Developing Early Years leadership: Examining the practice of facilitation in and through action research

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FIGURE 1

Appraisal and refinement of leadership Action Research project over 5 phases.

Field Notes

Planning
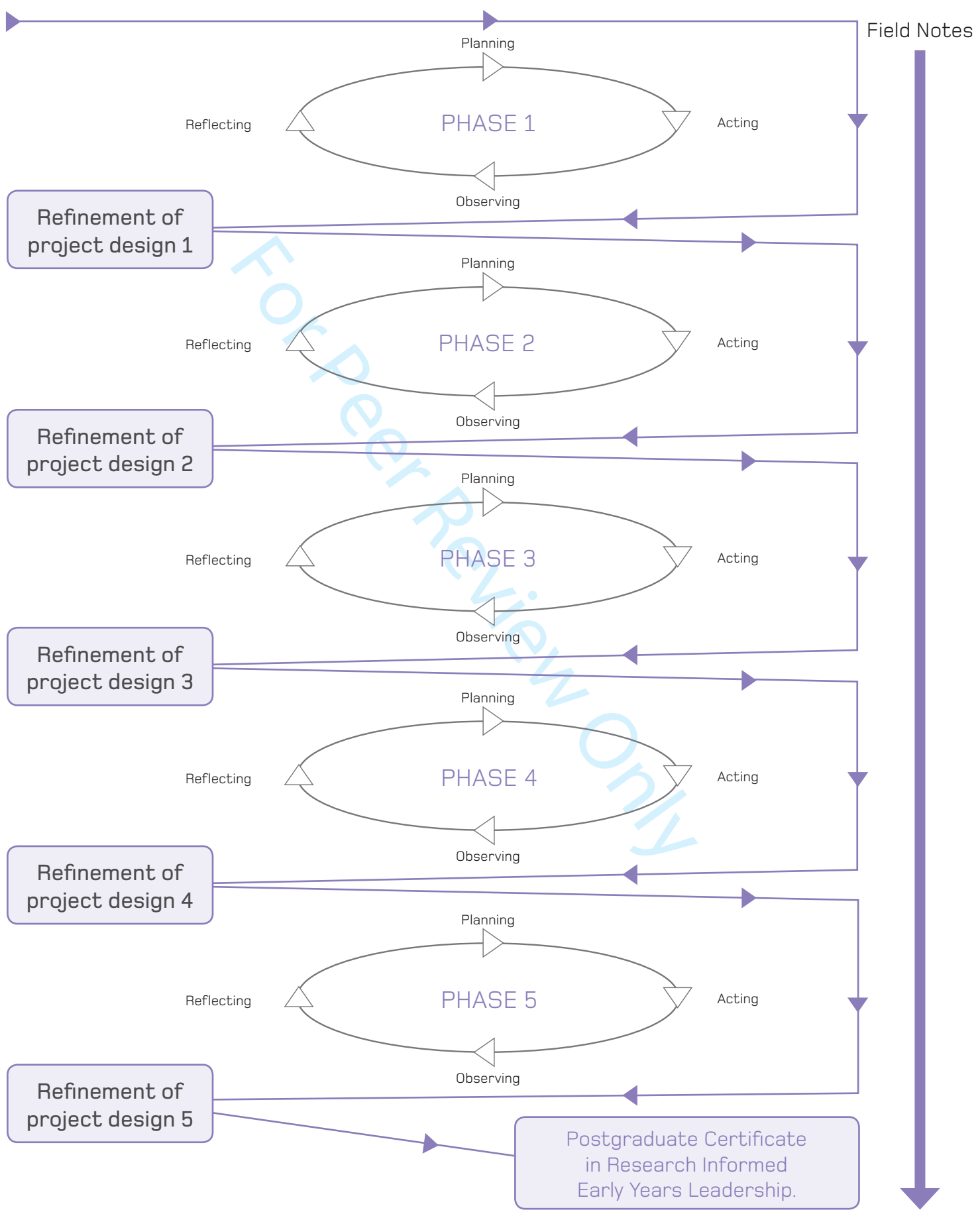
Reflecting   PHASE 1   Acting

Observing

Refinement of
project design 1

Planning

Reflecting   PHASE 2   Acting

Observing

Refinement of
project design 2

Planning

Reflecting   PHASE 3   Acting

Observing

Refinement of
project design 3

Planning

Reflecting   PHASE 4   Acting

Observing

Refinement of
project design 4

Planning

Reflecting   PHASE 5   Acting

Observing

Refinement of
project design 5

Postgraduate Certificate
in Research Informed
Early Years Leadership.

