

Developing the potential of observation - generating ideas using video data from a nursery school: a Students as Academic Partners project

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Abstract

This 'Students as Academic Partners' (SAP) project aimed to explore the potential of a creative approach to reflection. Developing approaches to reflective practice is directly relevant for a wide range of professional occupations including school teachers, early years practitioners, lecturers within HE and also trainees. Individual reflections were produced by project participants based on several very short video clips of children in a nursery school. The reflections include speculative observations, explanations and use of theoretical perspectives linked to broader themes. The analysis was extended through a collaborative reflection on the combined individual reflections. The focus on broader themes within this particular project seeks to contribute to an encompassing discourse related to early years practice.

Introduction

This 'Students as Academic Partners' project aimed to explore the potential of a creative approach to reflection using child observations from a local nursery school collected during 2014. Developing approaches to reflective practice is directly relevant for teachers and those who are training to become teachers. It is also more broadly relevant for students, lecturers and tutors within higher education and wider educational contexts. Professional knowledge includes a substantial reflection in action component as well as practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Dispositions such as noticing, wondering, focusing, conjecturing and openness to experience are desirable characteristics for teachers and others working in professional contexts. Speculative thinking, imagination and creativity also contribute to a more nuanced and responsive engagement with the lifeworld¹ of the practitioner. Reflective lifeworld research, explained by Dahlberg et al (2008) as a form of hermeneutic phenomenology, involves questioning the natural attitude² by describing as well as interpreting the phenomena of experience using an attitude of openness. The current research project valorises a form of elaborative interpretation that enriches details of experience

by generating creative responses. However, unlike lifeworld research which is based on the collection of extensive data e.g. interview transcripts may extend to 20-30 pages, the creative reflection in this SAP project is based on video recordings of 10 seconds to a few minutes duration.

The approach was originally influenced by Turkle's (2007) *Evocative Objects* – things we think with, later developed using Guilford's (1973) concept of creativity and subsequently rendered as a PhD thesis (Barnett, 2013). Turkle's approach was to collect reflections from participants reflecting on objects of personal or emotional significance. She then responded by drawing on her own experience to identify themes and links to a range of disciplines including philosophy, sociology and politics. She continued by using the collected reflections evocatively as a new starting point for further reflection. The intention within the current SAP project was to develop a 'melting pot' version of Turkle's approach, where the final drawing together of threads retained traces of the polyvocality of the participants rather than the perspectival view of any one participant or dominant author voice. Consider translating this into a form of professional knowledge!

In the current SAP project, Barnett's (2013) model of 'turning towards' the phenomenal object to consider direct interpretive connections and then 'turning away' to consider broader themes as part of a process of continuous revisiting of the object to create layers of meaning was used as a starting point. Guilford's concept of creativity (1973) was also used, to encourage and support generation of multiple ideas. The aim was to develop a creative approach to reflection as a way of responding to data that was very brief, incomplete and ambiguous. Guilford's model suggests value of reflection located within fluency and flexibility of thinking, combined with use of imagination to elaborate ambiguous details and the potential for original thinking. A fertile foundation for professional practice.

What follows is a series of individual reflections produced by four initial teacher training students. Each student initially watched and responded to several short video clips focusing on one particular child referred to anonymously as JD, AD, CL and LZ. These individual reflections were then used as a foundation for collaborative reflection. The framework for analysing the individual reflections aims to maintain the more speculative and creative approach to reflection (Barnett, 2013). First of all the general impression from watching the

1 Lifeworld: '...the complex, qualitative and lived reality that is there for us whatever we do' (Dahlberg et al., 2008: 38).

2 Natural attitude: '...the everyday immersion in one's existence and experience in which we take for granted that the world is as we perceive it, and that others experience the world as we do' (Dahlberg et al., 2008: 33).

clips is identified using the subheading ‘Starting with a general impression’. The focus then turns to specific details, speculative observations and notes generated from a small selection of clips used evocatively. Theoretical perspectives used to generate speculative explanations are also identified. Broader themes are located and considered in order to contribute to an encompassing discourse related to early years practice.

