

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE: CAN EDUCATORS FACILITATE LEARNERS' SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DURING CONFLICTS BETWEEN PEERS?

MAKING USE OF TEACHABLE MOMENTS IN AN EARLY YEARS SETTING

Introduction

This small scale research project was carried out in 2013 and constituted my dissertation for an M.A. in Early Childhood Education at the University of Sheffield. It concerned educators' responses to conflicts between peers aged three to five in an independent school in central England. I was the lead of three EYFS practitioners who took part in the study and who managed a cohort of eighteen children.

The major tenet upon which the study was based was that incidents of conflict between peers offer significant learning opportunities for them in the social and emotional domains.

Context

My interest in conflict stemmed from previous professional experience as a lawyer mediator working with adults. Mediation is a form of dispute resolution whereby the mediator acts impartially, facilitating constructive dialogue and managing power imbalances between the parties in dispute. A fundamental principle of mediation practice is that the ownership of the process is retained by the parties. As a mediator, I was able to witness first-hand what I perceived as benefits in terms of personal growth and improved communication skills to the parties involved, irrespective of their ages, levels of education or professional standing. My experience as a mediator informed my practice as an early childhood educator and it inspired my commitment to optimising agency in learners.

Why a focus on social development?

Social competence concerns the ability to forge mutually satisfying relationships with others, (Katz and McClellan, 1997; Stanton-Chapman et.al. 2012). In their meta-analysis of effective practice in the social domain Weare and Gray (2003 p.34) reported that 'emotional and social competences have been shown to be more influential than cognitive abilities for personal,

career and scholastic success'. They confirmed that focusing on developing competences should begin 'from a very young age' and that children 'need to be taught in the kinds of environments that promote emotional and social competence from the start' (p.52).

Learners with poor social skills may frequently find themselves involved in conflicts, thereby risking further alienation in a cycle of unsuccessful attempts to engage with peers (Katz and McClellan 1997; McCay and Keyes 2002). Rejection by peers limits access to positive social experiences. This in turn may prevent rehearsal of the very skills needed to develop competences. I was keen to explore whether, in our practice, we were utilising opportunities for the rehearsal of those skills necessary to forge positive relationships with peers.

Why a focus on conflict?

The definition of conflict used in the study was adopted from Chen (2003 p.203) as where 'a person protests, retaliates or resists the actions of another'. Conflict is inevitable wherever there is human interaction (DeVries and Zan, 1994). It is often perceived as intrinsically negative, to be avoided if possible and apprehended at the first opportunity. Numerous research studies suggest that educator strategies which focus upon achieving compliance, subduing and preventing distraction from the formal curriculum, dominate at the expense of those which offer learners opportunities for active participation, and collaboration (Bayer et al. 1995; Chen, 2003; Silver and Harkins, 2007; Blank and Schneider, 2011). It is my view that engaging in conflicts as they occur, supported by a more able other if necessary, affords learners opportunities to develop their conflict management skills. Therefore my study focused not on the resolution of conflict but its management by educators and learners.

Why a focus on teachable moments?

Arcaro-McPhee et al. (2002 p.20) use the phrase 'teachable moments' to describe how educators might observe, monitor and react 'only when children's skills fail them' I adopted the term 'teachable moments' in recognition of the fleeting nature of unplanned opportunities for learning. I was attracted by the notion that optimising interventions potentially optimises learner agency.

Advances in neuroscience affirm Dewey's (1938) assertion of the importance of direct experience in learning. Rushton, (2011 p.89) advocates the use of pedagogy consistent with current neuro-scientific knowledge. He asserts that 'children's brains need to be immersed in real-life, hands-on, and meaningful learning experiences' for effective learning' A pedagogy which embraces the notion of teachable moments aims to tune into the direct real-time experiences of learners whereas a generic teaching programme does not.

Methodology

The study was informed by a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). The research design comprised aspects of case study, grounded theory and action research. The intention was to collect qualitative data by way of observation from the whole cohort of eighteen children and colleagues working directly with them; three adults in total.

The research questions

There were three research questions:

- How did educators respond to conflicts between peers?
- Was there evidence of educators' attempts to support social development of learners?
- Was there evidence that educators' responses facilitated the social development of learners at the setting?

Ethical considerations

The prima facie status of children as a vulnerable group was compounded by my relationship of personal and institutionalised authority in respect of them. Since this could not be neutralised the onus was upon me to establish a robust ethical framework for researching with children and vigilance in its maintenance. Ethical considerations were integral to the design of the study and so all of the cohort were potential participants as I wanted to avoid singling out particular learners as causes for concern, thereby perceiving them as 'problematic'. I wanted to minimise intrusion and so determined that no learner would be recorded for more than fifteen minutes per day. (In fact the longest recording was under six minutes).

