

Practitioners' understanding of quality interactions with young children

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Introduction

This paper represents an MA study that took place in 2014. This was a small scale, interpretive study of quality interactions between practitioners studying on a work-based foundation degree programme and children in their care. By looking in depth at interactions from the practitioners' perspective it aimed to allow practitioners' understanding of quality interactions to emerge.

Social constructivists such as Vygotsky (1978), Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), Mercer (2000, 2008) and Robson (2012) argue that interactions between adults and children, where language is used as a tool, are the building blocks for the development of children's thinking skills. High quality interactions between adults and children where there is genuine dialogue promotes 'inter-thinking' and shared enquiry (Wagerif, 2010). Where the interactions are purposeful adults can offer support for the 'guided construction of knowledge' (Wells, 1999) as children use language to make sense of their worlds. Co-construction of understanding 'recognises and values the child as a powerful agent in their own learning (Jordan, 2009) and involves active participation of the child.

Quality interactions between adults and children support social and emotional development as well as thinking skills. Wertsch (1979) developed Vygotsky's ideas by modelling the influence of the adult on the social formation of the mind. At the inter-personal level dynamic interactions between adults and children regulate children's development (Sameroff and Fiese, 2000). Intersubjectivity, where there is 'mutual understanding between people of each other's thoughts and feelings' (Siegler et al., 2011 p 38) underpins quality interactions. Rogoff (2003) introduced the concepts of 'apprenticeship' and 'guided participation' to describe how adults support children's sociocultural development. Adults change children's ways of understanding through shared endeavours that build on the community's cultural practices. Childcare settings have their own cultural practices into which children are socialized and develop a sense of belonging.

Practitioners in early years settings often take on the role of a key person, building relationships with the child and their family and promoting children's emotional well-being as well as their development and learning (Elfer et al., 2012). They carry out emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), spending long hours caring for the needs of young children and managing their responses to these children appropriately. Rodgers and Raider Roth (2006) have argued that practitioners need to develop a sense of 'presence' as part of their professional role so that they can engage with young children effectively and respond with compassion. They need to be emotionally literate and capable of meeting the high emotional demands of the early years workforce's role (Page and Elfer, 2013; Taggart, 2011). As well as excellent

inter-personal communication skills practitioners need a sound understanding of child development in theory and the particular development of the children in their care so that they can support and promote children's development.

How practitioners interact with young children effectively has been the subject of a number of research projects. The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) identified sustained shared thinking as a characteristic of high quality settings. It involves interactions such as scaffolding, modelling, extending, discussing and playing. It is understood to be inherently collaborative (Robson, 2012) and needs high qualified early childhood specialists to make the best use of this pedagogy (Sylva et al., 2010).

Early years practitioners learn about sustained shared thinking as a pedagogy to promote children's thinking skills through qualification courses and being able to evidence its use is standard 2.4 for Early Years Teacher Status (DfE, 2013). Despite this researchers found that when they interviewed practitioners there was 'widespread confusion about...the meaning of the term.' (Allen and Whalley, 2010 p 99) Other research projects which have looked at how practitioners interact with young children from the practitioners' perspective such as the Froebel Research Fellowship Project (Robson and Hargreaves, 2005; Fumoto and Robson, 2006 and Robson and Fumoto, 2009); and Fisher and Wood's action research project (2012); have found that sustained shared thinking was an implicit part of practitioners' pedagogy which they understand in theory. However, this is not always seen when observing practitioners in practice (Purdon, 2014). Robson and Fumoto (2009) found that sustained shared thinking is most often used when practitioners felt personal autonomy and confidence in their work with children.

The practitioners studying the work-based foundation degree programme were becoming professionals and using reflective practice to make links between theory and practice (Moss, 2008; Dunn et al., 2008; Urban, 2008). As the course manager, lecturer and tutor on the programme I was interested in exploring interactions between these experienced practitioners and the children in their care from their perspective, to explore their understanding of quality interactions.

The initial linked research questions were:

- What do early years practitioners regard as quality interactions with young children?
- How do early years practitioners develop and implement their own pedagogy when creating episodes of quality interactions with young children?
- How do practitioners draw on established theory and/or create their own working theories of quality interactions with young children?

Methodology

An interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach was applied using a case study framework as outlined by Yin (2009). The object of enquiry was practitioners who

were studying the foundation degree at the time. They were selected as they had met the entry requirements for the course; having a level three vocational qualification, at least two years' experience of working with young children and currently working in a registered setting. By enrolling on the foundation degree programme the participants demonstrated that they were committed to the development of their practice and becoming part of a professional workforce; and their experience of being higher education students ensured that they were familiar with engaging with reflective practice.

