

**Intervening or Interfering- using research to inform research; a personal journey  
to create a living educational theory on how best to support children displaying  
social withdrawal**

This briefing paper written to accompany a presentation given at the TACTYC Annual Conference 2013 is written intentionally in the first person. It is an account of my personal journey to resolve a contradiction in my professional practice by firstly considering the research of others' in the field and secondly by applying the evidence based on this research to my own practice.

Over the course of my career as an educator I have taken vicarious pleasure from watching happy children engrossed in play together and also imagined the sadness of the child left on the sidelines. I felt tensions and dilemmas regarding these children; whether intervention was always the best course of action. I reflected on whether professional love (van Manen 1997) required giving a child time and space to find their own way of making friends and whether intervention would encourage emotional dependence; or whether non-intervention was letting a child down.

“How much do I want to see? What could I do to enhance well-being?” (Prichard 1988, cited by Whitehead 1988: p.8) was a question that I reflected upon in relation to my practice. The professional love (van Manen 1997) I felt for the children in my care would ordinarily motivate me to actions. However, because I was afraid of doing the wrong thing, I did nothing at all and experienced a certain amount of guilt that I was not doing enough to help these socially withdrawn children. This created a contradiction between my espoused values and my values in action and thus I began a research study to resolve this incongruence.

I had observed that the majority of children formed friendships without difficulty, but there were always two or three each year who did not find the process easy, an average of 10%. This is consistent with findings of studies carried out over the last eighty years (for example, Gronlund 1959; Hymel and Asher 1977; Kuhlen & Lee 1943, cited by Asher & Renshaw 1981) indicating that between 5% and 10% of children in elementary school are named as a friend by no one in their class.

Rubin (1982) was the first to distinguish between two types of solitary behaviour that children might display. These were categorised in Coplan et al (1994) as:

- 1) **Solitary passive (p.130).** These children were object focussed or interested in playing almost exclusively with construction toys. This behaviour is positively reinforced by teachers, parents and peers in *early* childhood, but was found to result in peer rejection by *mid-late* childhood.
- 2) **Solitary active (p.130).** It was observed that this type of play reflected psychological immaturity and impulsivity, perhaps resulting in aggression towards other children. It was characterised by repeated sensorimotor actions with or without objects and /or non-social dramatic play. This category was correlated with peer rejection from as early as the pre-school years.

Coplan et al (1994), citing Aspengerpf (1991) added a third group of observed solitary behaviour in children:

- 3) **Reticent (p.130).** This behaviour was typified by long periods of watching other children without any accompanying play and being unoccupied. The behaviour remained constant in both novel and familiar situations. Aspendorpf found that reticent behaviour merged over time with solitary passive behaviour.

Harrist et al (1997) added a fourth category to add to the previous clusters found in earlier studies:

- 4) **Sad / depressed (p.289).** These were children who were described by their teachers as “self-isolating, timid and immature” (p. 289).

This typology confirmed my observations regarding the existence of social withdrawal. My next step was to use the literature to inform my actions regarding how best to help these children. The debate was equally balanced, with many factors to reflect upon on each side of the debate. However, for brevity I will outline just three of these factors, beginning with the reasons why intervention is not a suitable course of action, followed by the counter-argument as to why intervention is justified.

The first argument cautions that, although there are many reported benefits to living and associating with others, (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Hill 1987, cited by Leary, Herbst & McCrary 2002), when children become adults they will spend much of their time alone (Larson 1990, cited by Leary, Herbst & McCrary 2002). Additionally, research suggests that being able to comfortably spend time away from other people predicts life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Hills & Argyle 2000). When considering intervening to improve the social skills of children, it could be argued that in doing so they are not being prepared adequately for adulthood when the ability to be happy in one's own company is as important for well-being as being able to get along with other people.

Leary, Herbst and McCrary (2002) report additional benefits to being alone. Many scientific, creative or spiritual insights occur when people are on their own (Storr 1988; Suefield 1982, cited by Leary, Herbst & McCrary 2000). These observations concur with those of Allen (1981) who asks:

*“Will the work of psychologists who attempt to increase the popularity of the unpopular child result in depriving the world of valuable creative contributions? I must confess that I am sceptical about my scepticism. At the same time, it might be wise to pause before initiating any program of behavioural change to examine thoroughly the possibilities for negative consequences being produced even from the best of intentions.”* (p. 201).

