

Introduction

It follows, certainly, that the ‘true story’ of the consortium is the one thing that cannot be told because it never happened (not a single ‘true story’ at least).

(Stronach and McNamara 2002, 165)

This paper has emerged from my reflecting upon a piece of longitudinal collaborative research that I carried out as senior lecturer in a university education department in the West Midlands, in partnership with a primary school in South West England. The action research came about as a proactive measure to develop the poor Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) of the young children entering the reception year at the school. My responsibilities during the research included auditing skills, leading Continued Professional Development (CPD) sessions and monitoring progress within the Early Years; and the teaching staff (including teachers and teaching assistants in the Early Years) implemented and reflected upon their developing skills and knowledge. In addition to the CPD sessions there were team and 1:1 conversations, observations, action plans and focus group discussions (which were recorded) led by the researcher. All of this was supported by the Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) who was employed on a regular basis by the school and each approach was negotiated with the Head Teacher, Early Years Lead and SALT. The research took place over three years. The collaboration was deemed ‘successful’ by those involved (as I will discuss later); but what I would like to discuss in this paper is how problematic it was summarising that accomplishment in a way that genuinely embodied all perspectives. I realised that, much as I tried otherwise, I could only tell my version of events; hence the quotation from Stronach and McNamara (2002) above. After wrestling with the problem of ‘voice’ for some time, I reached an acceptance that ‘my version of events’ was both inevitable and perfectly acceptable. I could embrace Luca’s (2009, 22) ‘embodied bracketing’ whereby the presence of the researcher is both recognised and celebrated, secure in the knowledge that through the meeting of the sets of knowledge held by researcher and research partners ‘understanding becomes illuminated’ (Luca 2009, 22). As reflective pedagogues our questions, which are based upon our innumerable perceptions of a single incident, should challenge and extend one another’s thinking. Different perceptions should be celebrated, and we should not feel that we need to synthesise a mutual consciousness in order to bring (a manufactured) authenticity to our research findings. Our roles, contexts and experience mean that our acuties of a situation will always be multi-faceted if similar. As such this article presents my voice, but it was edited by both the Head Teacher of the school and a university colleague (recognised as my co-authors) to be considered and challenged from differing perspectives. Their contributions enriched the emerging debate, as I discuss further in my concluding section.

This piece shares a critical point in my understanding and re-imagining of the research process. It explores an evolving understanding that collaborative educational research does not need to be “tracing (and therefore) reproducing” existing, ‘off the shelf’ approaches but that it can, instead map “ever-changing processes of becoming” (MacNaughton 2005, 121). It can be in flux, responsive to participants’ ideas. It is right for it to embrace the “uniqueness implicit in the particularity of things” (Stagoll 2010, 75) in terms of the goals and understandings of those involved in the research, but also in terms of the approach taken. As educational researchers, situated within a rich context of capability and knowledge creation, there is no need for our research to fit a prescriptive mould. We are working within a innovative context that celebrates diversity in ideas and approaches, we

recognise the multiplicity and uniqueness of every educational setting, every teacher and every student. Dealing with variation should be the strength and the value of what we do as educational researchers. As Vandebroek, Cousse and Bradt (2010, 149) advise, in our conceptions of education “It is indeed precisely dissensus that is needed most.” Somekh (2010, 116) also discusses this, using the terms “toleration and flexibility”. Below I explore some of the complications that those involved in educational research face, within the wider educational landscape as well as within specific contexts, but I then go on to discuss the challenges and benefits that meaningful research collaborations across boundaries can bring.

The problem of researching education

Before exploring my own experience of collaborative research as an academic within a primary school, I would like to highlight the complexity of the educational research context and in doing so justify some of the approaches that were taken to my own research. The idiosyncratic nature of educational research means that there are no consistent, discrete phenomena which can be subjected to scientifically validated research approaches. Yet there persists a view “that only pure research produces understanding that furthers the human condition” (Tierney and Holley 2008, 290). Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015, 604) lament the relentless drive to subject education to randomised tests in order to make ‘rational policy decisions’ even in recent years. Carr and Kemmis (2005, 352) refer to the “corrosive influence of technical rationality on the conduct of action research.” Those who are familiar with educational contexts will realise that it is always the case that every child, and every early years settings, is different. The uniqueness of contexts must be considered before any positivistic attempt is made at measurement. It is highly unlikely that educators will be able to reach consensus about approaches within the broad aims of education, because daily practice is so diverse (Vandebroek, Cousse and Bradt 2010). Educational research must be flexible and empathetic to specific circumstances if it is to yield any worthwhile results, yet because of this it is frequently criticised for its “soft and applied character” which is sometimes viewed as a “major limitation” (Tierney and Holley 2008, 291).

