Using Child Voice to Inform the Learning Environment

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INTRODUCTION

A focus on ***how*** rather than ***what*** children learn represents a significant shift in the education of young children in recent years, and is central to the development of the curriculum at the nursery school in which this small scale research project was undertaken. The Local Authority Nursery School has an intake of over 60 pupils across the 3-5 age range. The school's vision statement emphasises the importance placed on supporting children to develop the skills needed to become effective lifelong learners and this evaluative research project sought to incorporate the pupils' voice and perspective on curriculum developments undertaken.

There is "a large and growing body of evidence that individual differences in how children approach learning are a major source of differences in their achievement in school" (Stewart 2011, p. 9). This emphasis on how children learn is now explicit in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014 through the Characteristics of Effective Learning: Playing and Exploring (engagement), Active Learning (motivation) and Creating and Thinking Critically (thinking). Moylett (2013) summarises the impact of these characteristics in terms of creating children who are ready, willing and able to learn.

How to develop children's learning power (Claxton 2002) has also been a key objective within the school's own improvement plan over the past two years. Much consideration has been given to how the learning environment supports children in being effective and engaged and empowered to make active choices about their own learning. This aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child which states that, "when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have a right to have their opinion taken into account" (United Nations Children's Fund, 1998, Article 12). In order to evaluate the changes made to the learning environment and to identify future school improvement objectives, teachers wanted to actively involve children and capture their voice, so ensuring that the future provision and practice would be directly shaped and influenced by their views.

The Curriculum Provision

The current curriculum provision within the school is built on evaluations and developments of strategies implemented over a two-year period. They are underpinned by the following aims:

- Teaching children how to use and look after the areas of continuous provision in their first term.
- Providing different levels of tools to allow and encourage children to differentiate for themselves.
- Reviewing the availability of open ended activities, both inside and outside the classroom.
- Reviewing the layout and presentation of the learning environment to ensure it supports engagement.
- Introducing planning systems to allow practitioners to respond immediately to children's interests and developmental needs.
- Providing CPD focusing on further improving interaction between adults and children to support child initiated play.

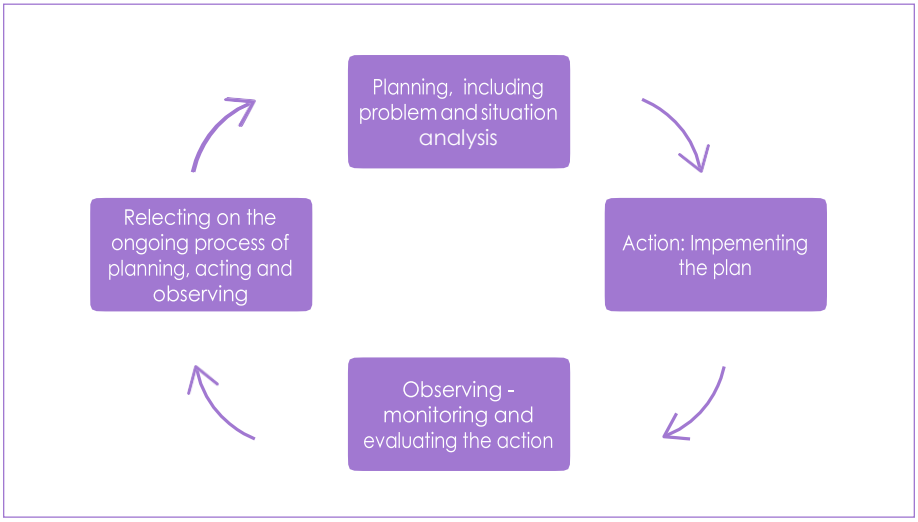
The research undertaken set out to evaluate the success of these aims and to determine what future implications could be derived from considering their impact on the pupils' learning.

