Learning to Talk, Talking to Learn: An Action Research Project to Investigate How Practitioners' Interactions with Children Under Six Support the Development of Language and Communication Skills through a Play based Approach to Learning within a Formalised School Environment

Alicia Blanco-Bayo, Kirkham Grammar School, United Kingdom

Abstract

Adult-child interaction during play as an approach to teaching and learning with children from 3 to 6 years of age in a formalised school environment is described in an Action Research study. The study was carried out in an independent school in the Northwest of England where focus groups were used to encourage self-reflection and group discussions with the aim of provoking change in practice. The answers to the key questions asked during the discussions generated data that determined how participants felt about using play as a hands-on approach to learning. Following a period of trialling of play as a strategy, it was concluded that there was a place for play as a teaching and learning strategy in a formalised school environment. However, it was also noticed that instructional delivery of concepts was still a curriculum expectation. The findings showed how adult-child interaction could have an impact on the development of language and communication skills. It was also confirmed that participants benefited by discussing own practice and how a support network was created during the focus group discussions. The fact that participants knew one another provided a relaxed environment that encouraged dialogue with a common aim in mind. Participants questioned whether formal teaching and learning was a parental expectation in an independent school. It was identified that further research was needed with the aim of sharing with parents the benefits play can have on the development of children's language and communication skills. The trialling of play strategies was carried out by each of the seven participants in a relaxed manner that fitted in with the regular day to day life of the school. This confirmed the need for further research to study the impact specific play strategies may have on the development of individual children over a period of time.

Keywords: independent school, parental expectations, hands-on approach, play, environment, adult-child interaction, communication and language, Action Research, focus groups and reflective practice.

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Introduction

This paper presents the action research study that was carried out within an independent school context and defines what each chapter includes. The context and background to the study are described to give a real perspective as a starting point to the research.

It also explains the reasons why the topic of adult-child interaction through play was chosen having considered previous research studies (Vygotsky, 1978; Hrncir, 1989; Irenson & Blay, 1999; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) and two government policies (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2014).

Context and background to the Study

Although I have written unpublished essays, articles and training sessions for use in practice; it was the interactions between myself and a 3 year old child which led me to plan a research study to investigate the purpose of adult-child interaction during meaningful play (Robert-Holmes, 2012).

As described by Kincheloe (2003), prior to any real investigation a meaningful scenario must be created so that those taking part in the study can see themselves in the picture. His angle on the use of Action Research directed my thoughts to a point of reflection about the way play was being approached in the school I worked for. Conclusively, the focus became the type of practice and the participants any of the practitioners working with children from 3 to 6 years of age. The interesting challenge would be to bring people together to discuss own practice and as a group reflect on experiences with children as play had been used as an approach to learning (Ahsam et al. 2006).

This section introduces the study. Furthermore, an analysis of previous literature can be studied in a detailed investigation carried out as piece of research for the University of Sheffield which I carried out for my MA dissertation. The perspective I explored looks at the relevance of play as an approach to teaching and learning as I consider Tozer's (2016) perspective. How independent schools have been defined through history and the current definition of what they offer is also briefly explored in this chapter. The use of play as a teaching and learning strategy is described as I analyse the impact it can have on the development of language and communication skills. The analysis of key research confirms the benefits of adult-child interaction during play expanding on Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding theory. The study of learning through play as individual stages of development are considered and is then related to the findings of Irenson & Blay (1999); Smilansky & Shefatya (1990); Isenberg & Quisenberry (2002); Walsh & Gardner (2005); Robert-Holmes, (2012) and McInnes et al. (2013).

The study also examines the use of Action Research as the methodology used to identify whether there is a place for play as a hands-on approach to learning in an independent school. It also justifies the use of Focus Groups to encourage reflection and dialogue amongst participants as Wellington (2000) and Sagor (2005) suggest. This chapter also shows how individual and group reflections can be the key to acknowledge the need for change (Öztok, 2016). Furthermore, it analyses the data

collected during three focus groups discussions as it relates it to the concepts of adult-child interaction, learning through play and the learning environment. It then mentions how instructional teaching was brought to the discussion as participants connected with each other during the process of reflection.

The final section of the study analyses the conclusions reached from the focus group discussions as participants' responses are grouped in three main sections – Adult-child interaction, Learning through play and The learning environment- in order to answer the research question.

Research Question

Rather than defining the ideology of a school of thought, and bearing in mind that the participants were open to highly purposeful teaching and learning strategies; it seemed like a convenient time to trial varied hands-on strategies to initiate a cycle of reflection (Grieshaber & Ryan, 2015). This small scale study reflects on the impact adult-child interaction can have on the development of children's language and communication skills as they learn through play.