Because it sits within such an unsettled field, it is vitally important for those who are involved in research in educational settings to not explore and reach conclusions about ‘what works today’ but, more importantly, to investigate, why that works. By exploring the ‘why’ as opposed to the ‘what’, educational practitioners can then proffer themselves some firm anchorage when the curriculum and policy tide next turns. This is where the deeper personal understanding that it proposed by theorists such as McNiff and Whitehead (2011) and Reason and Bradbury (2008) fits. The professional action research that McNiff (2013) and her contemporaries propose starts embedded in practice. Rather than attempt to make strained links between theory and practical experience, teachers themselves really do become ‘living theory’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2011). For any reflective practitioner their understanding is already developing daily, it is just a case of ‘bridging boundaries’ (Korthagen, Loughran and Russell 2006) between theory and practice in order to better understand what the ‘it’ they would like to develop actually is. Central to McNiff’s (2013, 2014, 2016) work is the concept that we are constantly evolving within our practice, but by taking an active stance in recognising our key areas for development we can take better ownership of them and monitor our transformation. We can consult appropriate literature and gain the views of others. We can also better share our understanding with others. Conscious reflection is key to this shift in approach. Reason (2006, 188) puts it this way:

If we start from the idea that creating knowledge is a practical affair, we will start not, as in traditional academic research, from an interesting theoretical question, but from what concerns us in practice, from the presenting issues in our lives.

Such was the case with the practitioners in this action research project. The children's struggle with language was the presenting issue.

The focus of this action research partnership was to start from the practitioner's experience, perspectives and values rather than to produce tables of results through randomised tests. The potential for educational research to be respectful of other is diminished by the need to make it acceptable as same in order to be valued; as is the case with blanket assessments. Staggoll (2010, 74-75) explains that a rhizomatic methodology is not 'different from same' or 'difference of same over time' but 'uniqueness implicit in the particularity of things.' Within this research partnership the aim was to value the uniqueness of the community and work with and within that; there was not an objective to produce research that would 'fit' that school's distinctive experience and practice into a criteria of sameness. By valuing difference teachers and researchers can begin to build a picture of 'what works' through the richness of the many unique cases that are explored. Stenhouse (1978, 22) suggests that we create a "critical and analytic contemporary history of education fed by recent, current and future Case Study." No two case studies will be the same, but useful concepts and similarities will emerge. Somekh (2010, 116) suggests that we make "use of established publication channels" in order to "develop and extend our existing understandings." One size fits all simply does not apply in education, contrary to some policy indications, and instead we should be striving to craft a rich tapestry of educational action research that builds upon, learns from and adds to previous research.

Eighteen years ago Hargreaves (1999, 242) was pessimistic about the opportunity to learn from previous research as our educational culture headed towards one of quick fixes as opposed to developing deep understandings. This culture has perpetuated. Hargreaves (1999, 243) cites Brown (1997) who says that research findings need time to germinate:

... if the aim is for educational research to have some impact on practice, its ideas and findings have to change educators' understandings, and that will not be achieved overnight. It is only when the ideas enter into the common-sense discourse of communities' policy makers and practitioners that impact is achieved...

What comes through very clearly in this framing of educational research is the role of patience. Tierney and Holley (2008, 294) also decry the "production-line" approach to research where a problem is identified and a solution produced; and urge that we instead view research as evolutionary exploration where "multiple constituencies are involved in discussing research as questions and solutions evolve." This is closely aligned to McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) ideas of being our own living theory. This requires the ongoing identification of areas for further development. Such was the case with this research partnership. Through the common-sense discourse approach that was taken to this research alliance, knowledge, understanding and skills were slowly (very slowly on times) but securely developed, and continue to develop, as I will discuss later. But key to this discussion is how we shifted the relationship from a working alliance to a genuine community of practice (Wenger 2000) with shared goals.