THE PROJECT

Methodology

To evaluate the impact of the provision in terms of the impact on the pupils, it was decided that Elliot's (2001) framework for practitioner research was the most applicable as it was thought to complement the existing cycle of professional development used to structure the school's improvement processes (illustrated in Figure1). The school's cycle of professional development is rooted in a collegial approach – all members of staff are involved in regular reviews and feedback on the impact of their practice. Thus, in a similar way all staff were involved in the collection and review of the research data for this project.

Figure 1. Action Research Cycle



Using Elliot's framework, the staff:

- Identified what they wanted to find out.
- Carried out reconnaissance activities to gain knowledge.
- Described what they found out.
- Explained what they found out.
- Constructed the plan for improvement.
- Have begun to implement and monitor the actions identified.

> ▶ Key Point
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> There is value in undertaking collaborative practitioner research focused on the issues and challenges of practice in order to resolve problems and inform development.

In line with the belief that the children should have free choice in their involvement (BERA, 2011), it was felt important to explain the project to the children in a pupil friendly manner to ensure they understood the aims and could decide whether or not to participate. Staff verbally explained to them that they wanted to find out about; what they liked playing with in nursery and what they were learning about and asked the children if they wanted to participate. Some children opted out of taking part. Parents were asked to give permission for anonymised observations of the children willing to take part to be included in the data set. Using such data is not an unusual step as making detailed observations, is an integral part of normal provision and observations are shared regularly with parents through learning stories, open days, learning walls, and next steps information. However, all parents were made aware that the observations would be used as part of a research focus in this particular case.

In order to actively involve the children in the research process and to use child voice to influence and shape the provision, it was decided to adopt the Mosaic Approach, a framework for listening to young children, developed by Clarke and Moss (2011) and use the following data collection methods:

1. Detailed observations of the children accessing the learning environment, with a focus on how they used areas of continuous provision, the activities they carried out and how they interacted, or not, with other children and adults within the areas.
2. Photo tour, in which children were asked to identify and take photographs of their favourite areas of provision within the learning environment.
3. Picture survey using these photographs as a starting point for discussion with children about their chosen areas of provision, including what they like, why they like it and what they learn when playing in the area. Reflective discussion with staff to capture their perceptions of the children's learning.

Observation data was collected from a sample group of children. A brief synopsis of five such observations are included below:

Observation 1. This involved a close study of two boys, (Child A and Child B), who were working separately in the creative area, both building and joining 3D materials, engaged in their activity for more than 30 minutes. In both cases, the boys independently selected resources and equipment that they needed and that were appropriate to their task. They were also both able to identify from the different types of scissors available (plier scissors, spring scissors and standard scissors) which were appropriate to their level of development, with Child B changing from standard to plier scissors. Child A tried different shaped and sized boxes, measuring whether they would fit and cutting out pieces from a box to fit a tube in. The only time he interacted with an adult was to ask for help finding the end of the cellotape. Child B proudly told the adult "Look I've made a rocket" when he had completed his model.

Observation 2 & 3. These observations involved two children (Child C and D) playing with playdough. Both have English as an additional language. Child C watched and listened as the other children manipulated the playdough to make cakes and place them on a number mat, an adult and children narrated what they were doing. Once the other children had moved to another area, Child C made two cakes with cherries on the top and placed them on the correct number mat. She took them to an adult and pointed to them. Child D watched carefully as another child made a butterfly with the playdough by rolling out a piece of playdough and shaping it into a butterfly shape. Child D then flattened her playdough and manipulated it into a butterfly shape. Once she had completed it she sprinkled it with glitter to decorate it. She proudly showed an adult what she had created.

Observation 4. This observation involved Child E using the bikes outside the classroom over two days. Child E chose to play on the bikes three times over two days. Each time he was actively involved in his play and demonstrated a range of skills. He manoeuvred the bike skilfully around different objects, encouraged other children to join him and he instigated a "car wash" role play situation.