Whilst this study aims to analyse how participants use adult-child interaction during play to promote the development of language and communication skills (Fisher, 2011), it is hoped that Action Research will provoke a sense of reflection needed to provoke change in practice (NcNiff, 2014).

Having considered the option of studying the development of a 3 year old girl in particular in an attempt to demonstrate how play could provide what she needed to support the development of her language and communication skills, I reflected on my own practice and discovered that trialling a series of playful activities with one child over a period of time might not provide enough evidence to influence change in practice. Therefore, a period of self-assessment to analyse the reasons why I believed play could have such an impact on the development of language and communication skills was needed (Cullen et al. 2009).

Following this period of self-reflection, I put together the following research question: *Can practitioners' interactions with children under six support the development of language and communication skills through a play based approach to learning within a formalised school environment?*

Throughout the five chapters in this small scale study, I analyse the impact that adult-child interaction can have on the development of children's language and communication skills, as argued by Hrncir (1989); Irenson and Blay (1999) and Bruce (1994). How play can be used to facilitate learning is also explored according to Vygotsky (1978); Isenberg & Quisenberry (2002) and Robert-Holmes (2012). Furthermore, I examine the purpose of an enabling environment as I refer to the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2014) and Walsh & Gardner's (2005) perspective on adapting the environment according to children's needs. The study also analyses the expectations of the Primary National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) as the Spoken Language Statutory Requirements are related to the Communication & Language Early Learning Goals included in the EYFS Framework (DfE, 2014). This is followed by the analysis of the way play can be adapted to provide for individual

children's needs as suggested by Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot (2010) and Fisher (2011).

The use of focus groups is explored according to Krueger & Casey (2015), Cullent et al. (2009) and Cohen et al. (2015) as participants learned to relate to each other during a process of reflection and analysis of own practice over a period of ten weeks. How this small scale Action Research study used those reflections to influence change is also analysed using Creswell (2013) and Van Manen (1990) perspectives.

Conclusion

This section summarises the whole study and it describes how an Action Research approach enabled participants in this study to explore the use of a hands-on approach to play. It also identifies how the use of focus groups facilitated the opportunity for participants to discuss and reflect on aspects of their own practice which in turn helped to increase their confidence as they begun to develop a shared understanding.

Action research

Action Research provided a suitable methodological approach to the 'change' which I had intended to examine when I embarked on this study. Self-reflection was central to my own thinking. The plan was through the use of focus groups to discuss and analyse the perspectives of the participants on 'play' so that an agreed action could be put into place and then analysed within a cycle of reflection and hopefully a change in practice. This way, participants would actually be suggesting the changes themselves as Wellington (2000) suggests.

I envisaged at the starting point of my investigation that the participants might feel unsure as to what was expected from them and may feel daunted by the task (Cullen et al. 2009). Furthermore, I fully acknowledge that forms of play did already take place within daily practice. Therefore, there was a dilemma for me from the outset as I needed to explain to the likely participants why I considered there was a need to explore the effects of play on children's developing language and communication skills without influencing the adult's thinking (Grieshaber & Ryan, 2015). In order to provide answers to all possible questions before hand, the information sheet included a detailed explanation of what was expected from participants. This was followed by opportunities for individual discussions with me about any specific aspects before any participants agreed to take part in the research. One person queried whether the quality of her practice was being questioned. This aspect was clarified with the support of the Headmistress who had agreed for the research to be carried out. This is not an unusual concern when participants are approached to take part in research about their own practice. I understood that despite a willingness to participate it was entirely to be expected that some participants may feel unsettled and require further information about the aims and objectives of the study and the impact it might have upon them. Gaining informed consent requires the researcher to be able to be ethical in all aspects of the research from beginning to end and beyond (Braun & Clarke, 2013) As Krueger & Casey (2015) suggest, a relaxed and comfortable environment where each participant felt their voice mattered was provided. All participants engaged in conversation although at times, some participants overpowered the conversation. As the facilitator, I redirected the discussion to include those

participants who showed signs of reluctance to join in. It could be argued that because we are all white women there was a sense of inclusion (Smithson, 2000). However, as Krueger & Casey (2015) argues there is a danger in assuming that all participants would provide similar perspectives since they might have had experiences outside the school circle the moderator was not aware of. The variety of perspectives discussed enabled me, as the researcher, to observe participant's body language as they engaged in conversation. When I listened to the audio recordings, I was also listening not just to what they said but the way they said it. I recalled their facial expressions and the way participants looked at each other contributed to my later analysis of the transcripts. As recognised by Cohen et al. (2015), being able to moderate a discussion so that behaviour can also be interpreted is a crucial part of analysing qualitative data. The few signs of concern that had appeared before the research slowly disappeared as the participants were given equal opportunity to discuss each other's practice. The discussions became more of a support network for participants, and even those that had found it a challenge not to dominate the talk, eventually listened and commented on their own practice in relation to others', as suggested by Morgan (1988).