Although similarities can be found between this research and similar action research projects in schools there are subtle but important differences to consider. The first is that the practitioners involved in other action research projects have often 'signed' up to the project in a bid to develop their expertise. This is the case, for example, with Admiraal et al's (2016) review of teacher research in four secondary schools. The staff volunteered to be involved. The second difference is that such research is frequently an aspect of a further qualification, for example a Masters in Education, for the teachers involved. This was the case with Cornelissen et al (2015), whose research took an approach based upon their participants' perceptions of the social networks which formed the basis of this professional development. Although their research does at first glance involve a similar interface of schools and an Institute of Higher Education (IHE), there remains the significant difference of an alliance of academics and teachers that have chosen to step into the world of academic development. This is quite different to a team of primary school practitioners who have had a research project, despite all best intentions of those leading upon it, to some extent imposed upon them, as was the case in this research. It was another initiative, another demand upon already extremely stretched time. Nevertheless, an exploration of some of the issues and challenges which arose through Cornelissen et al's (2015) work does provide us with a good starting point for comparison, by looking at the establishment of the collaboration, the establishment of relationships and the negotiation of expectations. In doing so we explore some of the issues that have previously arisen in Korthagen et al's (2006) work of the "the tension between "traditional" expectations at the IHE and what is required to create "new" reciprocal relationships in research (Berg 2004; Burton and Greher 2007; LePage et al. 2001)."

Establishing Our Research Collaboration

Our research alliance came about due to an existing partnership between the university and the study school, which had developed through leadership enrichment activities. It was requested by and financed by the school itself, and was carried out over three years. All of the research processes were embedded within an ethical approach; following the BERA's (2011) guidelines, showing respect for the participants and attempting to keep any disruptive influence upon the research context to a minimum. CPD was central to the project, therefore it certainly fitted the mould of a 'classic' action research project; including auditing the practitioners confidence and understanding at both the onset and conclusion of the intervention. It had a scaffold of CPD, which was built upon through reflective focus group discussions, observations and planning support; these all worked towards a development in understanding and skills at the school. The research involved working primarily with the teaching and support staff within the Early Years, but further CPD sessions also took place with the wider school, in the hope of building upon and extending the good practice that had been developed within the Early Years. Most facets of the project were clearly outlined at its outset within a research timeline, but changes were made to this, in response to the emerging and changing requirements of the school community and meaningful dialogue between researcher and school. Something that you will rarely see in a research paper is the admission that some of the research approaches suggested simply did not work. In such cases alternative and more suitable approaches were designed in collaboration with the practitioners at the school.

There are a number of papers sharing (some even 'proving') effective approaches to SLC development in schools (Leyden et al 2011, Law et al 2012, Lindsay et al 2012) but, as I've made clear, the aim of this research was not to use statistics to prove the efficacy of a particular package

or approach. This research aimed to solve the problems which were particular to this school rather than claiming universal laws (Tierney and Holley 2008). This project attempted to answer the question that the school had raised, which was: 'At this school, how can we improve the SLC (and thus, in time, the academic results) of those children that come into school, in the reception year, with impoverished language?' As lead on the research my own question was slightly different to the school's, but worked towards the same overall aim, it was: 'How can I use this research to help teachers and teaching assistants to feel more competent and confident in supporting children with SLC needs?' Although the research was, to some extent, 'imposed' upon wider staff through the decision of the Head Teacher, all of the actual data production within the school was the result of a two-way process based upon a purposeful research dialogue with the staff. Dadds (2002, 13) explains how such conversations can then form the basis for the development of practitioner theories. During the course of the project the practitioners carried out their own investigations into what did and did not work with the children and brought them back to our focus group discussions. They built upon and extended initial ideas (see Authors, 2016). They explored fitness for purpose, the suggestions for modification of practice were use-inspired (Tierney and Holley 2008). Through this approach the teaching staff developed understandings, not just 'quick-fix' practices, and this is why the practice that was developed was able to endure and evolve.

Developing Research Relationships: How can you Write a Single Story?