Observation 5. Child F was the focus of an observation which revealed him moving between six different activities over a short period of time. He displayed strong physical interests but was not able to maintain concentration for more than 2-3 minutes at a time.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the reconnaissance activities children indicated that they were ready (engaged), willing (motivated) and able (creative) (Moylett, 2013) to learn. Through previous work on developing the environment to support the characteristics of effective learning, staff had carefully considered the layout of the environment and the presentation of resources. We had already identified that open ended resources and opportunities for open ended play engaged children, in conjunction with skilful adult interactions. Children were motivated to try out their own ideas and were increasingly able to verbalise and refine them.

1. In evaluating the observations against the characterisitcs of effective learning (playing and explaining, active learning and creativity and critical thinking) it was noted by staff that the planned approach to focus on these characteristics had been successful in supporting children's readiness to learn. The time spent teaching children how to use the areas of learning had supported independence and decision making by allowing children to access resources freely and follow their ideas through in a sustained way (Observation 1). The introduction of the levelling of resources allows children to differentiate tools to match their skill level (Observation 1). By carefully planning and enhancing the learning environment to meet children's interests and development needs, this allowed children to observe, explore, use equipment in different ways and try out their ideas (Observations 2, 3 and 4).

> ▶ Key Point
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> The use of unobtrusive, familiar and creative teaching tools with children is powerful when planning research. Observation in particular can reveal much.

The photo tour and picture surveys were used to initiate one to one discussions with the children. In these discussions, the children talked about the resources they liked to use and which areas of continuous provision they preferred. They also

talked about why they didn't play in certain areas - for example, a common reason given was if the areas became messy and dirty. Children were very clear on what their interests were and communicated clearly the activities they had carried out in particular areas. When prompted and supported by an adult, children were also able to talk about what they had learnt during a particular activity.

IMPLICATIONS

> ▶ Key Point
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> Opportunities for creativity and praise within learning contexts support children's self-esteem and motivation.

When reflecting on the information that had been gathered, it was noted that the areas of continuous provision were focused on a mastery orientation (Slavin 1990). By displaying a range of resources in ways that encourage choice and decision making, staff were able to give the children power to explore and try out their own ideas. However, having adults available whose interactions focus on children's interests and learning to build a growth mindset is central to the success of this approach. It was also noted that feedback giving praise can affect children's motivation and significantly impact on their ability to become effective learners (Dweck, 2006). Praise focusing on performance and intelligence can limit children's persistence to achieve a challenging task, whereas praise focusing on challenge, effort and strategy can build children's self-esteem so that "facing challenges, working hard, stretching their abilities and using their skills and knowledge to help others makes students feel good about themselves" (Dweck, 2006, p. 131).This links back to children's motivations and whether they are intrinsically motivated to succeed purely for the pleasure in achieving a goal, or whether they are extrinsically motivated to complete a task for some external recognition or reward. The four children from Observations 1, 2 and 3 all set themselves a goal and persevered to complete it and once they had succeeded their pleasure was evident. They were what Ferre Laevers describes as "extremely highly involved" and "continuously engaged in the activity and completely absorbed in it" (Laevers, 2005, p. 14).

Guy Claxon (2002) identifies four key learning dispositions: resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness and reciprocity, the 4Rs. After reflecting on the outcomes from the reconnaissance activities members of staff were able to recognise how aspects of the 4Rs were inherent within the provision they had created. Imitation, a learning capacity within the reciprocity disposition, was clearly evident as the two children in the playdough area watched carefully and then adapted what other children were doing to create their own versions. This is supported by Robson's (2006) framework for the creative process that identifies "familiarisation" as the first element as children gather information, acquire expertise and test out ideas. Through observations of children's independent

play, their resilience to see an idea through to its culmination was also apparent: children were absorbed in what they were doing, they observed and noticed details and persevered to achieve their goal. The two boys in the modelling area were also able to reflect on what they were doing, planning their model and revising it as they went along.

> **Key Point**
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> Imitation, a learning capacity within the reciprocity disposition, was clearly evident as children carefully watched their peers at play and then adapted and changed the activity to create their own versions. This is termed as famillarisation.