It is doubtful, however, that if children are lonely and miserable at school that they will console themselves with the thought that, by being accustomed to solitude, they might make a scientific discovery in the future. Children who are unhappy at school are less likely to fully absorb all the learning offered, which leads to lower levels of performance (Ladd 1990). This is an important counter argument in the case for non-intervention.

The second argument cautioning against intervention is that it is unnecessary. Coplan et al. (2004), concluded that social disinterest in early childhood correlated positively with a higher attention span and less negative emotionality. Jennings (1975, cited by Coplan 2004) speculated that unsociable children might merely possess object as opposed to people-oriented personalities.

However, this observation required qualification. Although the children studied did not appear anxious about themselves or their abilities, their social disinterest was found to negatively correlate with peer exclusion, leading Coplan (2004) to suggest that there may be a cost associated with preference for solitude in early childhood, particularly in the sphere of peer relationships; another reason to consider intervention.

The final argument for caution is that the school environment only partly influences a child's disposition towards sociability. Zsolnai (2002) drawing from Tunstall (1994) identified three groups that significantly influence the formation of social competence. The first originated from the personality of the child; the family denoted the second influence, and the school environment produced the third. The most overwhelming influence on the development of social competence for all these factors was the family. In order to permanently change the social behaviour of children, the parents would also have to be given social skills training. Whilst there might be a need for this training, (Allen 1981), it would be a courageous educator who would attempt such a task.

It was this recognition that the family has more effect on children than school that concerned me the most, as I was not in a position to directly influence behaviour in children's homes. I reflected upon whether any intervention could claim to have positive results due to my actions when so many of the influences upon children were out of my control. However, after reflection, I realised that pre-school settings give children a unique opportunity to socially interact and make friends with other children and is an ideal environment to learn social skills such as sharing, empathy, communicating and socialising through play before starting school (Smith 2002).

Although any pre-school setting or school cannot negate the influence of the home environment, I concluded that I was in a unique position to help children to learn social skills and thus was morally justified in proceeding to apply the most effective ways of assisting the children at pre-school to gain social skills; effectively attempting to change their personalities to give a better chance of success in later life.

Having reached this conclusion I paused to reflect on what I hoped to achieve from my research. The issue was twofold; firstly how my own professional practice could be enhanced so that I could act drawing upon my combined critically reflective practice and new

theoretical knowledge; and how I could facilitate opportunities for positive social interactions between the children, thus resolving the contradiction of my values in action. Without reflecting upon my own learning throughout the process, enabling new understanding to improve my practice in the future, the research would potentially become just a work placed project, and its value would be diminished.

Choosing a suitable methodology for this process was the next step. Action research is often considered appropriate for those who want to carry out research in their own setting (Cunningham 1995, cited by Biggam 2008) and therefore, this strategy was one to which I gave deliberation. Action research follows an established iterative pattern whereby data is collected, analysed, more data is collected and so forth until a permanent solution is found (Mac Naughton & Hughes 2009).

This iterative pattern has the advantage of allowing the practitioner to demonstrate reflective practice (Mac Naughton & Hughes 2009), and interested me because I sought to be part of the evaluation cycle, appraising my own practice as well as its effects on selected children. However, action research was ultimately discounted because social withdrawal in the setting where I worked was not going to be resolved as a result of this research: other children encountered in the future would demonstrate slightly different traits of social withdrawal; therefore, it is not a clearly defined problem with a final solution, voiding the principle of action research.

Whitehead (1988) proposes that it is possible to generate a new educational theory that is “living” in the sense that, whilst the researcher is trying to examine the world of the subject, they are also attempting to improve it. Rather than seeing change as something that is outside the researcher, Whitehead argues that because the practitioner is the facilitator of the improvement, the research should reflect this, allowing for an introspective thought cycle such as “How can I improve my practice?” In this way a new and distinctive theory is generated, which was most appropriate for the aims of my study. Throughout the process I used Whitehead’s reflection cycle to guide my subsequent actions:

- “How do I improve this process of education here?”
- I experience problems when my educational values are negated in my practice.

- I imagine ways of improving my practice.
- I act on a chosen solution.
- I evaluate the outcomes of my actions.
- I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations... (and so the cycle continues).

(Whitehead 1988: p.3)

My first step in generating a new and distinctive theory was to identify suitable children for intervention. To do this I began by observing the whole class group on several occasions. Different children attended the setting on different days and I watched how the dynamics of particular groups of children affected social behaviour.

Following informal observations of play patterns of the whole group, I tentatively identified the socially withdrawn behaviour of two boys, Christian and Michael; additional data was then gathered to confirm or reject this impression.