Through carrying out this research project my own understanding of collaborative investigations has developed significantly. I have come to realise that research partnerships are as much about accepting difference as they are about sharing goals. I could not pretend to share the perspectives of the teachers at the school or to have a real grasp of their culture, despite my own background in primary teaching. Johnson and Johnson (2002, 72-3) discuss how "the rituals and routines of school [can] be interesting, at best, and bewildering and alienating, at worst, for people who don't live with them daily." And this is the case; you cannot truly understand the culture of a school without being a part of it. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that it is unethical (or, perhaps simply naive) to claim to do so. But although one cannot fully understand a culture without living within it, I do believe that my own years of primary school practice enabled me to have a greater empathy and sensitivity towards the expansive responsibilities of my research partners during this project. Johnson and Johnson (2002, 73) conclude that the 'bewildering' nature of schools, means that the core of shared research needs to be "mutual trust and respect, and a commitment to shared learning" and this was very much at the core of our research collaboration. I was able to offer my own knowledge and experience to the school (I have previous experience in an advisory role supporting SLC) but equally valued their views upon what did and didn't work, of how theory played out in practice. Through the development of knowledge and (perhaps more significantly) confidence, teaching staff were then able to build upon and improve initial ideas in order to make them more appropriate to their cultural context. And through this I was also able to broaden my understanding through being witness to some of their innovative ideas. Through our open and respectful alliance we acknowledged our difference and shared our limited and highly contextualised knowledge with one another in order to embark upon a learning journey together. Somekh (1994, 373) describes this perfectly as 'inhabiting one another's castles' whilst retaining autonomy:

Change for each individual in the partnership arises from understanding that, in collaboration, both contributing and learning become a single process. That is what it means to inhabit each

other's castles. Nonetheless, each castle retains its integrity and continues to belong to one member of the partnership. In other words, collaboration is about celebrating difference and strengthening one's sense of identity...

And of course identity is interlinked with perspective. I was very interested in the perspective of the research participants at the school upon the process and asked could they write a short reflection on their thoughts and feelings about being a part of the research project. Below is a part of a reflection written by the Head Teacher, who took on this responsibility, where he reflects upon the onset of the research:

Prior to the beginning of the project staff in the Early Years (EY) phase of the school met with the Head Teacher and Early Years leader, together with the resident Speech and Language Therapist to discuss development of the ideas underpinning the research. The staff had experienced for several years a perceived decline in children's language and communication skills on entry into the Foundation Stage; something shared by colleagues in other schools. It was within this context that the research proposal was discussed and the role of the staff in delivering it.

This piece of writing and the transcriptions produced from focus group discussions with the Early Years team, raised perhaps the key issue of this shared research, that of 'voice' when writing up the research for dissemination. I had naively envisaged a shared composition at the conclusion of the project, but I had not pre-empted the practical hurdles that would prevent that from happening. Dadds (1998,50) asks "What processes do we establish to ensure the most democratic and representative end texts possible?" and the simple answer in this case, is through trial and error. In addition to the theoretical points that Dadds raises in her work there was also the more simple and more pressing issue of time. Time to write reflectively is part of my role, part of the expectations of being an academic; such is not the case for those educational practitioners that I researched with. There was no space within their working day for such a thing. Additionally, in sincerely wanting the voice of my research partners to be heard within this work, I had not foreseen my research partners' reticence about stepping into such an unfamiliar field as academic writing for an audience. The comments that were made during our email conversations made it clear that they found the concept of writing for an audience intimidating. Therefore, for all of the reasons outlined above, I took on the sole responsibility of composing publications, not because of any doubt about the writing that my partners might contribute, but simply because I had far greater capacity to do so and because I was more comfortable with writing for an audience. As a research partnership we acknowledged our strengths, our differences and our priorities. I took on the bulk of the writing and I invited my research partners' assistance as editors and contributors.

During the writing of reports and publications I endeavoured to demonstrate the utmost respect toward my research partners, but in one case my sense of 'ethicality' backfired. When I had included 'umms' and 'sort of's' in the transcription of focus group discussions, I did so with a genuine intent to present an authentic voice and not my 'tidied up' interpretation of the others' thoughts. Therefore, I was genuinely upset when my research partners took offence at this and commented that I had made them look 'stupid'. The emotional aspect of research is rarely explored, but Bar-on (1991, 7) astutely comments that "Emotion is not a side effect or a pathological consequence of engaging in research; it is central to the project." Our relationship; how I appeared to my research partners, and whether they felt that I was demonstrating respect and sensitivity was immensely important to me.

