can contribute to all areas of the child's education. The Head Teacher and teacher said RE is more about the setting's everyday routine. The Head said RE is as important as it is 'about personal and social development' but went on to say this was not 'necessarily with a religious bent' (Head Teacher, Interview). This agrees with Bastide (2007: 47) who says RE can be 'implicit,' focusing on learning social and emotional skills needed to understand religion. This indicates again that the interviewees felt religion is more about who they are as a school than as a subject. The teacher appeared drawn on this question, perhaps feeling a struggle between her role as a teacher in a faith school and a teacher who has to give importance to subjects that she can assess children on and that count towards their statutory EYFS profile. She finally answered that it was hard for her to say in terms of importance as practising reading and writing is done individually whereas RE is carried out 'as collective worship' (Teacher, Interview). This indicates her role as a teacher is to assess children and therefore subjects that are compulsory to be assessed have to be seen as more important, again something which was not reviewed in the literature. The response from the RE co-ordinator that all subjects are of equal importance is perhaps not surprising as RE is the subject she takes charge of. She said the lessons children learn from RE, such as a sense of community and feeling loved, is important for the child to feel safe and confident to learn other subjects (Re coordinator, Interview). Bastide (2007) agrees such lessons are vital for a child.

Theme 4

The fourth theme included that RE could be beneficial for children at the school who do not come from religious families. Something found in the research, but not identified in the literature reviewed, was that the teacher felt some children who were not from religious homes found RE more interesting and were keener to learn about it than those from homes where religion is very much part of their lives. This view contrasts with the view of Halstead (2009) that RE is important for some children because of faith being part of their identity. The interviewees felt that by teaching RE at the school all children had the opportunity and experience of religion and to ask questions. The head answered that this was because many children in the nursery do

not attend church which indicates that he feels this is an important part of RE. The results from the questionnaire show that actually 72% of children attend a place of worship as the chart (Figure 4) shows below.

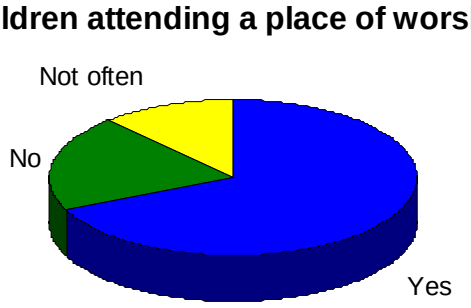

Figure 4: Children attending a place of worship

Some answered that they did not attend as much as they felt they should. Parents may have felt able to be so honest because of the advantage of the anonymous element of the questionnaires (Barbour 2008; O'Leary 2010). This result does not support what the Head Teacher believed and shows that many of the children do attend a place of worship which could explain why most answered faith was the main reason for sending their child to the setting. The priest gave the surprising, but perhaps realistic answer, that he believed RE is not always beneficial for all children as they can become confused, 'when the values in school are different from those at home' (Priest, Interview). The results of the questionnaire revealed 88% of parents talked with their children about religion at home as the chart (Figure 5) shows below, indicating it is something that a child may be inquisitive about especially if they attend a setting where religion is openly discussed and a parent or teacher will have to respond to the child's queries (Ashton 2000; Watson and Thompson 2007).