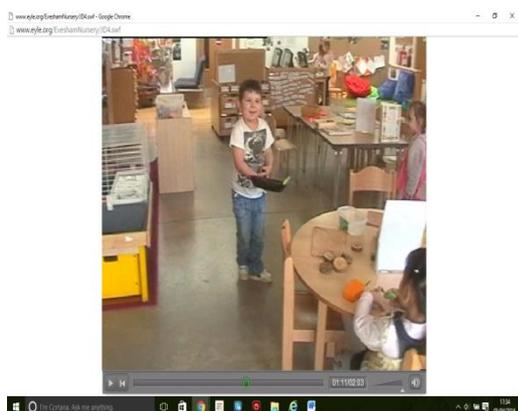
It’s interesting how the brevity of the video clips conceals their richness as a source of meanings. As Harman (2008: 455) noted, ‘Surely even the dullest of objects are laced with songs and legends that await their bards’. The other side of responding creatively is the phenomenological strategy of ‘bridling’ or Husserl’s Epoché³ (Dahlberg et al, 2008) but with such brief snippets of observation interpretation, speculation and imagination are brought into the foreground.

Individual reflections

Reflections on JD

(Starting with a general impression) JD seems to be entertaining himself throughout most of the video snapshots. However, there is a running similarity, as he frequently looks for adults’ approval or for his actions to be observed. An instance of this is clearly visible when JD looks towards the video recorder to see whether they saw him flip the pancake (fig 1.).

Figure 1: JD seeking approval



(Broader theme) Interestingly, Leary & Kowlaski (1997) note research suggesting that some children have a greater need for approval than others depending on different approaches to parenting. Another similarity evident in the video clips is the observation that JD generally tended to be alone, keeping

³Husserl’s concept Epoché includes questioning the natural attitude in order to ‘bracket’ or put to one side pre-understanding in an attempt to go to the things in themselves; imaginative variation – which in the SAP project is developed via Guilford’s concept of creativity and; horizontalizing – which means attending to all the details, not just those which initially jump out as significant (Dahlberg et al, 2007).

himself to himself and not really interacting with his peers as much as the other children. He frequently used an adult as a ‘safe base’ (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970) for exploration, interactions and approval which is common in young children when they are toddlers. Erickson (Mooney, 2000) highlighted very young children’s need for physical contact for developing trust and independence though (speculative note) JD was soon to be transitioning to a Reception class. Evidence from Tassoni et al. (2008) suggests young children also seek approval through physical contact, which is gradually replaced by seeking verbal reassurance. JD appears to be in between stages (speculative observation) as the video clips show him seeking both physical and verbal reassurance. (Broader theme). Although reassurance and approval can develop confidence and the well-being of children, it is important to develop children’s confidence and independence so that they do not feel the need to receive approval all the time. Children need to observe from the outside and learn to make their own decisions; without confidence children can become reliant on reassurance making decisions to suit their observer and avoid disapproval; this can lead to children becoming distracted in the classroom and not reaching their full potential due to the inability to take risks and learn from these (Dyer, 1998; Zucker, 1998). (Speculative observation). Despite JD tending to be on his own, when he happens to be in group situations where he interacts with peers, he has a tendency to take control and seeks attention. Fig. 2 shows JD putting an object too close to the face of the practitioner and fig. 3 shows JD playing with the practitioner’s hair.

Figure 2: Holding object too close to face

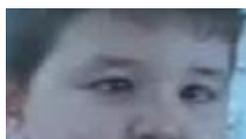


Figure 3: Playing with practitioner’s hair



(Speculative explanation) Research by Dupaul et al. (2001) supports the view that children with ADHD tend to exhibit more inappropriate behaviour than normal, especially in task situations like that of the one JD finds himself in. However, close up views of JD suggest he may have an eye alignment problem: *estropia* that is, crossed eyes (Children's Vision Coalition, no date). Although children usually outgrow this, it would help provide an alternative explanation for holding the object so close to the practitioner (fig. 4).