This small scale, exploratory study involved five participants who worked with children from birth to five years. A play leader, nursery nurse, nursery practitioner, teaching assistant and deputy manager worked in a Children's Centre, Reception class of a primary school, a private day nursery and a Montessori day care setting.

I wanted to 'see the situation through the eyes of the participants' (Cohen et al., 2013 p293) knowing that their understanding of quality interactions would be particular to their own experience, beliefs and context. Analysis of their views might provide a basis for a deeper understanding of what makes an interaction between practitioners and children high quality.

The participants were engaged in the data collection as they were asked to record three episodes of quality interactions which they had experienced with children in their workplace over the course of a week and then select the highest quality interaction to discuss in a semi-structured interview. The selection of episodes of quality interactions by the participants ensured that the interaction was meaningful for them. It also allowed the participants to make their own interpretation of what a quality interaction was.

The observations were used as the basis for a stimulated recall interview (Calderhead, 1981). This would focus participants' thoughts on specific events that they had experienced rather than having a general, theoretical discussion. The interview allowed time for reflection on the quality of the interactions and the participants' views on what made this high quality and what they felt were supporting and preventing quality interactions in their experience. As the interviews took place outside the workplace, with a researcher who was known to the participants, it was anticipated that the participants would feel comfortable enough to express their feelings and views freely. The interviews lasted at least half an hour each which allowed for deep responses by the participant, providing rich detail of the participants' views on quality interactions. The initial findings were shared as part of a focus group discussion to enable some validation of individual views by the other participants.

Ethical considerations

When researching with young children ethical issues of consent and assent need to be considered carefully. The participants were encouraged to ensure that they

gained assent from the children that they were observing and gained informed consent from parents and gatekeepers in their settings. The participants were only asked to carry out observations that were within the usual working practices of their settings and there was deliberate avoidance of using photographs and video recording of the interactions.

The relationship between the participants as students and the researcher as teacher was one of unequal power and so it was made explicitly clear that while the participants may gain some benefit from taking part in the research they would not be disadvantaged in their studies in any way. The participants were interviewed at a place and time of their choosing and were invited to review the interview transcripts before submission.

Findings

A constant comparison analysis (Thomas, 2013), based on Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory (1967) was used as a systematic way of sorting the interviews for themes and meaning. Reflecting on the interviews using the research questions as a guide allowed themes to emerge.

What do practitioners consider makes a quality interaction?

The key aspects of quality interactions that emerged from the interviews were:

Having enough time to interact with each other effectively

'I definitely think time is a big aspect, some of the time throughout the day you're 'rushy rushy'...so you don't have much time to just sit there with the children, talk to them, read to them, play with them, whereas when you've got the opportunity to do that I think it's important to do that.'

Playful and engaging

'If it's not engaging it's not quality.'

Initiated by the child

'it's very much them, I just followed it on'

A shared experience

'I think it's closeness, one to one, being on your own with a child – just doing the activity with you and the child.'

Emotionally rewarding for the adult and the child

'She seemed happy which made me happy'

Promotes the child's development

'I think it's valuing the children and meeting their needs, and that can be a range of needs.'

Effective

'In free flow later on there they are doing it again.'

During the focus group discussion the practitioners agreed that having enough time was the most important characteristic of quality interactions. They then ranked characteristics which were associated with the child's experience of the interaction, followed by characteristics associated with the adult's experience of the interaction. The quality was mainly associated with having time to engage with children on their terms, following their interests and experiences.

How do practitioners create and maintain episodes of quality interaction?

The participants in the study were using the child-centred, play-based EYFS (DfE, 2012) as the basis for their interactions. They started from the interests of the child, 'I was 'going completely from her interest and what she was absorbed in.' as most of the interactions were child-initiated.

There was implicit use of the pedagogy of co-construction of knowledge as an aspect of sustained shared thinking to extend children's thinking as the following quotes illustrate:

'It wasn't about really teaching them, it was about them showing you what they could do and how to problem solve.'

[I could] 'Support the child to construct something together [and] maybe extend [the child's thinking] a little bit with my ideas.'

They were skilled at communicating with young children and used this to support and extend their interaction with children.

What knowledge, understanding and attributes and skills do practitioners draw upon to support their interactions with young children?

The key themes that emerged from the interviews were:

Personal qualities, values and skills

The 'basics of being friendly, approachable, obviously being interested in the children and obviously wanting to be there.'

'Just being yourself really, you know how to BE in these situations.'

Being a reflective practitioner

'You are learning more about yourself, about your children, about the practitioners, about the setting.'

Learning from experience and academic learning

'You can use all that you learn in college and put it into practice, it's a nice balance between learning new skills at work and then learning more knowledge at college.'

Knowledge and understanding of child development in general and their particular child's stage of development

'If you know your children, you know how to respond to them.'