Staff were also interested in how children used equipment and resources that engaged their interest. Equipment such as a bike could be viewed as primarily supporting physical development. However as the observation of Child E illustrated, he was able to initiate role play using the bikes that made links between his experiences at home and at school, thus demonstrating his resourcefulness by using equipment that engaged him to extend his learning socially and imaginatively.

> **Key Point**
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> Emotional warmth and security, feelings of control, cognitive challenge and the articulation of learning are vital contributing factors in successful learning.

The majority of play observed, as described above, was purposeful, but, as demonstrated by Observation 5, some children do not engage purposefully within the environment. They are unable to maintain attention on tasks and adapt to changes in routines. This self-regulatory behaviour is identified by Whitebread (2012) as vital if children are going to become successful learners. In order to support self-regulatory behaviour, Whitebread (2012) identifies the key characteristics needed as being emotional warmth and security, feelings of control, cognitive challenge and the articulation of learning. This has raised questions for the staff at the school as to how they support all of these needs to ensure every child is supported through the learning environment and through adult interactions to achieve their full potential.

A common theme running through the reflections is one of time - children need time to observe, to absorb, to explore media and materials, to complete a task they have set themselves, to reflect upon and to return to a task to refine it or try out new ideas.

Actions

Using the information gathered through the reconnaissance activities and based on the data from the project, a main aim is to develop the school improvement plan with a focus on developing critical thinking and creativity through personalised planning systems. The School of Teacher Education. SMT team will also identify

what engages and motivates children during the first term with the aim of using this information to inform the development of the learning environment over the school year.

At the beginning of the Autumn term the staff consulted with the children by talking, observing and filming. They wanted to find out what motivates the children to learn and which areas of learning and activities are the most engaging. All members of staff took part in finding out about the new cohort and they enhanced areas of continuous provision as well as changing the environment to respond to the needs and interests of the children. The staff have focused on providing resources for open ended activities and developing the mixing areas, such as the messy area and mud lab outside. The creative workshop has been extended and more natural resources are available for use in the malleable area. After consulting with a group of children about the use of space, a room is now dedicated to storytelling and sharing books, for use with an adult.

> ▶ Key Point
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> Children need time to observe, to absorb, to explore media and materials, to complete a task they have set themselves, to reflect upon and to return to a task to refine it or try out new ideas.

Reflections for practitioners

A key question to which we keep returning is: How do we measure what we value?

High quality learning environments that promote the characteristics of effective learning must be complemented with adult – child interactions that focus specifically on extending learning and developing a "growth mindset" if children are to develop to their full potential.

The importance of listening to child voice has also come to the forefront. By incorporating the voice of the child into the school improvement procedures, staff at the school are responding directly to the children's developmental needs. By gaining feedback from the children as to what motivates and engages them, we are able to adapt the learning environment to support self-regulation. Whitebread (2012) considers self-regulation to be a vital component in becoming socially adept and successful learners. He refers to self-regulation as including "fundamental aspects of emotional, social, cognitive and motivational development" (p. 138). How to assess and teach children to self-regulate is a key focus for the school moving forward. Linking the self-regulatory activities often seen in young children during child initiated activities with assessment strategies will require a focus on the following elements of independent learning identified by Whitebread (2012): emotional, pro-social, cognitive and motivational.

These should lead to an enhancement in the pupils' experience of:

- Emotional warmth and security.
- Feelings of control.
- Cognitive challenge.
- Talking about learning.

> **Key Point**
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> Teachers need to reflect on the value of learner voice and the contributions made by adult-child interactions when extending and developing high quality learning environments. This is a factor too for greater personalised planning.

Finally, the aim is to introduce greater personalised planning. This means focusing on the individual child's needs rather than an overall objective. This will allow practitioners to focus on how children learn, gain a greater understanding of each child's individual needs, and what motivates and engages them. All linked to supporting self-regulatory learning.

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LEVEL 6
LEVEL 5
EXPLAIN
SUGGEST IDEAS
EXPRESS VIEWS
LEVEL 4
LEVEL 3
DESCRIBE
What level are you aiming for?
Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.