Figure 4: Could eye alignment help explain JD's behaviour?



Also, as an alternative explanation, JD could simply be entertaining himself as part of a playful nature or due to boredom or this could even be a form of avoidance in response to finding the task challenging. (Speculative note). If JD were to be involved in more social contexts and encouraged to engage with other children, sitting beside children throughout activities rather than adults, would this aid with his development and the need to seek physical adults' approval? Based on the video clips, the need to seek approval has yet to have any emotional impact on JD. It's possible that he is just going through the phases of development whereby he needs to seek approval and may grow out of this. He seems to enjoy adult interaction more than interacting with other children but his improving social interaction skills may assist in building his confidence and lowering his need for adults' approval. (Broader theme). Children engage in play to develop social skills and consolidate their understanding of learnt skills through independent play. In order for children to reach their full potential, it is important for a safe and stimulating learning environment to be offered with activities making learning accessible to all needs and abilities (Department for Education, 2011). It is also beneficial for adults to engage in children's play, encouraging further questioning and thinking to develop children's confidence, well-being, knowledge and understanding (Gaskin, 2015).

Reflections on AD

(Starting with a general impression) AD is an 'English as an additional language' (EAL) child who appears to be disconnected from the other children in the classroom, apart from a girl of about the same age, also EAL, who he seems to spend a lot of time with. He tends to copy this child on a regular basis, even down to her movements and gestures. Although there is little verbal communication between them, she seems to lead the way whether moving around the nursery holding hands or when sitting on a comfortable chair (fig. 5). She is the only child, from watching the clips, that seems to play with AD; other children begin to play and then shortly leave or play alongside (parallel play).

Figure 5: AD following



(Speculative observation). Evidence from the video clips suggests that there are occasions when AD is unsure of what to do with himself around the classroom, such as what to play with, or how to do so. Figure 6 shows AD sitting next to the doll's house, but not interacting with it. During this clip he spends a lot of his time watching the other children around him or walking past him. This disengaged behaviour occurs in several of the other clips too when interacting with a teacher or another child in the classroom so this may be a more pervasive behaviour pattern. (Speculative explanation). It may also be that his close friend is not at the nursery on those days so he has no one to play with.

Figure 6: AD sitting next to the doll's house



(Broader theme). If AD was to actively engage himself with the child initiated activities (Waller, 2010) around the classroom then his knowledge and understanding of English would have more potential to increase due to listening to the conversation of his peers. This is supported by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) document (Early Education 2012: 6) where a characteristic of effective learning labelled 'active learning' requires children to 'maintain focus' and show 'high levels of energy, fascination'. It's worth noting that the Montessori concepts of 'false fatigue' and 'curve of work' (Miller & Pound, 2011: 79) suggest a possible alternative explanation for AD's lack of engagement i.e. he may simply be resting in between more active and purposeful parts of his day. However, difficulty with understanding his fellow peers and being understood by them is likely to make social interaction and engagement more challenging. What strategies might the practitioners employ to create a more inclusive learning environment? With persistence and intervention from the teachers hopefully he would begin to show more enthusiasm.

Reflections on CL

(Starting with a general impression). The most common theme that seemed to emerge surrounding CL was her social involvement on a day-to-day basis. It is evident after watching even just a few clips that CL becomes distracted and unengaged quickly with those around her and that she isn't particularly interested in gaining acceptance or gratification from her peers. This can be interpreted as rather a sad disposition or even an instance of the 'lost energy of childhood' (Barnett, 2014). However, it can also be seen that she does seem to enjoy and gain satisfaction through observing others from the outside. On a number of occasions CL watches her peers from a distance (fig. 7), not willing to involve herself in their interactions but not wanting to cut herself off completely either. (Theoretical perspective). This 'onlooker play' (Parton, 1932) can be related to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning; although CL isn't comfortable to actively interact with her peers she deems them as more knowledgeable than herself and so watches them in order to construct her own understandings (Miller et al., 2010).

