

An evidence-base for organisational change based on pedagogical leadership.

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of a recent communication project in a Day Nursery. Aims of the research were to explore how Early Years pedagogical approaches were applied in the project to support staff and children in developing their communication and to examine the leadership model that was used to progress change within the setting. The research considered how the training and leadership approaches used have supported staff to develop their own efficacy in supporting communication in the setting and how an enabling environment was achieved for staff and children.

Introduction

In response to a recent Ofsted report (Ofsted 2015), the new leadership in a community nursery in Leicestershire identified Teaching and Play as a key area for development within the setting. The communication environment was seen as being crucial to this, particularly in response to the needs of children, many of whom had English as an Additional Language (EAL,) and the needs of staff who had not received any significant training or continuing professional development (CPD) in this area since one member of the team was engaged in the original every child a talker (ECAT) roll-out a number of years ago. This research which has examined teaching and learning approaches and leadership of learning in the whole setting communication project identified a number of key elements within the project which appear to have been pivotal in the embedding and ongoing implementation of good communication practice and the development of an enabling communication environment which has pervaded practice and understanding in this community nursery setting.

Communication and Language is a Prime area of learning and development within the framework provided (Great Britain 2014) for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and has been the focus of reports, discussion, targeted interventions and concern from government, Early Years and Speech and Language practitioners for a number of years (Bercow,2008;Tickell,2011, Nutbrown,2012). The Government implementation of the Every Child A Talker (ECAT) programme which was funded by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) in all local authorities on a three year rolling programme between 2008 and 2011 was as a response to some of these concerns. One of the stated outcomes of the ECAT programme was to raise practitioners' skills and knowledge in relation to communication. The hope was that, at this stage, all staff in settings would be trained and the key ECAT strategies would be embedded in practice and showing improvements for children as they progress into schools. A communication "lead" or Early Language Lead Professional (ELLP) was to be identified as an expert to support the changes within the environment but this had clearly not been the case and the communication offer of the setting had failed to progress.

Discussion

Against this background, the incoming nursery leader, having identified areas for development in teaching, particularly around the communication environment within the setting, sought to implement a new approach to the setting communication provision, including the commissioning of a new training approach that recognised that staff given additional responsibility require ongoing support to continue to "cascade" their learning and knowledge to the team (Siraj 2007). There was a recognition that a new approach to training and distributing responsibility for communication across the whole setting was required, based on the early years pedagogical principle of sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al 2003) to support the characteristics of effective learning across the staff team as outlined in the EYFS (Great Britain 2014). Building on the role of the ELLP was essential in the distributed leadership model that was used in this project; it was crucial that there was no one "expert" voice or any sense of protected knowledge but instead the whole team was inspired to develop and contribute to the communication environment within the setting. It was also apparent that truly distributed leadership and not merely delegation, would have to be implemented

and supported by the setting leadership through sustained shared thinking processes in order for change to become embedded and ongoing.

Good practice suggests that "All participants in early years settings can be seen as learners they are all contributors to the development of the organisation" (Robins and Callan 2009 p11) and the role of strong leadership to progress this model is pivotal in supporting this model. "The pedagogic orientation of early years is on learning to learn within a social context" (ibid p 11) and a pedagogical leader will undoubtedly embrace this view , not only in what they provide for the child but also in what is provided for the learning and development of the staff team. The evaluation of leadership in early years settings study (Siraj 2007) identified the process of co-construction as being central to learning and development of both staff and children. This concept was a key principal in the training approaches taken during the project and the development of a learning community was an intended outcome of this project as the setting established a team that keeps wanting to learn (Jones and Pound 2008).

Inherent within the Communication Project was the pedagogical principle that adults, like children, learn best when they interested and engaged and "children learn to love learning through being with adults who also love to learn" (Anning and Edwards 2006 p145). This was central to the development of the ethos of this communication project in that CPD opportunities had to build on these principles and that positive dispositions for learning (Carr 2006) are reflected in adults and children within a setting. "As pedagogical leaders we must create learning experiences for educators that parallel what we want them to offer children" (Coughlin and Baird 2013 p3) and in doing this the communication project was able to both model and create good practice in order to bring about lasting change within the team and across the nursery environment.

"Pedagogical leaders challenge others to see themselves as researchers in the teaching and learning process" (ibid p1) hence the examination of the project crucially needed to including the voice of staff team and this was done using an analysis of their learning journey based on the learning dispositions identified by Carr (2006). The learning dispositions of staff were valued and considered in the construction, development and delivery of the communication project and were revisited in reflection, observation and ongoing implementation in the same

way that EY practitioners plan, deliver, observe and reflect in their planning cycle when working with the learning and development of young children.(Great Britain 2014). Effective change can become embedded in this context.

Observation , a fundamental Early Years tool as espoused within the EYFS,(Great Britain 2014) was a central factor as the specialist EY practitioner spent a considerable amount of time observing practice as part of the environmental audit for the project and demonstrating the importance of observation to the setting staff. Peer observation was then modelled and supported as part of the change process as the setting leadership recognised the value of observation and provided time and space within the setting environment for this to be developed. As identified by the Ofsted report, “an effective start with young children relies on getting to know their strengths and weaknessesaptitudes and attitudes” (2015 p23) and this view was embraced by the setting manager and the specialist teacher as part of the strategy for facilitating changes to communication practice within the setting.