Consent for participation was sought from children, parents, colleagues and the senior management of the school. The highest ethical burden was establishing informed consent or assent on the part of children given that our fiduciary relationship would be easy to exploit. To obviate this likelihood I phased the seeking of consent over a period to give them time to reflect upon what was being proposed but not so long as to lose relevance for them before the project began. I spoke to them first as a cohort choosing the language I employed to be commensurate with their receptive language attainment levels.

I familiarised the children with the tools I would employ and they were able to explore the audio equipment themselves to make sense of its function. The following day I spoke to each potential participant individually to ascertain their consent. I took account of demeanour and body language as well as verbal responses. On-going consent was monitored throughout the project so that recording would cease immediately if any participant appeared uncomfortable or compromised as a result of the data collection procedures.

All data was anonymised by using pseudonyms and audio data was destroyed at the end of the study.

Method

Data collection took place over five consecutive days. Each day I carried a small cloth bag over my arm containing the audio recorder. Every conflict I observed in that period was recorded by me. Every evening I listened to each recording made during that day and if it satisfied my criterion as a conflict, I transcribed it there and then. I collected all of the data myself. All three of the practitioners in the setting were recorded. My colleagues were given no instructions other than a description of the study in the information sheet prior to its commencement.

Analysis

The *raison d'être* for the study was to evaluate practice so I was keen to avoid using pre-determined codes in my analysis which may have caused me to discount valuable data. Therefore I adopted an inductive approach, allowing the codes to 'emerge' (Cohen Manion and Morrison, 2007).

In my analysis each research question was addressed in turn. When asking 'How did educators respond to conflicts between peers?' I categorised each event as either a cessation or a mediation strategy. Cessation approaches were characterised by educator attempts to bring the event to a close by imposition of a judgement, direction or closed question(s). Mediation approaches were characterised by educator attempts to facilitate management of the process by the parties themselves. The one event where there was no educator involvement was classed as mediation strategy since it fulfilled this criterion.

When considering the second question 'Was there evidence of educators' attempts to support social development of learners? I analysed the data in terms of whether educators' responses gave opportunities for social skills rehearsal on the part of learners.

The third research question, 'Was there evidence that educators' responses facilitated the social development of learners at the setting?' concerned learner responses. To address the question I based my analysis on what learners did as a result of the educators' strategies.

I used cultural domain analysis to organise my data (Malloy and McMurray, 1996; Cohen et al 2007). Having divided the data into categories of cessation or mediation strategies, I subdivided each into whether or not the educator approaches were potentially 'enabling.' I then focused on what the learner responses were and coded those comparing events and refining the codes several times in an attempt to ensure consistency of interpretation and across codes. The categories of social skills which emerged were as follows:

- **Constructive dialogue** (engagement/acknowledgement/negotiation)
- **Active listening** (response – verbal or non-verbal)
- **Clarification of issues**
- **Mutualising** (recognition of shared goals or interests)
- **Accommodation** (compromise, offer of solution, empathy, generosity, friendly overture, altruism)

These categories were then coded as to levels of educator support.

Findings

The results indicated educators' responses to conflicts enabled learning opportunities in emotional, social and language domains. Learning opportunities were enabled where educators were neutral in approach; listened; invited dialogue between the parties; explored issues by questioning rather than directing; clarified positions; mutualised areas of agreement; offered solutions; acknowledged feelings and affirmed pro-social conduct. Aside from directing the parties to meet, no directives were given.

Learners were enabled with or without support to engage in dialogue, listening, clarifying issues, mutualising and problem solving. Problems were articulated and sometimes solutions generated. Learners were enabled to practise several skills intrinsic to social development from a Vygotskian social constructivist perspective. Language plays an important role in social cognitive development (Bayer et al, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, (1978) using speech as an interpersonal function precedes the development of its intrapersonal use as a problem-solving tool. In several of the conflict events children engaged in 'self-talk' as well as social speech.

The relative value of each event in terms of potential learning is revealed by examination of the individual event data. By way of illustration I have included an annotated transcript: This conflict event involved George, a boy aged 4 years 11 months and Gilbert a boy aged 5 years and 2 months. A game of pirates is taking place between Gilbert, George, Billy and Florence in the garden. Billy alerted Olive, the educator to tell her that George had taken Gilbert's sword.