FIGURE 2

Action research cycle for each phase

1 PLANNING

Facilitator:
- Identifies steps to create a supportive learning community
- Constructs programme of activities

1st Person Action Research

EY Leaders:
- Select area for change
- Create action plan
- Share with key stakeholders

2nd Person Action Research

2 ACTING

EY Leaders:
- Implement change

2nd Person Action Research

Facilitator:
- Enacts programme at current stage

1st Person Action Research

3 OBSERVING

Facilitator:
- Observes how EY leaders are managing implementation
- Identifies any gaps/issues/challenges in programme at current stage

1st Person Action Research

EY Leaders:
- Analyse impact of change on practice and provision

2nd Person Action Research

4 REFLECTING

EY Leaders:
- Share evaluations
- Identify challenges
- Revise action plan

2nd Person Action Research

Facilitator:
- Identifies improvement/ innovations, responding to observations
- Considers position of participants and reviews programme

1st Person Action Research

Action Research Cycle

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Table 1: Outline of the workshop sessions

Session	Content	Research material
1	Introduction and ethics of project Who to involve with each EYL project and how Creative cards: Where are we now? What do we want to achieve?	Facilitator Reflective Diary Field notes
2	Action planning for a three week cycle (including success indicators from phase 2 onwards) First thoughts and reflection Ideal leader inventory (from phase 3 onwards)	Facilitator Reflective Diary Field notes
3	Challenges and barriers Journal articles on leadership and management in Early Years: connecting with own experiences Reflection and evaluation of project so far Adaptions and review P4C enquiry (from phase 4 onwards)	Facilitator Reflective Diary Field notes
4	Team role analysis (Belbin, 2010) Reflection and evaluation on project so far Influences on participants and whom they influence (phase 5 only)	Facilitator Reflective Diary Field notes
5	Creation of poster by participant to illustrate outcomes for each setting (to include success criteria from phase 2 onwards)	Facilitator Reflective Diary Field notes
6	Dissemination to invited guests and Local Authority sponsors	Facilitator Reflective Diary Field notes

Developing Early Years leadership: Examining the practice of facilitation

in and through action research

Abstract: This article examines the use of first-person action research to improve the facilitation of a continuing professional development (CPD) project in Early Years leadership. The intention of this project was to support Early Years Leaders (EYLs) from a diverse range of Early Years settings in NW England, including those in children's centres and the private, voluntary and independent sector, to improve their practice and hence strengthen the quality of Early Years provision.

The project, carried out in five separate phases, gave rise to a nested action research inquiry carried out by both EYLs and the lead facilitator of the CPD. As the EYLs used the approaches offered by the facilitator to articulate and evaluate their own experiences of leading Early Years provision, their sayings, the articulation of their expertise and their burgeoning confidence in using that expertise, challenged the facilitator to find her own locus of knowledge. The article focuses on this process of building respectful partnerships for reflexive learning and how the facilitator, using her own overarching inquiry, developed insights into the process of facilitation itself. The concept of practice architectures (Kemmis et al 2014) was used as a framework to analyse the data. Findings include the importance of recognising the importance of diverse forms of expertise and where this lay and the emotional labour of relinquishing control of the process to enable authentic shared enquiry.

Keywords: First-person action research, early years leadership, facilitation, continuing professional development

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Introduction

The diversity of Early Years settings in the UK and elsewhere is manifest, as are the

qualifications and professional experience of Early Years Leaders (EYLs) (Nutbrown

2012). This range of Early Years settings means that developing consistent practices

and supporting those practices has been challenging and continues to be so. The focus

on raising the quality of Early Years education and care has revealed the lack of a

consistent framework focusing on leadership within this field. There is a growing

interest by Government in England (DfE 2017) and supranational organisations

internationally, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) (OECD 2018), in enhancing the quality of Early Years leadership.

All registered providers of Early Years settings in England are inspected by the

regulatory body, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). One of the key aspects

under scrutiny by Ofsted is the quality of leadership as this is acknowledged as

underpinning high quality provision. One local authority (LA) in England, in an area of

mixed socio-economic status where the levels of educational attainment of young

children were consistently lower than that of the population in general, wished to

enhance and affirm the quality of leadership within the Early Years provision for which

it is responsible. Its primary aim was to raise the educational attainment levels of

children attending these settings in focusing on leadership in both education and care.

It therefore sought partnership with a neighbouring university where the LA had

previous successful collaborations, to undertake a professional development

opportunity for its EYL. The intention was that the LA and the university would jointly

design and develop a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) project for EYLs

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that would take a collaborative action research (AR) approach to addressing leadership in Early Years settings.

Often carried out in collaboration with peers and a facilitator (Winter 2002), AR provides opportunities for professional development, both individually and collectively. The objective for this project was to bring together expertise from all participants, the theoretical and conceptual knowledge of the university and the deep knowledge of how legislation, policy, professionalism and the 'regulatory gaze' (Foucault 1978; Osgood 2006) impacts on provision and practice on the part of the LA and the practical enactment of the EYLs.

This paper considers how through engaging in AR into our respective practices, a university facilitator and five groups of EYLs gained insights into building knowledge through reflective practice, sharing understandings, reflecting on those understandings, making meaning and learning together about Early Years leadership. The premise underpinning the choice of AR for this project was the opportunity to embed shared, collaborative critical reflection as an approach to CPD to raise standards of leadership.