When I carried out my PhD research I came across a passage by Punch (1994, 84) which explained how “Entry and departure, distrust and confidence, elation and despondency, commitment and betrayal, friendship and abandonment” were just as important as the mechanics of data collection methods within field research. The significance of this has not wavered during my ensuing research experience. There is an emotional burden to carrying out research, particularly long-term field research, which is rarely explored. Research is not grounded solely upon the tools of data collection, it is based upon meaningful relationships and mutual trust. Needless to say, the superfluous utterings were duly removed from the interview transcripts.

Negotiating Expectations

Having been in contact with the university through an existing partnership, the Head Teacher saw working with the university as a viable route to take in order to bring about change. His perception, voiced during initial discussions as well as his written reflection upon the project, was that not only could new approaches be initiated through CPD sessions, but the university would ensure that there was ‘intellectual rigour’ in considering these approaches and recording progress. But this did mean the meeting of different agendas, and the need for compromise. Returning to Ball’s (1994) pressures of performativity, the school ideally sought a set of statistics that would ‘prove’ the effectiveness of any interventions that were introduced, and which would justify the considerable funding paid out for the research. As lead researcher I was aware, and made clear that the vast range of variables involved in this study would prevent any such cause and effect being ‘proved’ with validity. Instead it was agreed during the initial discussions with the Head Teacher, that if staff had increased their knowledge, understanding and confidence in supporting children with their communication needs over the course of the study; and if the children appeared to be more able to communicate competently, then the intervention could be deemed a ‘success’. As a conciliation, we also followed the achievement of the children involved in the study to see if there were some statistical data that could (if only nominally) support the qualitative data collected. We agreed on a middle ground.

The Head Teacher acknowledged the initial trepidation of the staff in his reflection, he said:

Some staff were at first apprehensive, particularly with regard to the extra workload this research may have engendered. Many were looking forward to developing new skills in order to provide better support to the children in their care. After the initial discussions however, the Early Years team agreed that more children were indeed entering the school with low expressive and receptive language skills and that there was a need to intervene in a more direct way, and with more children, than had previously been the case. The Early Years team recognised that the additional work this research generated would have to be carefully managed, but would have, overall, a beneficial effect for both children and staff.

Regardless of any reservations, the staff at the school were consistently warm and welcoming when we worked upon this project, even when it involved extended twilight sessions at the end of a busy day. All relevant staff attended all sessions and some teaching assistants who were less involved in some of the research development made the effort to come and share how useful they had found the sessions, or how effective they had found approaches with certain children. I make no apologies for mentioning this, as I have already highlighted my views upon the importance of the relationships that research is based upon. The relationships formed were based upon sensitivity, understanding, and respect, and were thus very positive. Honesty was welcomed. When (frequently) I heard ‘we

just haven't had time to do it' we simply made a new plan of what might be more achievable. What is clear from the Head Teacher's description of events below, is that the Early Years practitioners (including the teachers, teaching assistants and SALT) felt genuine ownership of the research. In fact 'the researcher' is barely visible in this recount of events.

Staff were involved from the outset, alongside the speech and language therapist. An initial Early Years meeting with the University research lead set up the context. Following this, language comprehension assessments and lesson observations by the speech and language therapist impacted on staff development work, which was delivered in team meetings. An action plan was devised and agreed by Early Years staff so that everyone knew what their role was within the research project. Staff were given regular opportunities to share good practice and discuss the changes made, both to their performance and the learning environment. As part of the action plan Early Years staff met as a team with the University research lead to feedback on developments, positive outcomes and issues that had become apparent. This allowed the team to explore their work and make improvements to common practice.

'Ownership' of the research was discussed openly from the outset due to its situatedness within two very different educational discourses. My concept of successful 'performance' within the field of research was very different to the Head Teacher's ultimate target of pupil achievement. Of vital importance was respecting the goals of the other, demonstrating conscious reciprocity and the emergence of beneficial mutualism (Johnson and Johnson 2002). The school appreciated the idea of publication as a means of gaining recognition for their work and I was able to understand their need for some statistics which could evidence improvement at the school. I did not believe that child assessment results could 'prove' an improvement in the children's communication with any validity, but I was happy to produce something in the way of numbers that would appease external requirements. We were both willing to take a step forward in order to reduce the distance between what Hargreaves (1999) describes as academic ideals and the policy based pragmatism of the short-term solution.