Transcript	Exchange	Mediation strategy
6		
George	(Shouting) I didn't snatch it you liar!	
Olive	(Calmly) George, could you come here please?	Neutral approach
George	(Calmly) I didn't snatch it.	
Billy	(Calmly) You did	
George	I didn't	
Billy	Did	
George	I just said I'd give him a thousand pounds	
Billy	He didn't	
George	I did	
Olive	Gilbert, Could you come here too please? Ok, who does this involve?	Brings parties together

George	I said I'd give him a thousand pounds didn't I Gilbert?	
Olive	Gilbert could you tell me, or could you tell George what happened?	Invites dialogue between parties
Gilbert	He just snatched it off and said please, please, please loads of times	
Olive	Said please, please, please loads of times? Because you really wanted that did you? (To George)	Acknowledges feelings
George	(quietly) Yeah...	
Olive	And who had it?	Seeks clarification
Gilbert	(Calmly) I had it first	
Olive	Is that right?	Seeks consensus
George	Mmm...	
Olive	So what could we do?	Asks learners to generate solutions
Florence	Maybe... maybe, George can go first, Gilbert can go first, George can go first and Gilbert can go first	
Olive	So they could take it in turns?	
Florence	Yeah!	
Olive	I think taking turns is a good idea but...	
George	Oh! Another good idea! You can have the hat and I can have the sword! And that'd be a good idea! Yeah? So we can both be Peter Pans.	
Gilbert	Oh we can't. We can't	
Olive	Why?	
Florence	Because there's no because there's no...two Peter Pans	
Gilbert	I think we have to make two Peter Pan costumes	
Olive	Do you? Is there any? What bit did you really want?	
Florence	I'm going to read my Peter Pan book	
George	I just really wanted this (the sheath he's wearing)	
Olive	You really wanted that. What about you? (To Gilbert)	
Gilbert	Erm... I think we have to make Peter Pan costumes	
Florence	Wait, wait... I got a genius...	
Olive	Wait a minute 'cos we need to listen to Gilbert and what he wants because he had it first. What do you think?	Seeks to maintain ownership of process by protagonists
Gilbert	I think you have to make Peter Pan costumes. One for George and one for me.	

In the above exchange mediation strategy enabled Gilbert and George to assert their positions, generate their own solutions, mutualise their interests and compromise. These

actions represent evidence of interpersonal skills. In addition George was able to regulate his emotion which before the intervention had been unregulated as evidenced by his aggression. Following this, George and Gilbert went off together to find the resources they needed to make their costumes.

Conclusions

The study provided evidence that mediation strategies dominated as responses to conflict events in the setting and that educators' use of teachable moments in conflict events did afford opportunities to facilitate learners' social development.

One advantage of this approach was that that educators were able to use conflict events as an opportunity for formative assessment and engage in complex interactions with individuals, making more finely grained judgements about their learning (Torrance and Prior 2001). Beyond the individual, collaboration was evidenced in all conflict events where mediation strategies were employed. Although the study focused only on data collected over a short time frame, the value of the strategies employed potentially impacted positively on the culture of the setting. In our practice my colleagues and I witnessed children use the strategies that adults had modelled to problem solve collaboratively and use assertive, constructive approaches to conflicts unprompted by educators. A possible explanation for this is that learners within the setting learned to perceive conflict as unlikely to produce disapproval, judgement or blame from educators and so defensiveness was lessened. The tacit acknowledgement of learners' rights to make choices, problem solve, assert their positions and be supported in maintaining control of their interactions, aimed to support their feelings of autonomy and agency, seen by social learning theorists as key to effective learning (Bandura 2001; Pritchard and Woollard 2010; Rushton 2011).

The recognition of a 'teachable moments' requires skilled judgement on the part of the practitioner. In an emotionally charged conflict event where children may be overwhelmed, the need to comfort and reassure will take priority but may themselves give rise to a 'teachable moment'.

The highlight of study for me was what intense scrutiny of the minutiae of interactions between peers revealed to me about the capabilities of the individuals involved. All of them were well known to me as my working day involved cycles of planning and observations based around them as will be familiar to all early childhood practitioners. However, my awareness of their potential as sophisticated agents in interpersonal exchange were heightened considerably reinforcing my conviction that we must recognise and respect the considerable capabilities of young learners.

Further research over a longer period with diverse cohorts could help establish whether the potential benefits of teachable moments as a pedagogic approach are evidenced over time and whether mediation strategies might prove a valuable tool for the early childhood educator.

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