This paper has been written by the project facilitator and university senior lecturer, Author 1 (XX) and her reflective partner/critical friend, Author 2 (XY), an action researcher with Early Years leadership experience.

Methodology

The project was designed as a collaborative AR inquiry into leadership-as-practice (Raelin 2016) within the Early Years sector. AR is a means of practitioners examining their everyday practices and taking action to improve it. In AR opportunities arise from

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working through practical lived experiences and engaging in discourse with peers regarding issues of mutual concern (Carr and Kemmis 2009; Noffke 2009; Somekh 2006). Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman (2013) found that involvement in AR helps to amplify practices of leadership on the part of practitioners, strengthening the rationale for the choice of AR for this examination of leadership-in-practice (Raelin 2016).

AR has a dual function, firstly it acts to illuminate participants' understanding of their contexts and secondly it enables participants to use these insights for making improvements, both for the individuals and the group as a collective. It is

> a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990,5).

Two strands of AR ran through the project. Second-person AR projects were undertaken by the EYLs looking at their own practice, whilst BA undertook a first-person AR project into her own practice as facilitator for this CPD/AR project. Second-person AR is where participants collaborate in an inquiry on mutual concern, so that in this instance each group of EYLs inquired as to how they could improve their practice of leadership (Reason and McArdle 2004). The premise for this was that the collaborative AR approach embedded shared, critical reflection that would reveal to everyone involved their own practices as work-in-action. Making practitioner knowledge explicit would become an approach to CPD with the potential to raise

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standards of leadership in Early Years settings that built on practitioner expertise. This was initially seen as CPD for the EYLs but as the project developed it became clear that the first-person AR undertaking by BA, the facilitator, created spaces for her own learning as she created spaces for the learning of others.

Insert Figure One here: Appraisal and Refinement.

BA now takes up the narrative of this project.

First-person AR is a form of systematic inquiry into one's own actions and choices undertaken through recursive critical reflection (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). Its purpose in this instance was to enable me (BA) to evaluate how successful I had been in creating challenging, secure communicative spaces for learning, and to examine how my prior experiences were guiding my choices for action. I would then make informed changes to my facilitation practice using these insights. First-person AR thus supported the examination of my own practice as the university facilitator of this Early Years Leadership CPD project. An important consideration was that I had no practical experience of leading an Early Years setting. I did not have specific experience of my source of knowledge resulting from actually carrying out the role in 'knowledge-as-practice' (Raelin 2016). These sources of lived insight existed elsewhere within the combined experiences, knowledge and understanding of the EYLs. My own professional expertise was as a lecturer in Higher Education (HE), engaging with the learning and teaching aspects of a university wide approach to curriculum reform via communities of practice (Annala and Mäkinen 2017). The source of expertise on early years practice therefore could not be my own embodied cognition (Shapiro 2010) but

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the way in which I used my skills to facilitate communities for learning within the project. The focus of my first-person AR project was thus my facilitation of learning spaces for others who had direct lived experience in practice.

The second-person AR projects, nested within my own overarching first-person research project, were carried out by the EYLs. Whilst both the first-person and second-person AR projects are intrinsically entwined, the focus in this paper is on the former.

Project design

The project was undertaken in five separate phases, with each phase taking place over a period of about six months, between September 2015 and February 2018. Each phase consisted of a discrete group of between 13 to 21 EYLs who participated in six separate workshop meetings. Each EYL designed and carried out second--person action research in their own Early Years setting whilst I undertook my own first-person enquiry. - Through this process, the EYLs they were supported by their peer group of EYLs to reflect on, evaluate and extend their actions (see figure 2). The collaborative AR approach provided a space for self-identifying a necessary change management initiative, then implementing and evaluating this. The elongated time frame of approximately six months for each phase allowed for reflection-on-action in addition to reflection-in-action (Schön 1983) for all partners within the CPD activity. Whilst the workshops were jointly facilitated by myself, the university partner and LA staff member, I took the lead throughout the project.

Insert Figure 2 here Action Research Cycle for each phase.

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The basic format of the six workshops at the heart of each phase of the project was discussion and forward planning, interspersed with activities to elucidate practitioner thinking about leadership and what it may involve in the Early Years arena. The workshops, designed by myself as facilitator, occurred at three weekly intervals, so that after each individual workshop, the participants had a time scale of one week to plan their ideas in detail and gain stakeholder agreement, the second week to implement their change and the third week to evaluate, from all stakeholder perspectives, how this had succeeded (See Table 1 below). This spacing was crucial as it enabled both the EYLs, and me as facilitator, to reflect on the previous workshop and to review our intentions for the next workshop in the light of previous learning. My reflections were documented in a personal diary which formed the basis of my own AR in relation to the facilitation approach. This first-person account aimed to examine my leadership within a CPD project following democratic principles (Olin, Karlberg-Granlund, and Furu 2016) and to examine the change and development of my own mediation approach as facilitator. It examined how, whilst paying careful, respectful attention to the participants' desired outcomes, my interpretations of the situation influenced, and were influenced, by the actual process of facilitation.