Figure 7: CL watches children play with tyres



Figure 8: CL plays with another child outside



Moreover, it seems that space also has an impact on CL's social involvement as she appears to engage with other individuals more often when in the outside area compared to the classroom (fig. 8). Although, she still fails to immerse herself fully into interacting and engaging with others even then, tending to be left out of play on different occasions and to follow her own interests. (Broader theme). Evidence suggests that learning environments have a big impact on

young children and so it is important to create the right environment so they feel safe and secure to explore (Miller et al., 2010). (Speculative explanation). I wonder if perhaps a perpetual circle has formed, whereby CL isn't motivated to join in with her peers and as a result/consequence they don't view her as another child to be involved. While CL fails to play and interact with the other children at the nursery, rarely communicating with them at all, this doesn't appear to be something which disturbs her emotionally. There are several instances of CL talking to adults, following them around and being eager to please them. (Speculative explanation). Therefore I would argue that she is a child who prefers the company of adults and finds children her own age daunting and possibly frighteningly different from herself. I believe that this is likely to change as CL matures though, because of the preference she has for observing the other children; she wants to understand them and learn from them. (Broader theme). This also highlights the importance of teachers establishing positive relationships with the children, so that they are not in danger of completely isolating themselves (Department for Education, 2011).

Reflections on LZ

(Starting with a general impression) LZ persisted with her own clay activity but also reached over to press the clay of a girl standing next to her. This looked spontaneous and wasn't preceded by an offer to help or any indication she was going to participate in the other girl's clay activity. However, the other girl was acceptant and there was no sense of boundaries being crossed without permission. Despite the lack of speaking there appeared to be an amiable relationship between the two girls.

(Speculative observation). A noticeable trend in LZ's behaviour when at the clay table was the ease with which she was distracted. Figure 9 shows one instance of her turning round as another child passed by. During the one minute video clip LZ turned round to her right and then to her left, watched the girl on her left and a boy on her right (who arrived later during the clip), looked into the distance (as if something had momentarily caught her attention) and then across the table as the practitioner interacted with another girl who had joined the group. She seemed not to notice when a reel of Sellotape was rolled across the table but was excited and joined in when other children showed their hands in response to the practitioner.

Figure 9: LZ turning round



Several of the video clips also suggest LZ watches other children, which can be described using Parton's play types as 'onlooker play' (Andrews, 2012). When at the sand area for example she starts to copy another child's tapping action. But her attention is frequently captured by events around her and visible in facial expressions that suggests curiosity or wonder. (Speculative explanation). What causes children to be easily distracted? In this instance there were several sources of distraction but interestingly LZ remained firmly located at the table and returned to the clay between distractions – not really an image of a child with ADHD. As a non-English speaking three and half year old it's perhaps not surprising that LZ gives the impression of being easily distracted while being immersed in the environment of the nursery. So it's quite possibly an expression of the 'silent period' (Bligh & Drury, 2015) that characterise emergent speakers of English, 'a crucial time for self-mediated learning within the early years community of practice' (p. 259) as children attempt[ed] to gain control of their learning through the agentive action of silence" (p. 272). (Broader theme). A bilingual teaching assistant may not always be available but including cultural artefacts within the setting, using YouTube as a source for picture book stories in other languages and encouraging a more active role for parents are positive strategies for a more inclusive EAL enabling environment.

Revisiting the reflections: a collaborative perspective

Individual reflections were grouped into six themes using an in vivo coding approach: engagement, relations with adults, relations with children, personal attributes, role of adults and theoretical perspectives. Although separated in order to focus attention during the analysis the themes were then combined to provide a more holistic view. As emphasised by Bold (2012) coding can have the effect of fragmenting the data compared to a more holistic narrative analysis.