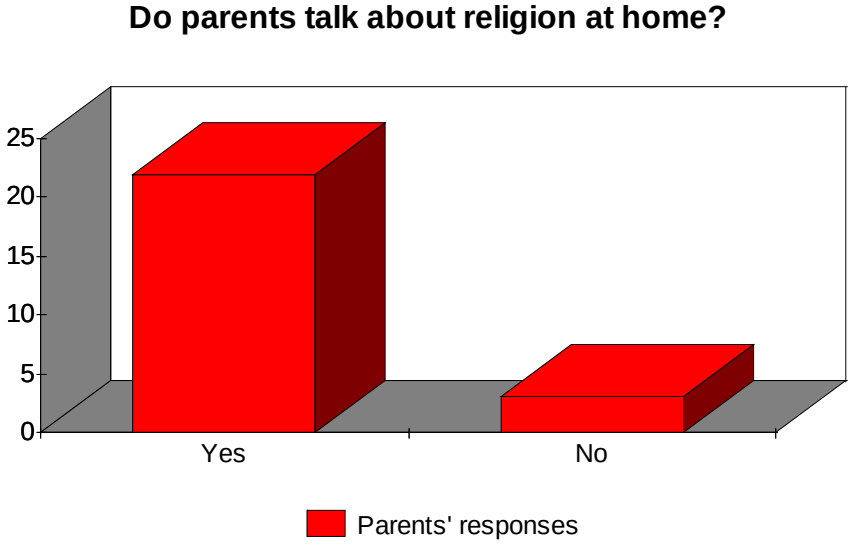

Figure 5: Do parents talk about religion at home?

Those who said they did talk about religion at home included those who had answered that they did not attend a place of worship and did not think their child could understand the teachings of RE. This indicated that religion is a part of life for everyone even if a family does not regard itself as religious (Brelsford 2005). As most parents talk to their children about religion it indicates that the setting needs to let parents know what they teach the children about religion so the children do not become caught in the middle between differing views as suggested by the priest.

This question revealed other areas such as the quite defensive answers that were given about the faith of the school. This could have been because as Cush (2008: 49) says religion has many 'negative overtones' as some see it as controlling. Another point the interviewees who worked at the school tried to make clear was that the children who are not of the Catholic faith are not segregated in the setting and the children learnt about other faiths as well as that of the school. The Head Teacher and priest both said that all children are given the same experience in the school. Although all the people interviewed bar one were Catholic, none of them seemed to feel the need to push the Catholic religion of the school onto the children or parents and made it clear that this was something they did not do. The interviewees said that RE is not about teaching young children Catholicism, it is about teaching them to care for one another and to become respectful and thoughtful people which agrees with the views of Bastide (2007) and Cooper et al. (2010). The teacher said that just because some children have not experienced religion does not mean they are going to become bad people. The Head said those at the school 'do not throw down our religion' and the school was 'no more caring than the school down the road' (Head, Interview). In the same reply the Head Teacher and teacher defended the faith of the school as the Head said the school has a 'Christian open witness of who we are as Christians with a Catholic ritual and heritage' (Head, Interview) and the teacher said it was the parents' decision whether to send their child to the school as the Catholic faith is 'definitely not something we hide' (Teacher, Interview). The Head went on to say the school sees religion as more about 'morals and how we treat each other.' Beadle et al. (2007) and Bailey (2002) agree this is an aim of RE. The answers especially of the Head and the teacher are defensive of their faith but at the same time they point out that the children who are not Catholic are still treated the same at the school. The teacher believed it gave children the experience of religion but then seemed to doubt her answer when she said she was not sure it was the best thing for children, 'because how do we define that?' (Teacher, Interview). The RE co-ordinator said that through sharing other religious faiths the children can 'develop a sense of who they are in their own community.' It could be deduced from the interviews that it is a misunderstanding when people have a negative view of RE and regard faith schools as not being inclusive. The lessons being taught to the children are simpler than might be believed. The misconception from those who think religion is not beneficial as they see it as controlling (Cush 2008) is argued within the interviews as RE for them is about being taught to respect others and to teach this at the children's level. The result from the questionnaire that 72% did not attend a Sunday school as the chart shows below indicates that the only Religious Education most children receive is in this setting. This result was surprising when looking at the numbers of children who attend a place of worship. It may be that some places of worship do not have a Sunday school or that children who attend the Catholic Church attend different masses to the morning Liturgy group. Five out of the six Polish questionnaires answered that the child did not attend a Sunday school which could indicate that language barriers play a part in attending Sunday schools.