Insert Table 1 here: Outline of the workshop sessions

The workshops adopted iterative reframing, this is where a leadership issue is considered anew after reflection (Author 1 reference 2013). The outline of the workshop sessions is given in Table 1 above.

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The reframing approach was also used at the end of each phase where EYLs had the opportunity to enter a communicative space, to elaborate as to what extent they felt they had achieved their aims and why their project had succeeded or stalled. The concept of communicative space has its roots in the work of Jürgen Habermas (2003) who identified the ideal place for people to come together as a place of

> ...mutual recognition, reciprocal perspective taking, a shared willingness to consider one's own conditions through the eyes of the stranger, and to learn from one another (p. 291).

Communicative spaces were central to enabling EYLs to consider how to take the project further in the light of repeated discussions with their peers. They places where hierarchy and status could become irrelevant and all views and perspectives were valued. Creating such spaces for open and honest discussion was the role of the facilitator. This willingness and openness to question our own actions by the EYLs and myself in the light of insights from others was to prove essential to the safe sharing of practical issues, for example from safe-guarding issues regarding potentially vulnerable children to disciplinary actions regarding staff supervisions. In the safe spaces of the workshop sessions EYLs shared and discussed their successes, their ways of building on success and how they were coping with challenges. This became the essence of the communicative spaces at the heart of the collaborative AR process. Reframing enabled them to gain a sense of a work in progress with the journey itself being recognised as a valuable learning process. This was true for both the EYLs and myself as facilitator. My role as facilitator was to recognise the expertise espoused by the EYLs and to actively question what I could bring to enhance their knowledge of through the sharing

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of ideas, attitudes, reflections, decisions and burgeoning new knowledge. This highlights the difference between a more traditional role as facilitator, whereby one supports the learning of others, and my position as a first-person action researcher, who engaged in actively learning from the facilitation process itself.

I, as facilitator, was also able to avail of these communicative spaces. For example, the fact that for each phase there was a new LA Early Years staff member who acted as co-facilitator meant that I had to repeatedly articulate the principles, practices and evolution of the project for the new LA staff member. Initially considering this to be an issue I came to realise that such articulation necessitated a critical reflection on developments and forced me to recognise my own emerging understandings of the core aims of my facilitation approach for this project.

Ethical approval for the proposed study was sought from the home HE Institution on a phase-by-phase basis. This resulted in a biannual scrutiny of the research project to ensure it adhered to the research ethics policy, including BERA (2018) and EECERA (2015) guidelines. This in itself provided a prompt to ensure that potential power imbalances were brought to the fore for each group of participants, using scrutiny by external colleagues as critical friends to the action researcher as facilitator.

For each of the five phases, the first meeting was an introductory half-day session to explain the research project and to enable participants to consider their involvement and decide on whether to take part. Had one of the participants not wished to be involved in the research, they would still take part in the leadership project itself,

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without contributing data for the action research project. In each of the five phases, all participants agreed to take part.

Tracing the facilitator's first-person AR

The six workshop activities are now examined in more detail to elucidate how ongoing reflection through first-person AR helped me to understand and improve my practice of facilitation. The major instruments for this were my field notes and reflective diary, which together with discussions with the LA officer and the involvement in the communicative spaces with the EYLs, provided valuable insights into the potential for a new form of professional practice for me.

The first two methods I planned for use within the workshops to facilitate inquiry were creative cards and journal articles.

1.   Creative cards

My first encounter with creative cards arose from my own experience of AR as a first-person participant. An experienced facilitator had enabled me to understand how creative methods, such as the creative cards, could enable participants to reflect on their personal contexts, to experiment with considering different ways of acting and then to theorise this as the basis for future actions (Reason and McArdle 2004). I have since used the creative cards activity on numerous occasions within my current role as university lecturer (Author 1 reference 2013).

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The cards are photographs of diverse situations involving one or more people (Bijkerk and Loonen 2009). In this study each participant chose one card and described how they felt this photograph reflected their sense of their personal situation as an EYL. This activity was designed to support the opening up of personal belief, opinions and praxis. It enabled the sharing of their own feelings outside the context of their Early Years setting and acted as an affirmation for each individual within the group when others identified/saw similarities with their choices, understandings and actions. It also aimed to distance the EYLs from the minutiae of their specific context whilst at the same time enabling them to see the bigger picture. Examining their praxis in public, their choices and actions and relating their rationale for this to others is challenging (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, 2014, Author 2 et al 2019) and can unsettle even the most convinced of their success in the role of leader. It is, however, important to unsettle long held beliefs and understandings as part of the process of learning to see and act differently, to making a change in practice (Author 2 et al 2019; Author 2 2009). This is true both for the EYLs and me as facilitator. Engaging in this exercise also offered me a way of examining and recognising that how I perceived my role was directly informed by my previous experience and how the everyday practice of the project was now guiding a deeper understanding of the rationale for my facilitation practice.