Another area of conciliation was ethical procedures. As has already been mentioned, all of BERA's (2011) ethical procedures were followed in terms of explicitly informing the school community (including parents) about the intentions and parameters of the research. But in a situation such as this, taking part in the research becomes part of the requirements of whole school development and an expectation of the individual's employed role. Therefore 'the right to withdraw' becomes rather more grey than would normally be the case. (I suspect that this is often the case with such research but rarely discussed). All staff were required by their manager to attend the CPD sessions and to be observed. In order to satisfy my own conscience about the element of choice, I made clear through all of my written and verbal interactions with participants that it was completely their decision whether data that was collected was shared more widely or not. I also asked the Early Years lead to verify that she was happy with all data that I wished to share with a wider audience. We were not following an existing path, we were creating one (Tierney and Holley 2008). We needed to design an approach that was fit for our particular context. The school never did place any restriction upon data that was shared and all participants demonstrated a transparent and unguarded approach to their own position and development. This was inordinately helpful in being able to record their transformative journey (found in Authors 2016).

The Impact of the Research

Noffke et al (1996, 336) describe their research relationships during their projects spanning over 12 years as “occasionally problematic”. Their sweeping assumption that “schools are primarily concerned with knowledge which will benefit their own students, while universities are concerned with a wider and more abstractly defined population” (ibid, 335) may well be the root of those problems. Our research partnership bore very little similarity to this simplified dichotomy. My primary aim in undertaking this research project was not to impress a faceless audience of academia, it was to improve things for the staff and, essentially, the students at this particular school. Perhaps that is the educationalist in me (and it would be interesting to explore the priorities of researchers who do and do not have practical, first-hand experience of teaching), but until the project was completed that remained my focus. Also in contrast with Noffke et al, the staff at the school were eager to share their own knowledge development with a wider audience, more abstractly through publication (with which the Head Teacher, Early Years lead and SALT all played a part) but also more practically, by offering support to practitioners from neighbouring schools by inviting them in to view the developments in practice. For the duration of the research and through to developing pieces for publication we were content to “inhabit each others’ castles” (Somekh 1994, 373) whilst mutually benefiting and learning through the collaboration.

I saw my role within the research as being to research and report upon the phenomenon of children’s poor language development within literature and also to provide training and support that might better equip the staff at this particular school to tackle this issue. For this reason I do not need to ‘justify’ this research in terms of locating it within pre-existing methodological structures or in terms of it robustly ‘testing’ an approach. Inevitably the approach was Action Research, in that we were aiming to bring about change, but the further parameters of the work remained fluid and flexible in response to the specific culture of the school. There was no pressure to fit into sameness, our journey to developing knowledge was unique. When the aim of collaborative action research is to promote critical reflection, there is no predicting where that critical reflection might lead (Johnson and Johnson 2002).

Below the Head Teacher presents his perspective on the outcomes of the research:

The impact of this research over the three years of the project has been significant in terms of practitioner development and improvements to the learning environments. It got all staff to think more and adapt their practice. It impacted on the environment with photographs and communication friendly posters so that all children benefit. It encouraged teaching staff to provide a multi-sensory approach to support independent learning. It has embedded practice further and ensured consistency and progression throughout the Early Years. The training provided by the speech and language therapist and University has extended ideas on how to promote speech and language within activities both individually and in small group work. TALC testing results influenced the school behaviour policy and how staff dealt with children who presented challenging behaviour.

This research brought about genuine change through meaningful collaboration, through reflective approaches and through creating its own path. Lynd (1939, referenced in Hargreaves 1999) distinguished between the scholar who is at risk of becoming remote from life and disengaged from social problems, and the technician, who is in danger of accepting policy makers' definitions of social problems and their short-term solution. I would argue that we fell into neither trap, as we met

within a third space based upon practice, listening, reflection and caring challenge. Wenger and Snyder (2000) describe communities of practice as a group of people meeting regularly in order to learn how to do something better. Our research brought together a new community of practitioners who were able to explore the space between theory and practice within the context of children's language development. There were observable successes (below) that the practitioners were then enthused to share and to further build upon.

Our research exemplified Hargreaves' (1999, 247) notion that discovering:

'what works' is not a search for universal laws but an uncovering of ever-changing practices through a research process that is itself endless, since the inevitable exceptions to 'what works' become the basis for further research.