As the participants interacted with each other their thoughts and current practice were discussed openly with some moderated direction when needed and there was a sense that the participants enjoyed the process of self-reflection. I did find it difficult not to agree or disagree with some of the responses as Krueger & Casey (2015) identified might happen. However, I reminded myself it was important to take a neutral role in the discussion and simply support the participants so they would all have an opportunity to talk about their own practice. These were observations I made during the focus groups discussions but when brief comments about their own practice were made over a cup of coffee in the staff room, I realised how much the methodology was having an impact on the way participants talked about their own practice in public. This confirmed that Action research through focus groups discussions was fulfilling the purpose of this research. The self-reflective nature of the methodology impacted on the participants' ability to reflect on their own practice in relation to the development of children's language and communication skills. As the focus groups continued, the participants willingly shared strategies that had either worked well or not so well. As described by Clough & Nutbrown (2012), being able to meet on more than one occasion made the interactions between participants more purposeful. As I began to analyse participants' responses I became aware of the impact this piece of research was having on the participants. As identified by Holly (1989), reflecting and sharing daily practice were the key elements that influenced change. By drawing on participants' own experiences meant they were sharing the highs and lows, the challenges and dilemmas and enabled them to feel less judgemental of one another and of themselves which often came to light during times of pressure. My role became to ensure the environment felt secure. I went through a process of self-reflection myself and concluded that by ensuring participants felt comfortable, I was enabling the environment. I was making sure participants had opportunities to further their knowledge as they shared their own experiences.

On reflection, I could have asked for specific details about a particular child in each class. This would have provided me with examples of the impact a hands-on approach through play could have on the development of language and communication skills. As it happened, the examples that participants provided were generic and described the impact that had been noticed on the whole group of children. My initial idea of

observing a child's reactions as predetermined strategies were applied, as suggested by Knottnerus & Tugwell (2010) could have been brought into the research. Although such close observations would have added another dimension to the study it would have required a longer period of time to prepare which I did not have.

The findings of this small scale study did not show whether the selection of participants were diverse enough to have a big impact on the overall teaching strategies that were used in the school. There was not enough data to make any generalised claims about whether a hands-on approach to play has a place in all independent school. Nevertheless, this study was set up specifically to consider the practice within my own school and therefore as previously discussed, using an action research approach did facilitate a change in the way participants enable the environment so that children have opportunities to apply the knowledge acquired after periods of instructional teaching.

The research question

Whilst I could have justified the reasons why play could be so beneficial, that was something individual practitioners could find out for themselves. Therefore, I chose to bring people together so that good practice could be discussed, shared and developed even further.
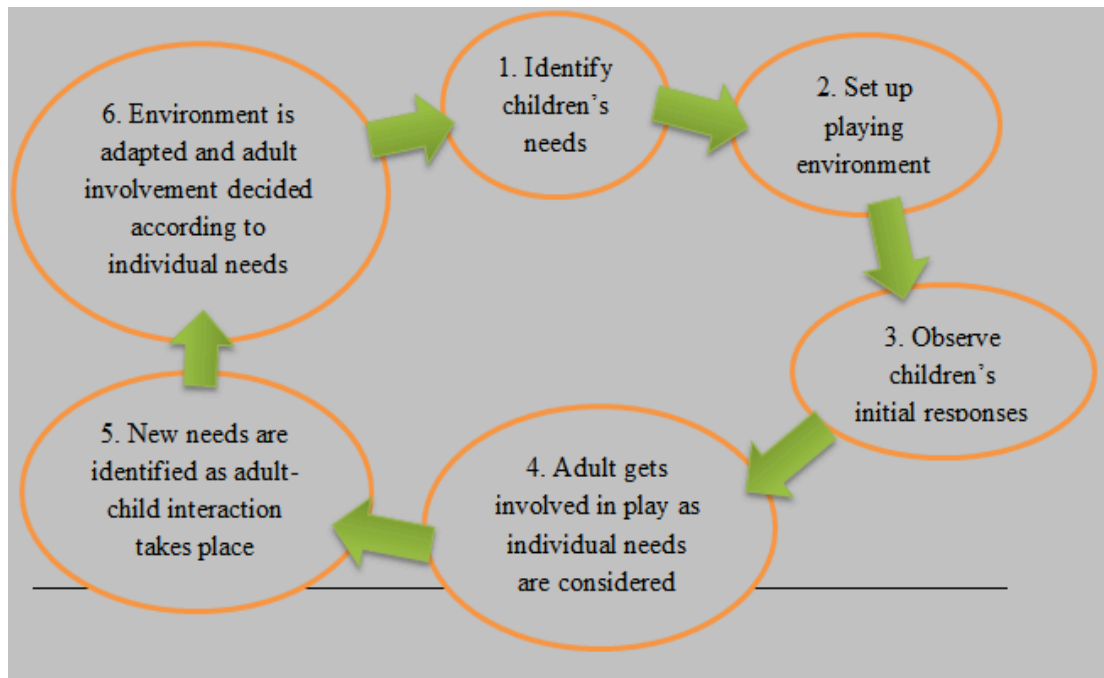
I reflected on the relationship I developed with a 3 year old who in my practice had taught me to listen so that I could understand where she was at and what she needed. The powerful moments of interaction that we shared together were the starting point for this project and were central to my ideas about the role of the adult-child interaction during play. As a result I constructed the following research question:

Can practitioners' interactions with children under six support the development of language and communication skills through a play based approach to learning within a formalised school environment?

The research question was planned while working in an independent school. I chose to build on the subtle changes that the school had begun to undertake. I wanted to discover whether play had a place in a formalised school environment and an action research approach enabled members of the team to be included in the research in participation with me as opposed to have research done to them (Smithson, 2010).

Summary of Findings

Based on the findings of this study participants did realise that open-ended activities that encouraged spontaneous adult-child interactions could be beneficial to children from 3 to 6 years of age, as identified by Ireson and Blay (1999). They also concluded that the interactions could be planned according to what children were ready for and needed, as suggested by Trawik-Smith (2010) and Vygotsky (1978). This supports the interpretation of the cycle of learning described in the Circle of responsive behaviour below (Blanco-Bayo, 2016)

1. Identify children's needs

2. Set up playing environment

3. Observe children's initial responses

4. Adult gets involved in play as individual needs are considered

5. New needs are identified as adult-child interaction takes place

6. Environment is adapted and adult involvement decided according to individual needs

When participants discussed how children were showing more confidence when they were allowed to interact during more open-ended activities, it became clear that they felt child initiated learning had a place in their classrooms; as identified by Fisher (2011). However, they also said they felt time to teach concepts was needed. This could be due to the way terminology is used in the Primary National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) that refers to the Spoken Language Statutory Requirements as skills that should be taught. I did notice that participants interpreted some of the curriculum expectations as the instructional delivery of concepts. This continues to question how much of the hands-on approach to play can be implemented with the independent school sector.

Conclusions and further research

This research became an opportunity to share good practice and learn to reflect on some of the approaches that can have a bigger impact on the development of children's language and communication skills. Robert-Holmes (2012) defines reflective practice as the strategy that can have an impact on the development of new systems, and I can see how this occurred throughout this research. Participants showed a willingness to use hands-on approaches during a variety of lessons and the depth of their reflections was such, some of them made suggestions as to what should change within the school to make learning more practical. There was, however, a concern about what parental expectations may be and that made participants believe that some instructional whole class teaching was expected in an independent school which fits in with Wood's assertion in Brooker (2012b), " … parents who, for a variety of reasons, are unconvinced that playful activities are as effective as didactic ones…" (p.27-28).

From a researcher's perspective and listening to participants' voices, I can foresee the need for future discussions aimed at sharing examples with parents of the impact play can have on the development of children's language and communication skills. All participants were in favour of using a hands-on approach to learning through play in

their classrooms. However, they questioned whether an independent school that had been known as a Grammar School for over 500 years was ready for it on a more permanent basis?

Further discussions are also advised if the intention is to change the approaches used on a more permanent basis. If adult-child interaction during play was brought into an enabled environment as a hands-on approach to learning, as suggested by Fisher (2011), it could provide what children need throughout the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. Participants were able to see it for themselves over a short period of time. However, gauging and changing the views of parents is an area that could be explored as the new generations of parents are faced with a more modern approach to independent education.

Further research with a range of participants from several independent schools of similar characteristics who could trial very specific strategies with certain type of children is worthy of further investigation.
A larger scale research should also be carried out so that adult-child interactions, play and the learning environment in a range of independent schools can be studied in more detail.

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