

Exploring early years practitioners' 'effective' verbal interactions in the outdoor environment

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Project aims

The aim of our project was to build research capacity through the development of an ESRC proposal. The project team consisted of Professor Trisha Maynard, Jane Waters, Dr Justine Howard and Dr Guy Roberts-Holmes (all from the Centre for Child Research, Swansea University), Eileen Merriman (Trinity College Carmarthen) and Caroline McLachlan (University of Wales Newport). Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford (Institute of Education, London University) took on the role of external mentor.

The initial project focus and its significance

Initially, the proposal focused on an exploration of how early years teachers in Wales were responding to the requirement, within the Foundation Phase Framework (WAG, 2008), to make greater use of the outdoor environment

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as a context for play and learning. This was seen as important for a number of reasons. We were aware that in recent years concerns have been raised about, for example, the decline in children's access to outdoor play spaces; children's increasingly sedentary lifestyles; parental fears about strangers; and an increasingly risk-averse culture (e.g. Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Lindon, 1999; Furedi, 2002; Gill, 2007). A great deal of research (e.g. Ouvry, 2003; Garrick, 2004; Tovey, 2007) has highlighted the potential benefits of the outdoor environment as a context for children's play and learning. It is argued that these benefits – physical, social and cognitive – are particularly noticeable when children are allowed to play in natural, wild environments (Fjørtoft, 2001; 2004; Waller, 2007; Waters and Begley, 2007). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Foundation Phase for Wales (WAG, 2008) maintains that teachers should support young children's play and learning in both indoor *and* outdoor environments.

As yet, not a great deal is known about how schools in Wales are responding to this requirement. There are indications from small-scale studies that some schools are working directly with, or adapting the philosophy of, initiatives such as Forest School – although this has not been without certain tensions and concerns (Maynard 2007a; 2007b; Waters and Begley, 2007). Further evidence has been provided by a small-scale study (Maynard and Waters, 2007) which examined the current use of the outdoors by six early years teachers in Wales. Maynard and Waters found that while the teachers maintained that they were making greater use of the outdoor environment than they had done in the past, in most cases this was in a partial and limited way. For example, the teachers made little use of natural outdoor environments even when these were available and generally undertook the same kinds of tasks and made use of the same pedagogical approaches as they did when working inside the classroom. Little evidence was found of open-ended questioning or sustained shared thinking: strategies which the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2004) have established are correlated with 'effective' pre-school (early years) provision.

While the evaluation of the first year pilot of the Foundation Phase (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006) discovered that practitioners in the pilot schools reported an increased use of the outdoor environment, there may, therefore, be a pressing need to look in more detail at *how* outdoor environments are being used.

Concerns

Given that from the outset we were eager to develop a proposal that had a good chance of gaining ESRC funding, we held some concerns about our initial focus: in particular, that it may be too broad and centred on 'finding out what was happening'. This, we were advised at the initial WERN workshop, was not an approach that ESRC generally welcomed!

As a way of refining our research question, we began to shift our attention towards adult-child interactions (particularly the idea of sustained shared thinking) in the outdoor environment and, while both were still seen as significant, of foregrounding children's 'learning' over their 'play'. This necessitated a further and deeper consideration of the theory that would underpin our project.

In search of a theoretical underpinning

On the advice of our external mentor, we began to explore approaches that emphasise the need to maximise child participation in classroom talk. Skidmore and Gallagher (2005), for example, note that a number of writers have developed approaches that view teaching and learning as 'dialogue'. Being based on understandings of how knowledge is constructed, these approaches call for a 'democratisation' of the usual power relationships that exist between teachers and children (Skidmore and Gallagher, 2005). Previous research has suggested that the democratisation of relationships might have particular significance for teachers when working away from the boundaries of the classroom (see Maynard, 2007b).

EPPE and REPEY

As part of our consideration of adult-child interactions, we were particularly interested in the findings of the EPPE and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years REPEY (Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years) projects (Sylva et al., 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) concerning sustained shared thinking and open questioning: that is, in terms of children's 'outcomes', these verbal interactions had been identified as 'effective' in early years settings. For those members of the team used to working from socio-cultural and postmodern perspectives, the idea of identifying 'good' or

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'effective' practice was challenging and problematic. That said, we recognised that the EPPE findings were significant – not least in relation to the Foundation Phase guidelines. We also recognised that these projects (EPPE and REPEY) had been working within a different paradigm and had used 'mixed methods' – as most of us were essentially qualitative researchers, this was new territory, but territory we were eager to explore!

The re-defined focus, aims and methods

As a result, our focus was re-defined as 'an exploration of early years practitioners' use of 'effective' verbal interactions when working in different outdoor environments and the associated democratisation of adult-child relationships'. In relation to the Foundation Phase framework, then, the main aim of our study is to examine the following two questions:

- how far does the outdoor environment appear to support the use of 'effective' verbal interactions and thus 'effective' learning? (This will incorporate an exploration of differences between practitioners' use of 'effective' interactions indoors and outdoors and in different types of outdoor environments.)
- when working outside, is there any correlation between the practitioner's intentions; adult-child verbal interactions and children's engagement in activities? Are there other significant factors which appear to influence the use/level of effective verbal interactions in outdoor environments?

The research design is still being developed, but it is likely that we will ask four local authorities (in south/mid Wales) each to identify four good/excellent early years practitioners (of children aged three to five years) according to criteria that, from the EPPE/REPEY studies, we know are associated with 'good' outcomes for children. The practitioners will be visited in their settings, field notes will be made on their outdoor provision and observations undertaken of their interactions with children when involved in 'normal' learning activities. Taking into account a range of factors, including the frequency of 'effective' verbal interactions; the type of outdoor space available and how often this is used; as well as the need to include both English/Welsh Medium provision and maintained/non-maintained schools; eight practitioners will be invited to become part of this project.

Detailed case studies will be developed for each participant and setting (indoor and outdoor environments). Practitioners will be visited on at least three occasions during the project; each visit followed by a period of data analysis. This will enable us to follow up and further explore emerging issues. We intend to ensure that comparable data is collected at each setting so enabling us to make comparisons across settings.

Collection of qualitative data is likely to include:

- semi-structured interviews with practitioners;
- observations (video-taped) of practitioners interacting with children in outdoor and indoor environments;
- informal discussions with practitioners;
- field notes and documentary evidence.

While not yet planned in any detail, we anticipate that qualitative data will be analysed using NVivo – as in the EPPE study, for example, we will model our initial ideas emerging from the data using ‘nodes’ that both support the coding of data and as a consequence are themselves amended and refined.

Qualitative data will be supplemented by, and compared with, more quantitative data collected through the use of systematic observations using three rating scales: the Pre-school Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS) (DeBord et al., 2005); the Caregiver Interaction Scale (Arnett, 1989); and the Leuven Involvement Scale (LIS-YC) (Laevers, 1994). We are particularly interested in evaluating POEMS which has been produced for use in pre-school settings in the USA. This scale explores five domains: physical; interactions; play and learning settings; program; and teacher/caregiver role. It is hoped that an additional outcome of this project will be the adaptation of POEMS for use within a Welsh/UK context.

Outcomes and future developments

A further meeting will be held over the next few months to finalise the research methods. It is anticipated that the completed proposal will be submitted to ESRC before December 2008.

This project has undoubtedly been beneficial in many ways. On reflection, however, given the involvement of colleagues with differing levels of research experience, working in different institutions, the identification of a more modest aim might have allowed us to adopt – rather than simply to

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talk about – more constructivist and democratic approaches. In relation to building education research capacity, this may have been a more appropriate and effective way forward.

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