2.   Journal articles on leadership

A range of contemporary journal articles were provided for the EYLs in order to contribute 'theoretical perspectives to deepen the discussions' (Olin, Karlberg-Granlund, and Furu 2016, 438) and stimulate reflection. The EYLs had little access to peer-reviewed journal articles in their daily roles, with the most usual source of information being well-established professionally orientated magazines, covering both news and best practice. Whilst I was confident in the use of academic journal articles

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in my role as university lecturer, using them as methods of CPD was a risk. Unfamiliar and technical academic language and conventions meant that I may have chosen a method that was not successful, alienated the participants and reinforced an academic superiority, which I had been at pains to reduce. However, EYLs found the peer-reviewed articles useful. They reflected on how similar some of the findings in the journal articles were to their own specific concerns and situations and this gave them confidence to reflect further on their own context.

These two methods for stimulation reflection and discussion (creative cards and examining journal articles) were used in all five phases of the project. After the first phase, however, my field notes revealed how neither the cards nor the journal articles had really given space for EYLs to conceptualise and articulate what their practice could look like after change. As Denyer and Turnball James (2016) suggest, articulating how intended goals are actualised could be problematic. I therefore introduced some new facilitation approaches to try and address this (Identifying Success Indicators; The Idea Leader Inventory; Philosophy 4 Children and Influences).

3.   Success Indicators

After seeking advice from my reflective partner/critical friend (TC) I decided to ask the EYLs to create a vision of what improved practice might looked like in their context. This was a verbal exercise, done collaboratively, but as will be revealed, this process also failed to enable both the EYLs and myself, as facilitator, to carry out this task.

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4.   The Ideal Leader Inventory

To support the EYLs in the construction of their own concept of leadership the Ideal Self Inventory (Norton, Morgan, and Thomas 1995) was introduced into the workshops. This is a process whereby participants identify core constructs of an ideal self as EYL. Having used this approach in previous research with students in collaboration with Norton (Norton 2018), but it was only through my diary reflections on phases one and two that I recognised belatedly that it could support a co-construction of leadership from the participants themselves, rather than one imposed from outside the inquiry. This approach is in line with practice of AR as a process of self-inquiry through co-construction and shone further light on how my facilitation approach needed to adhere to these values.

5.   Philosophy for Children (P4C) enquiry into leadership

From my reflective diaries I could see how the value of introducing more open-ended inquiry, where the expertise contained within the group could guide and direct the consensual learning, was becoming more central to my practice. I therefore wanted to introduce a way of enabling EYLs to take more control of collective learning opportunities.

Based on Socratic Dialogue, a means of exploring complex philosophical questions where people work together with a facilitator to seek answers to open-ended questions, in this case 'What is leadership?', P4C promotes thinking about philosophical concepts through facilitated collaborative conversations. It is an international educational strategy founded by Lipman in the 1970s (Lewis and Robinson 2017) and used increasingly in HE Institutions, particularly in the field of

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Initial Teacher Education (Author 1 2017). I therefore introduced the P4C approach

into the workshop programme. A pictorial provocation on the nature of leadership was

used to initiate enquiry, which was then co-created by the EYLs and scribed by me as

facilitator, with checks that I had recorded their discussions accurately.

6. Influences

This workshop activity arose directly from the EYLs as they discussed their own

responses to critical events in their professional careers. Rather than a view of how they

were seeking to influence the views of other practitioners (as described by Aubrey,

Godfrey, and Harris (2012)), they used reflective practice to examine how and why they

themselves had arrived at their beliefs instead of focusing on their practice of guiding

others. This provided a space for the EYLs to consider how previous experiences had

shaped their views and practice and from this unearth their own personal theories for

their action. Reflecting on their own experiences enabled them to understand their

positionality, what they were trying to achieve in their settings. This became a lens to

examine how agency within leadership-in-practice operated.

The evolution of the workshop sessions based on my reflections demonstrates

how I used reflections on my diary and field notes, to make change, evaluate, adapt and

enhance the sessions. Triggers for these changes arose from reflection on the workshop

activities and discussions, examining how useful they were in engaging and supporting

the EYLs in planning and implementing their changes.

Data analysis

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In this project three elements of practice, sayings, doings and relatings (Kemmis et al's (2014) theory of practice architectures) were used to analyse the underlying meanings being formed as data were generated. The early years arena gives a particular set of sayings, doings and relatings that are cognisant of the socio-cultural context of highly complex early years provision, both Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) and maintained sectors. This practice architecture therefore functioned as a lens to reveal how the social and educational processes underpinning the facilitation of the project shaped it as a socially constructed space. It illuminated how practices are framed by cultural-discursive (sayings) as forms of understanding of what is said during and about practice, material-economic (doings) as modes of action amidst the material set-up and social-political arrangements (relating) as ways of engaging with the world and one another.

