

**Analysing and understanding research findings:
practitioner/researcher interaction.**

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... the role of educational research is to inform professional discourse, and to be informed by it. Research should contribute to the maelstrom of ideas, theories, facts and judgements about education. It should be something that teachers and policy-makers look for, read about, argue over, reflect on, and then either reject and forget, or file away in their memory to adapt and adopt later. But here is the rub - most research writing is not memorable and not much of it is easy to get hold of.

So the question arises: how can research contribute to professional discourse in such a way that it is readily understood and remembered?

(Bassey 1998: 20)

Bassey seems to suggest that if information from research is to be communicated effectively and accurately to others it has to be readily accessible, clear and coherent. The creation of authoritative texts in an appropriate genre for the event can be problematic given the tension between traditional and post-modern approaches. It has been suggested (Robson, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994; and Sparkes, 1995) that conventional formats of analysis are often too constraining and that reporting formats must respect 'local groundedness, holism, temporal extension, access to causality, emphasis on meanings' (Miles and Huberman 1994: 298). However, Nisbet and Entwistle (1984: 253) suggest that unnecessary departures from a conventional form of reporting are an obstacle to communication as 'originality finds expression in the ideas, not in the form of the report'.

In order to elicit the imagination of the reader, involve their emotions and to get a response, I want to draw on alternative forms of representation that take into account the context, the influences on the thinking of those involved, as well as the main issues that are under discussion in the analysis.

I want to communicate with practitioners and help them to gain access to my research, enable them to empathise with the participants and develop heightened sensitivities about the lives of

the people involved. The research findings need to be readily accessible, of interest and engage people with the ideas. It needs to build a bridge to another life in order to help practitioners to understand and to connect them with other possible ideas, beliefs and feelings. At the same time, I want to help people to question and examine so-called certainties and to open possibilities for new thinking and possibly construct new knowledge. I struggled with considering what format would enable this.

In making accounts accessible to others, Dey (1993: 238) suggests that some of the techniques involved in storytelling need to be employed. In this way, the reader gains a vivid and convincing description of the setting, is able to empathise with one or more characters and can see the evolution of the plot towards some sort of climax.

During the 1890s Margaret McMillan succeeded in this respect in that she created fictional characters from events that were happening in order to persuade society to change, a technique also employed by Vivien Gussin Paley (e.g. Gussin Paley, 1990).

What might be the best way of communicating?

The appropriate format depends not only on communicating successfully to the audience, but also on the nature and purpose of the enquiry itself. In this context, I was writing about children's induction to school and transitions through Key Stage One and had gathered data through interviewing. I wrote in a range of styles and drew upon a range of devices and genres of representation to reflect the various views gathered, and communicated, through dialogue as this was appropriate to the context. This in itself created difficulties because, in writing in genres that make for interesting reading and which help to incorporate the findings, I did not want to lose the essence of the research, lose sight of the rigour needed in the process of analysis or have the format itself detract from the findings in my preoccupation with style and genre.

The writing needed to be clear, forceful and easy to read in order for it to be 'meaningful and easily grasped' (Wiseman 1952: 8). I needed to include adequate data for 'criticism and debate' (Powney and Watts 1987: 191), analyse, explain, draw out common features across situations, identify patterns of behaviour and so forth from snapshots of life.

In order to reveal and reflect as normal a situation as is possible the presentation of the information needed to provide 'pictures' of the groups under investigation (50 pupils, their parents and practitioners). I did this by drawing together phrases and sentences of fragmented

knowledge and understanding from my respondents to read as a whole, thus attempting to transmit social and cultural understanding.

The resulting ‘illustrative scenes’ are not necessarily factual accounts but rather ‘factions’ which let the voices of the participants be heard, and are used as a means to describe their lived experiences. They are written in the form of letters, e-mails and telephone conversations between two ‘mums’ whose children attend different schools; a newspaper article; a radio programme; and conversations between children and between teachers. Together, these illustrative scenes make a story about the start of school and the transitions that children make as they proceed through Key Stage One. However, they also stand as individual vignettes. Thus, I had a range of material to disseminate.