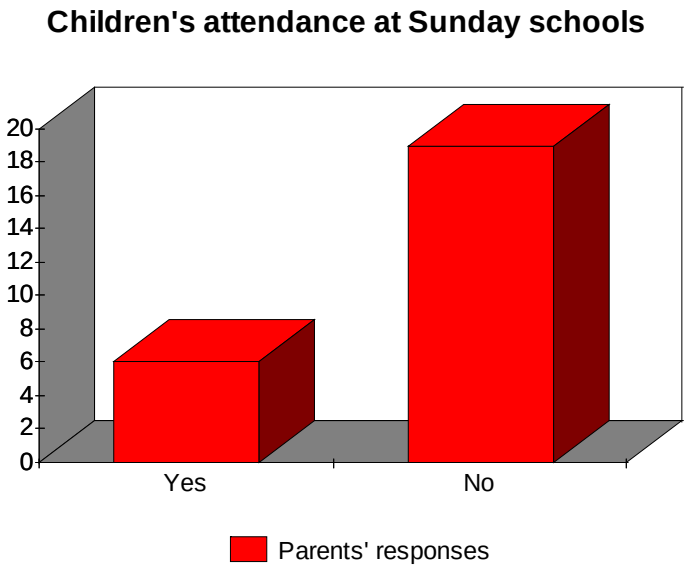

Figure 6: Children's attendance at Sunday Schools

Something identified throughout the transcript from the Head Teacher was his use of the word 'we' indicating that he sees the teaching of RE in his school as something that is carried out as a team. Using the word 'we' shows he was answering very much in his role as Head of the setting even though the questions asked 'do you feel…?' (Denscombe 2010). This was also identified in the transcripts of the teacher and TA who also used the word 'we' indicating teamwork in teaching RE and also because of the large number of practitioners that work within the Foundation Stage. The Head and the teacher gave harmonious answers in their interviews and this could be due to school policies which may have influenced their answers rather than their own personal views (Denscombe 2010).

Conclusions and Implications

The research question asked 'Whether or not RE should be taught to children in the Foundation Stage in faith schools?' The aim was to gain the views of those involved with children in the Foundation Stage in a faith school as to why they have chosen to teach RE, a subject not considered compulsory by the Government, and whether they feel children at this age should be taught it. The research found that while the majority of interviewees and participants of the questionnaires felt RE should be taught to children in the Foundation Stage, there were differing views on whether children can comprehend religion in both the data and literature. Religious terminology and the darker sides of religion, such as the Crucifixion, were felt too complex for young children to understand (Rudge 2004; McCreery at al. 2008; Teacher, Interview) although it was also felt that teaching RE at the child's level of understanding could allow for some parts to be understood (Teece 2001; Petrovich 2011).

The research project found the faith of the school had an impact on the answers produced as staff felt they should teach RE because it was a faith setting and felt parents wanted their children to receive RE as they had chosen to send them to a faith school, this was supported by the results of the questionnaires. This raises the question

of whether the staff would have still given the same answers if it was not a faith school and whether they would still feel it is important for young children to learn RE. Further research could look at the opinions of those at a non-faith school and used together with the data from this research project for a larger comparison study on whether or not RE should be taught in the Foundation Stage of all settings, religious or not.

The research also found that although literature suggests RE should not be considered differently from other areas of learning in the Foundation Stage pressure from the Government and Education Boards on schools can mean staff cannot see RE as important as other subjects. The literature suggests this may have a negative effect on children as RE relates to and benefits many other areas of learning.

The data revealed that RE is considered important for children from non-religious families as it gives them the opportunity to experience religion, supported by the views of the questionnaire as the number of parents who felt their child should learn RE at this age included those who did not attend a place of worship. The questionnaires revealed that 88% of the parents talk to their children about religion which suggests religion is a part of life for everyone even if a family does not regard itself as religious and the interviews and literature found it is something children may be inquisitive about (Ashton 2000; Watson and Thompson 2007).

Although it can be concluded from this research project that it was felt by most participants that RE should be taught in the Foundation Stage in faith schools, the research was only carried out in one setting so it cannot be considered as a generalised view of all faith schools. Yet the views of those involved with the teaching of RE to children at this age at the setting are valuable.

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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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