I categorised each section of my field notes using the three elements of sayings (cultural-discursive), doings (material-economic) and relatings (social-political). For sayings, I interpreted the EYLs responses to what I said about practice, how I learned from their discussions on practice and how I supported the peer group to discuss their practices. For doings, I reflected whether the resources and activities that I had provided had enabled the EYLs to engage fully with their action research project. For relatings, I analysed whether I had created communicative learning spaces that enabled us to safely challenge our assumptions, perspectives and actions. Iterative re-reading of my diary and field notes, in critical reflection, enabled me to create groupings of insights that allowed salient concepts, practices and their interconnections to surface.

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Findings

The findings give the key concepts that arose as I contemplated the evolution of my practice as facilitator. These were guided by my ongoing reflections on my field notes, gauging choices made from new insights in addition to revisiting previous ones, in order to check that these were still valid in the light of these newer ones offered by later phases.

Recognising Sources of expertise

Key to enhancing my facilitation practice was the understanding of what actually constituted my expertise and what value I was adding to the enquiry into Early Years Leadership. I now recognised that my expertise was in facilitating acts of collaborative enquiry rather than formal leadership-in practice (Raelin 2016). This enabled me to let go of my concerns about not having direct, practical experience of Early Years leadership and led to a greater comprehension of how to facilitate the enquiry of different groups of EYLs through the authentic valuing of their expertise as a collective.

> The range of expert knowledge within each group of participants continues to surprise…Diverse interpretations of leadership have arisen in each group, none quite the same as the previous groups of participants. (Fac Diary)

The ideal leader inventory and the P4C activity were able to elicit the range of expertise available to each group. Using and reflecting on these activities enabled me to see that they supported EYLs to engage with their own knowledge and expertise at a personal level, to recognise and take ownership of their own learning. Knowing that EYLs were

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moving forward in their own understandings of practice made me more confident in my own role as facilitator. I recognised the 'doings' of facilitation was my source of expertise.

Letting go of control

Working in this flexible and fluid manner in CPD was challenging for the EYLs as well as myself as facilitator:

> At some points it was hard to really understand what I would get out of this course, apart from the positive aspects of meeting with other leaders and managers. (Participant J: Field Notes)

> After a few sessions I shared with R that I was concerned I had not completed any tasks (as such) and R kindly explained that it wasn't very often that we got separate time to reflect on our practice personally and as part of a network. (Participant L2: Field Notes)

My reflections show a troubling awareness that I was structuring the CPD in a way that was difficult for the EYLs to appreciate due to their prior experiences of training.

> I need to find a way that helps the participants take control of the sessions. It may be that I am unwittingly still presenting that I am in control, yet saying they are the experts? (Fac Diary)

I began to understand my own complicity in maintaining the expected status quo before the locus of control could move towards the EYLs. My reflective diary helped reveal

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where I was in control and how this needed to change. Once this became evident to me, letting go of control began to occur. An example of this was with the Influences activity. I introduced this when one phase of EYLs discussed how important the topic of 'influences' was in determining how they operated within their role.

> I particularly enjoyed the time to digest and process the information. I can see now how I influence my staff. (Participant L: Field Notes)

Their sayings acted as a spur to examining the influences on my own behaviours and to listen to what the EYLs were choosing as important topics to discuss. Their reflections led me to recognise (belatedly) that the EYLs needed to (and were now, through the Influences activity) explore the concepts for themselves. I could see that I had allowed the space for (my) practitioner knowledge to be foregrounded rather than drawing on theirs, and the influences activity had drawn this out. My field notes show my puzzlement as to why I had not seen this as a useful method to explore before the fifth and final phase of the project but now the influences of the EYLs 'sayings' changed my own practice. I could learn from the leaders as much as they could learn from me.

This was also demonstrated in the 'Success Criteria' workshop. The EYLs found it very difficult to determine specific elements of their desired change or improvement. They articulated worthwhile and generic criteria (for example improving staff morale) for which it proved difficult to create a shared understanding of what would indicate success. This was also difficult for me as I had little current experience of facilitating a strong understanding of this. Our shared relatings became one of struggle and not being able to move forward. My reflections showed how I too had not

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been able to share a visualisation for this. It was only when some of the EYLs grasped the concept of visualising and articulating a tangible change/ improvement that others could see and share their projected changes. The EYLs were thus more able to help others move forward than I could. I had prepared the ground, and shared in their labour, but by drawing on their lived experience, they had found a way through for themselves.