At the start of this research the majority of the practitioners had little or no experience in the field of Speech, Language and Communication development. By the end of the three year intervention practitioners could clearly and confidently describe how their understanding and their practice had developed. One of the core areas that they recognised was giving the children more time and space to think and process. The time spent on the project meant that core practices, such as remembering to use a child's name before speaking to them, could not only be trialled, but embedded within practice. During the first two years change was very slow. Adaptations in approaches were repeatedly delayed as other requirements took priority. But the gift of time meant that there could be consistent nudging, consistent reminders. The positive effects of small changes could be recognised, discussed and built upon. For example, the success of using an individual communication fan with one Down Syndrome child (his teaching assistant commented that it had 'given him a voice') meant that it was a tried and tested approach that could be implemented more widely in similar situations. The increased independence of the children through using pictorial clues and recording devices meant that these approaches became the norm in Early Years by the end of the research. One child was particularly delighted with the talking tins (recording devices), as they meant that she could listen to her instructions 'lots and lots and lots.' Something very small made a considerable difference to her independence.

The nature of the research, which supported the practitioners in making change that was useful to them, that listened to their needs and apprehensions, meant that a more meaningful understanding could be rooted and practical experiences could be shared. For example, one teacher noted that some of her colleagues were reluctant to develop visual and tactile supporting materials because of the time involved. But, she could bear witness to the fruits of labour in this area, adding, "...you realise that once it's in place it gives the children independence...32 children aren't asking the same questions." That she was able to share that experiential knowledge with her colleagues through focus group discussions was infinitely more useful than any expert coming in and giving instructions. In the final year of the project, news of this Early Years team's expertise in the field of SLC support had spread into the wider community, and practitioners from other schools were arranging visits in order to observe the 'good practice' that had been developed.

In addition to the large amount of qualitative data collated through this research, which suggested that the CPD sessions and discussion had had a meaningful impact, there also existed the statistical evidence which suggested a positive influence. Assessments of the children's lexicon and comprehension indicated a vast improvement overall, although it was acknowledged that these

assessment tools were not ideal (are any?). An unexpected benefit that the Head Teacher attributed to the project was the children's emotional development. Assessments suggested that those children that had benefitted through the increased SLC support input over the three years of the project showed a marked improvement in their emotional wellbeing in comparison with previous years. These were genuine changes that were meaningful to this particular school. Their value lay in their specificity to context.

Conclusion

I believe it is a credit to the nature of this collaboration that in their final discussions and audits the practitioners at the study school were open and honest in identifying grey areas where they felt less confident and were eager to continue their learning. This would be provided by the school SALT. This research had not been a 'quick fix' it was a meaningful journey of ongoing development. Grown out of the culture of the school, this action research had not just introduced a process, it had developed a firm knowledge foundation through shared-learning encounters that could be built upon. It opened a meaningful dialogue around SLC development based upon a refreshed general knowledge of the basics and shared practical experiences. Baumfield and Butterworth (2007, 424) ask a simple question in order to justify any collaborative research, which is: "Has learning been the result of working together?" I would answer yes, in rich ways, a number of which were unforeseen.

When I asked my university colleague to comment on an earlier draft of this work she focused in particular upon the 'emotional burden' that the researcher can carry and said that this should not be underplayed. Therefore the ensuing draft allowed more space to explore this. The Head Teacher did not suggest changes, instead he commented "I think it encapsulates our work. As you wrote: 'This research brought about genuine change through meaningful collaboration'..." I was so delighted by this statement that I asked to cite him. Carr and Kemmis (2005, 351) discuss how "action research increasingly became an institutionalised model of in-service teacher education" and how the more widely it has become accepted the more formulaic it has become. They fear that it has simply become another approach to research that could tick the box for school's CPD requirement. Carr and Kemmis lament that the problem is far 'deeper' than a technical approach to research searching for a convenient solution, but that technical reasoning is now deeply embedded within a dominant, positivistic "contemporary discourse organisation and practice of modern education". I have recently been researching with a group of headteachers and one commented that in the modern educational world, the model of accountability sometimes forgets that schools are about people. As educational researchers and creators of knowledge, we can only hope that with persistence and a focus upon "the ethic of concern for persons that forms the very essence of education itself" (Jarvis 1995, 25) reason might prevail.

6,676 words in main body

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