Methodology

I was teaching two groups of early years and Key Stage One practitioners who were undertaking a part-time In-service degree in Early Years Education. The students were exploring issues concerning the start of school as part of their course. I wanted them to consider the systems of preliminary visits to school that operated in their settings, to help them question their induction and transition procedures and to open up cracks in habitual traditions. I asked them to consider practice from the parents’ point of view by reflecting on one of the ‘illustrative scenes’ described above. I gave them a telephone conversation between two ‘mums’, Lorraine and Debbie, which recounts the tale of each child’s first induction visit to school:

Telephone Conversation

Debbie and Lorraine take their children to school

Hi Debbie, it’s Lorraine. I thought I’d just phone and tell you about Stacey’s visit to school and see how Hayley got on.

Oh, the children don’t go the first time. All the parents went into the hall at 2 o’clock and that lovely secretary gave us a big envelope which had loads of forms to fill in. There was tea and biscuits and, oh yes, the sweatshirts were all laid out for us to buy.

Well, ours was very different. I think I told you in my e-mail, we took Stacey at 1.30 p.m. and the teacher was there to meet us in the hall with the Headteacher. He asked us all to sit down and then the children went with the teacher into the classroom. One wouldn’t leave his mum and screamed and screamed. The head talked to us about PE kit, school uniform and lunchtime. He wants us to come and help in the classroom.

Yes, we had some of that and about wanting us to help in school. First she told us about all these forms. The white card was for the school card index, the white forms for when Hayley goes on visits; the blue form was something to do with the government. Then there was the school prospectus ...

Yes, we had one of those

. . . and the pre-school booklet and she said that the pre-school profile was to come and another booklet on the last visit!

Wow, what a lot of forms and things. The teacher came back and talked to us about what they wanted the children to be able to do. About writing their name and saying the letters and they gave us a sheet with letters and pictures on. She told us about a book that we could write in that is kept with their reading book and said it was so they could write messages to us, too. She told us about the reading scheme and showed us some books.

We're not going to get that until the last afternoon. That's when Hayley meets her teacher. The headmistress said she'll show us a video and tell us about how we can help with reading. This time she talked about us being partners and about the things in the prospectus. She talked very fast so I can't remember all of it now, but there was something about catching children doing well and she talked about all the subjects and fitting them together as themes and if something didn't fit, doing it separately.

Yes, we had something on maths; she showed us something she called multi-link and how they use things like that instead of copying out of books. Then somebody asked a question about medicines.

Oh, we had something about health and safety and about school meals and Friends of the School and how they've got a couple of parent reps for each class. I knew about that because Sheila did that when James first started. Then someone from the governing body talked to us and someone from the school health service had come along. She said they don't do head inspections any more.

Didn't they talk about the cuts?

No

You know I've been going to the meetings, don't you?

Mm

The budget still doesn't mean a lot to me. Anyway, the headteacher gave us an ear-bashing about the budget. So much so that we didn't have time to walk round the school like they usually do. I wanted to be shown round to see what they do. It would have given me a feel of the place. If you don't know anything about a school you go in like a piece of blotting paper. But I did get to see the children with the teacher. We all went down to the classroom to collect the children and they were having a story. But they're not going to be in that room, they're going to be in the room at the other end of the school. They were with all these other children today.

We haven't seen the classroom yet but we'll go to school every other Monday for the rest of this term and go into a room with some of the other children who are starting in the summer. It's not her proper classroom. I have to stay with Hayley and do this pre-school profile like I did with James. It's a booklet with activities in it; colouring in and shapes. I thought school would want to know about the education he'd had so

far but they gave us these booklets to do with him. I felt as if it was me that was being tested rather than them finding out about him.