The research study

The research team carried out a focus group with the setting staff, 1:1 interviews with this team as well as recording the reflections of the specialist teacher who delivered the training for the project. Staff were asked to consider the impact of the project for themselves, the whole staff team and the children within the setting. An evaluation of an environmental audit of the setting and a staff self-evaluation of confidence in using the communication strategies from the project alongside peer observation ratings were also used to assess the impact of the project on practice. A critique using pedagogical leadership approaches (Coughlin and Baird 2013) and the concept of learning dispositions (Carr 2006) was used to analyse how the needs of learners (both children and adults) have been supported in the implementation and embedding of this project into practice and to explore the efficacy of this project for staff learning and development.

Findings

The research from the focus groups and interviews found that there were a number of aspects which all staff noted and which had contributed to the

development of a setting-wide communication strategy. These included the way that the training for the project had been delivered as it built on engaging the involvement of the setting staff at every stage and supporting them to persist with the new communication strategies. The early years concept of sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al 2003) between teacher and learner was evidence in the framework for the training model. The element of partnership between the specialist teacher and the setting team was evident, as was evidence of the value being placed on the learning and development of staff by the setting leadership which was echoed by the staff team (Male and Palaiologou 2015). This was crucial to the communication strategies becoming embedded into practice.

A key finding was the whole-team approach where all staff shared responsibility for communication and where everyone was aware of their own responsibility. Leadership responsibility for the implementation of the communication strategies was clearly distributed across the staff team and each member was able to articulate this as being central to the success of the project (Robins and Callan 2009).

Staff identified changes in the environment as being central to the success of the project. As the communication project strategies were implemented it was possible for them to see a positive impact on the children in the way that they were able to understand and follow setting routines and to make their needs known. This, along with the high value placed on communication by the setting leadership, was motivating for staff to persist with the communication strategies.

Developments in relationships were also observed, both in the way that staff interact with the children and in the way that they share their knowledge and understanding with each other and support each other to persist with the communication strategies which are now a high priority across the setting. Staff hold each other to account in a collegiate and supportive fashion and this was noted by all staff as well as the communication project leader to be a positive impact on relationships within the setting.

The establishment of regular and systematic opportunities for observation was also identified in the focus group as a significant change which has affected setting wide communication practice.

The high level of involvement (Laevers 1997) in the communication project itself, the training and its implementation was another fundamental aspect and this high level of involvement is echoed for both staff and children alike; there is evidence of the Early Years learning and development themes based on learning dispositions (Carr 2006) and meeting the needs of the unique learner which have been central to the success of this project. The project was characterised by dynamic styles of teaching and learning which were responsive to the needs of the staff and awareness of the centrality of relationship as a key factor of the delivery of the project. There were clear parallels between what happened for the adult's learning and what happened for the children's learning as a result of this project becoming embedded into practice. Parallels can be drawn between the learning journeys of the children as their communication and language skills are supported to develop and the learning journey of the setting and the staff as they implement and progress the development of the setting communication strategy.

Following engagement with the communication project there has been a clear increase in peer-rated "good" practice. It is of interest that there has been an apparent reduction in "excellent" practice. From interview data with practitioners this appears to be a knowledge effect as a result of practitioner's improved understanding of what constitutes excellent communication practice. This is recognised theoretically as an effect of knowledge acquisition in the conscious competence model (Handy 1994). Staff commented on how, following involvement in the project, they had a much greater awareness of the expectations for good and excellent practice and subsequent peer ratings reflected this more robust approach to peer assessment.

Outcomes and Conclusions

Distributed leadership gives permission; it is not the same as delegation. It creates "space for others to rise to its challenges" (Rodd 2013 p48). Peer observation was explicitly taught and practised using a format devised for the purpose. It followed a clear pattern where the specialist teacher and manager trained and supported the communication leader and the communication leaders within each room who then practised this in the rooms with the support of managers. This will continue to evolve over time until all staff are confident in carrying out and feeding back effective peer observations.

The communication leads meet regularly to compare notes and to moderate the observations thus ensuring best practice across the setting and sharing and supporting good practice. This enabled the ongoing monitoring and assessment of staff has developed and is used as a regular form of ensuring good practice is shared and supported.

Finally, staff were also clear about how the project would be developed and the role of leadership within this was fundamental to this aspect. The setting lead had to identify the communication group and be prepared to allow them time and cover as well as being a driver of the project between sessions and having confidence in the group chosen. The setting lead had to work closely with the project leader in the setting up and flexibility of delivery. A pedagogical leadership view (Coughlin and Baird 2013) which supports the development of staff alongside the development of children was apparent as a theme throughout the research. There was evidence to support the suggestion that a learning community or community of practice (Wenger 1998) with a shared responsibility was developing in the language that was used around "us", "we" "How we do things". A community of practice is a group of people with a shared interest and who share knowledge to support learning and change and there is a sense of this developing as the project progressed. Comments from staff reflect key aspects of positive learning dispositions or characteristics of effective learning shown throughout the project's development and were categorised according to their key elements; interest, involvement, persistence, expressing ideas and taking responsibility.(Carr 2006)

From the data collected there was evidence of active learning having taken place. Within the learning community each member of the team needs to be involved in contributing to change in practice (Whalley 2008) and here the role of the leader in modelling a positive disposition to change is a central element in the process. This "possibility thinking" (Craft 2012) is a key strategy in Early Years pedagogical approaches as the learner is supported to move from "what is" to "what might be". The role of the leader and the trainer in managing and supporting the process of change and making the project something which is owned and embraced by all has underpinned the success of this communication project.

In conclusion, returning to the initial proposal for this project it is possible to see that, through seeking to develop teaching and play through the enabling

environment, effective change was achieved as early years principles have been applied to practitioner learning and development.

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