Recognising shared emotional labour

Emotional labour, the management of personal emotion in a professional role, had not been identified as a focus for the project but by listening to the EYLs discuss how emotions effected their practice, I came to realise the importance of letting these surface. One point of emotional connection between the EYLs and me occurred when they discussed openly how difficult they found some of the demands of their role, such as giving negative feedback. My field notes show a mirroring of this in my feelings on marking student work, in particular where student effort was not matched by the grades they obtained. In this emotional connection, I recognised for us all, and in my facilitation in particular, the foregrounding of emotional labour was essential to understand our actions. My field-notes note the emotional labour of the shared enquiry as reflected by the participants:

> I thought the issue was how I managed my time... But now I know it's actually what I do as the leader in the nursery that's the important thing. Listening to the others has made me realise that, it's taken a while for that to get through. (Participant L: Field Notes)

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As noted above I too wondered why I had not noticed issues related to my facilitation, and it was through the sayings of the EYLs that I came to recognise the need to change. I appreciated the level of insight I gained through the EYLs' reflections and I could engage with this at a personal and professional level. In terms of 'relatings' my leadership within the HE environment was situated differently in context but was not altogether dissimilar in lived experience. An example of this is how I connected with the insight from L above. I understood that throughout my professional life I have engaged in collaborative sharing, needing to understand and value the diverse perspectives of others, even where it may feel uncomfortable or conflicting with my personal view. This offered a shared sense of understanding where their contextual experience of emotional labour mirrored my own.

Importance of the iterative process

Throughout the whole project it was clear that a one-off reflection process was insufficient to allow understandings to emerge. Finding ways to be reflexive, to return to our thoughts again and again, was an essential part of the process. I was initially reluctant to use peer-reviewed journal articles with the EYL as I thought they might find them overly technical and dull, given the intensely practical nature of their roles. I had imposed my expectations of these texts on the EYLs and then had to realign my thinking with the reality of how they actually appreciated these texts in practice. They engaged with the articles fully, appreciating the theoretical insights that leadership theory can bring to an analysis of practice. Yet this was not the full story, as asking EYLs in a later phase, a new insight emerged:

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Its all very well reading about leadership styles – but what about us and what

we do everyday? Who is writing about us and what we do?" (Participant D:

Field notes)

In the case above, D reflected on the journal articles I had introduced in the hope of

their usefulness and stated clearly that all of these did not cover the complex nature of

the owner-manager/ leader of an Early Years setting. The journal articles considered

leaders and leadership without seemingly addressing leading within a given situation

and its contextual boundaries. Thus my own understandings of the purpose of the

articles were disrupted by the reflections of others on the task, together with my own

reflection on their perceptions of how this task had been received by the participants. I

had thought that using published articles on early years leadership would strengthen the

EYLs' voices and empower them as they recognised their situation in writing of others.

I had not anticipated how strong their voices were. My attempt to empower was not

required. My own learning through reflection on this was salutary.

The role of collaboration, openness and sharing

The use of the practice architecture, sayings, doings and relatings, brought to the fore

the elements of the project that created interconnections and new ways of thinking about

approaches to CPD. This was not a didactic approach, but one based on decentralising

and on building equitable relationships for shared knowings and doings. This was not

a project solely for EYLs learnings about leadership but for facilitator learnings about

how to support that process. I came to realise, through my ongoing reflections about

how to create a safe, collaborative, space, that I also engaged in this activity as a

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participant. Articulating and sharing our perspectives of the challenges of our roles, is

shown by field notes relating to planning for each phase.

> Each time I'm heartened by the way the EYLs listen to each other with care,
> they really want to help each other. Talking about our own issues in our
> situations is helping them understand none of us are perfect and that we can all
> learn from each other… (Fac Diary)

Discussion

The evolution of the EYL project reflects the social-political dimension of practice

architecture, in particular as it seeks to confront a social problem in the lack of status in

general for the Early Years workforce in the UK (Nutbrown 2012). It attempted to

address 'deflated levels of credibility for certain sectors of society' (Author 2 et al 2019,

380) in this case the EYLs. AR allows the possibility of the revealing of tacit knowledge

held within this undervalued group so that it becomes explicit to those that hold this

knowledge and those who actively listen and engage with this knowledge and stories

of practical experience. In this particular project it enabled a facilitator to create an

honest, authentic examination of leadership even where the immediate practice is not

shared. Instead a disposition of trust and belief in the expertise of others is necessary.

It also required on my part, as facilitator, active reflective practice in examining my

own positionality, reflexivity and the experiences that have led to this. Choy, Kemmis

and Green (2016, 346) are clear that

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Above all, partnerships between peer learners are more successful when facilitated by other agents, such as teachers representing the education providers, who are also actively participating in the AR process.

Taking part in my own action research, whilst facilitating the action research projects of others, enhanced the sense of collaborative inquiry as each partner was engaging in the same endeavour, even where the subject differs.

The evolution of facilitation practices can be framed using the three elements of practice architectures, the sayings (cultural-discursive), the doings (material-economic) and relatings (socio-political), (Kemmis et al. 2014). The cultural-discursive domain is located in the creation of a communicative space, one that respects the participants as knowledge holders, who can support the learning of others through collaborative enquiry. This is based on an ethos of respectful listening to the contributions of other members of the cohort, yet still managing to articulate aloud challenges to potential assumptions. As Author 2 et al (2019) suggest, for learning to take place it is necessary 'to disrupt long held beliefs and understandings as a means of providing creative spaces to develop new ways of acting, and to engage in a critical evaluation of the change processes afforded within projects' (p392).