Oh I'd like to be able to tell them what Stacey can do, although I suppose some parents might over exaggerate and then the teacher would expect that much more of them.

I think it's better that they start with a clean slate. Anyway with James they did puzzles and painting in the classroom and then the headmistress took the children into the hall for some games and a story. She took us round the school and showed us the toilets, and that nice secretary's room and the staff room. I would have liked a visit where I left Hayley so she could have a chance to be there without me and I'd have liked her to have had some contact with the teacher, but they still don't do that. Look, I must go now and get tea ready. I'll see you next week.

Yeh, bye now. See you soon.

One group of students read and discussed the conversation in pairs and shared their views with the whole group. A number of relevant issues arose which encouraged the students to explore some of the problems which occur in their own settings. The other group acted the telephone conversation as a role-play situation. A lively discussion ensued in which a number of students identified factors that they wanted to reconsider in their own practice. At the next meeting the students were asked to complete a questionnaire about the accessibility of the information.

'Debbie and Lorraine take their children to school': Questionnaire

I am concerned that findings from research that might help practitioners to question their own practice, often isn't discussed. Last term we looked at some findings from some research about children's induction visits to school. Please could you help by answering a few questions about the way in which the findings were presented?

1. What were your thoughts on having research findings presented in this format?
2. How did it encourage/discourage you from accessing the information?
3. How did it/didn't it help you to consider possible alternatives to induction visits?
 - 4a. Did it make you question practice in your setting?
YES NO
 - 4b. If so, how?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If you would like to add any further comments about gaining access to research please comment on the other side.

Results

Analysis of the questionnaires indicates that findings were easier to access as role play than through reading as narrative as it was 'slightly confusing to remember who was saying what' by just reading. Nonetheless, respondents thought that both styles gave meaning to the subject and made it easy to understand the issues. This was partly due to it being 'a realistic situation', being 'informative in a fun way' and, for those who used role-play, because a 'practical activity made it easy to digest information from the conversation'.

Respondents felt that they could relate to the content 'through the presentation and the format' which 'made it real'. They felt that it generated discussion. However, this may have been due to the subject matter as much as the way in which it was presented. They found that they could readily identify the differences in practice described in the two settings due to the use of different fonts. One respondent said that it had helped her to assess the way in which her own setting presented work to children.

Students thought that the format helped them as it introduced the subject in a way that encouraged discussion by providing a framework for comment. The majority appreciated being offered alternative view points which emphasised perceptions of parents and children. It gave them an insight into other systems of induction and encouraged twenty of the respondents to review their own systems as a result. They re-evaluated their own induction policy to take into account the role of parents and questioned their own practice with regard to the amount of information given to parents. As a result eight students had 'reduced the amount of 'talking at' parents', provided supporting notes and included more time for parents' questions during preliminary visits to school.

Discussion

It is likely that data is difficult to access unless it is easy to interrogate. Therefore, dense and heavy writing might disenfranchise people from gaining information. Continuing Professional Development courses offer an opportunity to involve students in accessing research during taught sessions through role play. However, tutors need to take into account

where students are in their development and students need to be able to transfer information to their own situation.

Dialogue and conversations make more impact than dense description as it is often through conversations that we gain insights and understanding of social situations. Conventional formats of reporting can be constraining and stilted and alternative genres may communicate better, involve people more and help them see the world of others, thus enabling them to question their own practice, discuss it, reflect upon the issues and perhaps attempt different methods in their setting. Further research into reporting in alternative formats and ways in which research is communicated to practitioners and policy makers might identify the contribution that different styles of dissemination of research makes to professional discourse. One way of disseminating accessible research data might be through an Internet site which offers a discussion forum for teachers to raise questions and pass on their thoughts and experiences to others.

What have other lecturers tried? Do your experiences mirror mine? Are there other innovative ways of presenting research outcomes to students on initial and continuing professional development courses?

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