The individual reflections included the words 'distraction', 'unengaged' and 'disengaged'. Of course, when a child is fully engaged they won't be easily distracted but the reflections also included a focus on relationships as well as activities. Lack of engagement was not playing with other children or sitting dreamy eyed without engaging with the resources. One speculative note wondered if the child might be bored which could be linked to the quality of the enabling environment and children's different abilities and interests. Sutherland & Stack (2011) suggest a range of strategies for engaging high ability children including actively planning for well-matched open ended thought provoking activities. Other research by Smith et al. (2007) was specifically focused on strategies to engage boys in early years settings through 'super hero' play. Some ideas for reducing distractions can be derived from research related to the physical environment. Lippman (2004) focused on affordances of classroom areas, noting how alcoves and corners of the room can afford semi-private space that will help reduce distractions.

Relationships featured particularly strongly in the individual reflections and raise questions about the role of the

practitioner. How active should the adult be in encouraging children to interact with each other? How responsive should practitioners be to children regarding them as a safe base and when they engage in approval seeking behaviour? Project participants felt the need to "encourage the children's interactions and create a more positively social environment". The structure of the learning environment and the provision of learning opportunities were regarded as important means for encouraging social engagement and peer relations. Theoretical perspectives also provide a range of alternative responses with Piaget and Montessori suggesting standing back and watching for signs of learning readiness while High Scope, Reggio Emilia and Vygotsky suggest a more interactive approach (Miller & Pound, 2011; Mooney 2000).

Conclusion

Within the context of learning and teaching in higher education, this SAP project suggests value in collaborative engagement with lived experience which encourages use of imagination. A simple model of individual creative reflection combined with collaborative pooling of ideas can support generative thinking and fertile foundations for professional practice, as well as teaching in higher education more widely.

Project participants commented on their experience of being involved in the project. In particular, emphasis was placed on the value of using video to support child observation within the collaborative context of conversing with other project participants. One of the project participants noted:

'The impact of analysing data in this way and approaching reflection so creatively is that it makes effective use of multimedia. It is also appropriate to the setting, as much learning is conducted through play which is assessed through this form of assessment'.

However, interestingly, and linked to the broader theme of professional knowledge, the ambiguity of very brief video clips was also regarded as a double edged sword: there wasn't enough data to support a clear description and video clips could be misleading and difficult to interpret but on the other hand speculative thinking, explanations and the imagination were encouraged – increasing the complexity of professional discourse.

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Biographies

Dr Anthony Barnett is a senior lecturer in primary education at University of Worcester. He has a particular interest in innovative approaches to practitioner research in education. He has articles relating to generative social research and the use of multimedia and reflective practice within early-years. His most recent published article is entitled ‘A reflective encounter with the fine sand area in a Nursery school setting’, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 30(2) pp. 260-272. He also has publications relating to asynchronous discussion and co-authored Savage & Barnett (2015) *Digital Literacy in Primary Education*.

Kelly-Anne Archer is in her third year at the University of Worcester on the Primary Initial Teacher Education (with QTS) BA (Hons) course. The course is detailed and challenging offering a range of learning experiences to prepare me for my future career in teaching. I have gained experience in mainstream schools and a special education needs and disabilities school. Through observation, I can see what learning styles work best for each child and their levels of engagement in the teaching. I can also see how they develop through the different learning experiences. In the future, I hope to gain my SENCo qualification.

Tilly Christie-Thompson is a teacher training student in her second year on the ‘Primary Initial Teacher Education’ course at the University of Worcester. I have undertaken a range of teaching placements in a wide variety of schools, including that of mainstream schools, small religious village schools and

challenging environments with severe behaviour problems. I have a particular interest in teaching early learning and am pursuing an early years pathway at the University. I look forward to my future career in teaching and aspire to

encourage and inspire learning in all children, regardless of their personal needs, backgrounds or environments.

Megan Gee and **Molly Burton** are students at University of Worcester.

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