A recognised method for gathering evidence of social withdrawal where all children name their friends (Booth La-Force & Oxford 2008) was used. I compared the children's responses with my own informal observations of Michael and Christian for triangulation and found that these observations confirmed my initial data. I also used this to plot changing dynamics in the social interaction pattern of the class group from the beginning to the end of the research and to demonstrate evidence of changes in the social status of Michael and Christian as the study progressed.

Secondly, I spent extended periods detailing the language, interactions and movements of Michael and Christian, both indoors and outdoors, in order to observe whether the effects of space and close proximity to other children made a difference to their interaction attempts and success. A similar observation record to that used by Sylva, Roy and Painter in The Target Child study in Oxfordshire (cited by Sylva, Roy & Painter 1980) was devised for this purpose. From this information qualitative data was gathered in an attempt to understand the detail of the children's social lives, as well as quantitative data that enabled me to specify in detail how many minutes each child spent playing alone, with adults, with children in a group, within a pair or watching the play of other children. I compiled graphs outlining this

use of time at the beginning of the research and compared the results with those compiled after the interventions were carried out, in order to add credibility and validity to the claims of the results.

Thirdly, I also collected data outlining the interaction habits of the whole class, to demonstrate how, if at all, these patterns differed from Michael and Christian. The rest of the class acted as an “average interaction” indicator.

Observations of the children in the setting gave me the evidence necessary to formulate the intervention programme, but there was a fourth important element that I needed to give a more complete picture of the children’s personalities, enhance the interventions, and target their needs. As outlined previously the greatest influence on social and emotional development comes from the home environment (Goleman 2006), and in order to give the study ecological validity (Bronfenbrenner 1979, cited by Hogan 2005) it was important to visit the children in their own homes. By using semi-structured interviews with the boys’ mothers regarding whether Michael and Christian were different at home, with other extended family members, or with strangers, I was able to determine that it was not only at pre-school that they were withdrawn from their peers. This ruled out any localised effect of the provision itself on the boys’ withdrawal.

From further research of the literature I identified five methods of successful intervention programmes. The first step was to teach children how to recognise emotions in others (Goleman 2006). To achieve this I focused on one emotion a week so that the boys could absorb the characteristics of each emotion without being confused by the others. I focused on the key emotions of happiness, sadness, anger and fear.

Secondly, I initiated some direct coaching in social skills with the aim of increasing the children’s ability to understand the emotions displayed by others and react appropriately in response. Being able to interpret the emotion displayed by others is a basic social skill, because this reciprocates the appropriate response (Smith 2002).

Thirdly, I supported and coached Michael and Christian to become skilful at making a group entry bid by recognising and then establishing the same frame of reference as the group (Putallaz & Gottman 1981: p.132).

The fourth method was the inoculation of the boys against rejection following unsuccessful group entry bids (Putallaz & Gottman 1981), and finally, I devised problem solving scenarios to encourage the development of important emotional intelligence traits, such as self-control, self-motivation, enthusiasm and persistence (Goleman 2006; Dweck 1981) as the fifth method.

The results of the study were mixed and I do not intend to detail the outcomes in this briefing paper, suffice to say that Michael's social skills were significantly enhanced. However Christian did not show any improvement. The reasons for these results have been reflected upon and I now have an increased understanding of social withdrawal in young children, ensuring that I can subsequently act in confidence in a way that was not possible at the beginning of the research.

At the end of my study I returned to the question posed at the beginning;

*“How much do we wish to see? How much do we wish to understand? What conceptions, and alternative conceptions, of human practices do we have that will enable us to enhance and significantly enrich life and well-being?”*

(Pritchard 1988, cited by Whitehead 1988: p.8).

My study had two aims; how my own professional practice could be enhanced by combining critical practice and new theoretical knowledge (praxis) to enhance the possibility of increased social interaction between Michael and Christian and the rest of the class group. Secondly, to enhance my well-being and eliminate the guilt caused when observing children who were not interacting with their peers and not knowing how to support them.

By carrying out the research my well-being has been enhanced by the absence of guilty feelings which have been replaced by feeling the contentment of knowing that I did everything that I could to help Michael and Christian. The knowledge gained throughout this study will undoubtedly be of use to me, but as no two children or circumstances are the same I will inevitably start learning again, adapting my skills to the new situation, ever learning, reflecting on the values and contradictions reflected in my practice, and generating new living educational theories for myself (Whitehead 1988).