Knowledge and understanding of established theories.

'Being aware of learning theories, all of that comes in at the background and directs a little bit how I interact with the children.'

In the focus group discussion it emerged that the skills associated with building quality relationships with children and valuing children's competencies were all highly valued. The participants ranked being able to be a playmate with children; being empathetic; giving the child unconditional positive regard; and understanding the child as an active agent in their learning; as the most important aspects of quality interactions. This was more highly regarded than knowing and understanding established theories.

Reflective practice developed on the foundation degree course allowed practitioners to critically engage with theory to develop their own pedagogy. This is illustrated by one participant:

'That's something that I'm aware that I have had a shift in. I used to be quite heavily into Bruner and scaffolding the child and then I thought that you've got to remember that this child is competent in their own right. Am I supporting or am I leading the child? I've certainly shifted because now I think it is more important that the child is an active agent and I respond to that if that's needed, whereas before I might have been a lot more jumping in there, and moving on to the next thing.'

Discussion

The practitioners who participated in this research project were able to take part in, record and reflect on episodes of quality interactions with young children. The practitioners valued those episodes in which they had time to spend with their children, and, often it was when children chose to spend time with them. They were opportunities to engage with children on their terms in a playful way, sharing an experience together from which both the adult and child could benefit. It was expected that these quality interactions might centre around thinking together but the participants selected a range of situations including having a conversation at the water tray and sharing a book or an action song as well as supporting a task involving mathematical development. While sustained shared thinking may be a sign of quality in an early years setting these practitioners took a broader definition of what made an interaction high quality.

The participants were aware of the pressures on their time and made the most of quite brief interactions. Although sustained shared thinking implies time to explore ideas and understanding together these episodes seem to be more like Kothagen et al.'s concept of 'good contact' (2014). Both the adult and child were 'present and engaged'. This emotional connection between the adult and child may be one part of a mosaic of connections that may take place between adults and children in settings which build emotional links and underpin the learning conversations which can take place once children feel emotionally safe and supported.

The practitioners were able to use these short episodes of quality interaction effectively as they drew on their own personal attributes and skills built up from experience as well as using their knowledge and understanding of child development and learning theory. Reflective practice enabled them to make links between theory and practice and, more importantly, to develop their own working theories.

The practitioners agreed that children were competent and active agents in their own learning. As such they should be listened to and respected (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2008; Rinaldi, 2005). They valued interacting with them on an equal basis and were happy to follow the child's lead. The practitioners were more likely to be co-constructing knowledge (Jordan, 2009) than scaffolding children's progress through the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) as this reflects a more equal balance of power between the participants and children in their care.

The participants reflected on interactions with different children in different situations, and they felt that they and the children had good outcomes from the interaction. This was as much about emotional satisfaction than supporting cognitive development. It is notable that only one of the interactions that were considered to be high quality was with a key child. The practitioners did not consider assessing children's progress to be a positive outcome of a quality interaction. Being a key person was associated with keeping records that were required by settings rather than the basis for building a relationship with children in their care and providing a secure base from which the child could continue their learning journey.

Implications for professional practice

Reflecting on the findings of the research has led me to consider some implications of the emerging themes for practitioners in the early childhood sector of the workforce as well as for my own practice as a lecturer and tutor on a foundation degree programme.

The role of practitioners in supporting children's development in the early years

The interactions that the practitioners considered to be high quality were more often brief episodes of emotional and social contact rather than sustained episodes of shared thinking that promoted children's development and learning. They engaged with children on an inter-personal level, tuning in to their needs and meeting these, whatever they might be. This might suggest that these practitioners perceive their

role as being more focussed on caring and supporting young children rather than teaching and assessing their progress. This may conflict with the focus on 'school readiness' found in the revised EYFS (DfE, 2012).

In this study only one of the episodes selected as being high quality was between a key person and her key child, although it might have been expected that the key person system would promote high quality interactions. These findings raise questions about the organisation of settings to promote quality interactions between key people and their key children which meet the adults' and children's emotional needs as well as promoting children's development and learning.

Developing pedagogy for interacting with young children

The practitioners used a range of strategies for interacting effectively with young children, drawing on their experience to select the most appropriate strategy for each situation as well as their attitudes to children as learners. The brief episodes of meaningful interaction described by the practitioners where they made 'good contact' with children might be an effective pedagogy for building relationships and providing a base for inter-thinking that is more flexible than sustained shared thinking. This could be explored by further research.

The importance of reflective practice for practitioner's professional development

Reflective practice is the key to the development of professionalism by practitioners. It allows them to critically evaluate their own values, attributes, knowledge and skills; make links between theory and practice, and create their own working theories. As a tutor and lecturer on a foundation degree programme it is important that I continue to support students to develop their reflective skills.

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