The material-economic elements, the doings, highlight many of the challenges for a dual action researcher/ facilitator role (Olin, Karlberg-Granlund, and Furu 2016). These challenges include letting go of control, listening to the sayings, and creating spaces for learning that draw on the diverse sets of skills and knowledges brought to the group. The challenge also includes finding materials that allow this to happen and

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recognising when materials, thought to facilitate shared, or cooperative learning, draw on the predetermined assumptions and understandings of the facilitator, and militate against it. Interpretations of how materials and methods are framed and work in practice need to be subjected to ongoing revisions. This emphasises the need for a 'process of adding to, shifting and branching off, thinking and sifting' (Author 2 2009, 278), with each phase in turn creating its own dissatisfaction with a simple repeat of the previous doings. It acknowledges the messiness that a continuous cycle of change produces and celebrates it as a learning space.

The practice architecture of this CPD and the facilitators expectations of how this would evolve were different to the rationale that generally underpins CPD projects undertaken by EYLs. As their expectations were framed by previous experience they were unsure of the validity of CPD where the reality was not set tasks, predetermined by an expert other, but one where participants created their own tasks and solutions. When the relatings or social-political arrangements are constructed through a collaboration, and the control of the CPD activity is shared intentionally, the facilitator has to be discreet, and this is effortful. It is difficult to not be in control. This is not action research as transformation as proposed by Glenn et al (2017), indicating that a change can be demonstrated or even required. Nor is it empowering. The leaders already have situational power and must use this in their everyday life. Facilitation is most effective when taking this into account. As Tourish (2013) suggests, the term empowerment is not value free, but must take account of the form of agency that is being enacted within specific organisational structures and processes.

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In PVI Early Years settings in the UK, multiple layers of accountability may be encountered by leaders, namely to the children, their families, their staff, the community, the LA, the regulatory body OfSTED and the owner of the childcare business. Each of these bodies have espoused values, which may differ from each other as well as those enacted by their agents. EYLs negotiate a path through these multiple demands on a daily basis. They already have a voice and use this in their daily practice to state their opinions, the rationale for their decisions and judgments. Attempts to give EYLs that which they already have in their possession indicates that the facilitator usurps their authority in order to bestow it again on the facilitator's terms. 'Political weasel words' (Stronach and McNamara 2002, 156), namely transformational, empowerment and giving voice, are often used to align power with the dominant discourses, such as that of Ofsted and the Department for Education (England), rather than the lived realities of the complex, messy microcosm in which the leadership of Early Years PVI settings in the UK exists.

Conclusions

Listening to, reflection on and valuing the insights afforded by each cohort of participants, learning from them changed my practice. I believe my facilitation of the EYLs AR enquiries improved over the course of the project's five phases of the project enabling them to become more confident researchers and leaders. It has improved my knowledge of facilitation and provided a set of findings about facilitation that hopefully should, in Winter's words, get 'sufficiently close to the underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities in other situations' (2002, 144)

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Such action research projects consist of encounter and explication as a form of a reveal, the acknowledgement and affirmation of what has already been experienced and embodied. They create the space for people to share what they know and the rationale for their choices. They also support the honest authentic evaluation of their decisions within a safe supportive space with peers. They can form the communicative spaces that, as suggested by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), enable people to share experiences as embodied cognition and take their own actions. They can recognise their selves in the experiences of others and in so doing, re-evaluate personal experiences and choices for actions anew. Shared reflections do not need shared expertise, but rather relatings to shared experiences. This creates a confident core where combined knowledges eldges are used to help each other to improve performance. This process of nudging into knowing, rather than instruction from an external expert, enables the foregrounding of collective knowledge in an ethical, respectful, authentic manner (McLeod and Author 1 2019). It repositions CPD from a process of sharing of given skills and tasks by perceived experts to 'having faith' (Henderson, 2017) in the expertise of those who do and in the co-creation of knowledge that is contextually relevant for practice. It repositions the facilitation process from one of leading to one of listening and reflecting, of sharing in active learning. The spaces offered by the facilitator become the pathway for articulating individual and shared knowledge and for each individual to find ways to further their own practice.

In conclusion, the writing of this AR project has acted as a further reflective cycle. Cycles of discussion between myself (BA) and TC have challenged us both to make further sense of the happenings I documented in my first-person enquiry. The writing down has required me to aim for an authentic appraisal of my own practice as

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facilitator. This has proven to be most challenging of all reflections but also enabled

me to unearth the essence of practice as a facilitator rather than director. It has forced

me to look at my own positioning in the project whereas prior to this I had concentrated

on the learning spaces for EYLs. Articulating the meaning of being involved in this

project has <u>marked and shaped </u>my approach as a facilitator and enabled me to see how

the relatings, the ways of being together, permeated the whole of the AR project.

> What is articulated strengthens itself and what is not articulated tends towards
>
> non-being. (Czeslaw Milosz, quoted in Heaney 1999, no pn)

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