**Substantive themes, methodology and the use of video in the Early Years learning environment: a postmodernist interpretation**

   The aim of this paper is to begin to consider a way of conducting educational research relating to the physical environment of the school in which the research question takes second place to the research activity itself. The usual procedure in educational research, both qualitative and quantitative, is to start with a very specific research question, or in the case of action research a particular problem or issue, and to identify appropriate and systematic data collection methods. There is a preoccupation with questions of validity and reliability. In the case of action research there is an emphasis on finding a solution or improving practice. Even in the case of modernist grounded theory, where the theory emerges from the data, the end product according to Glaser (1992) seeks to "…explain how a basic social problem is processed in an action system." (p.43) This paper is based on the altogether different notion of diffuseness and meandering flexibility.
   In order to make this research paradigm more accessible I have produced an alternative working title: Variations on a theme and expressionism in educational research: fact or fiction? The alternative title suggests parallels with music and art. Juan Gris' painting 'Landscape with Houses at Ceret' painted in 1913 in the Cubist style can be understood as a conceptualisation of the countryside using a variety of constructed images combined into an original composition. Claude Monet's painting 'Impression: Soleil levant' painted in 1873 can be understood, in contrast to a photographic representation, as a sketch employing the imaginative use of brush strokes and colour. This suggests an approach to educational research that is more impressionistic: leading to a patchwork quilt painted onto a background provided by the physical environment of the school. The idea is neatly portrayed by the following definition of Cubism

> "The art of painting original arrangements composed of elements taken from conceived rather than perceived reality" (Apollinaire, 1912)

Taking the idea further, there are no precise research questions only experiences en route and a journey that is greatly facilitated by the opportunities provided through video and computer software.
   The development of this postmodernist approach has roots in the modernist grounded theory of Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), in the Situational Analysis of Clarke (2005), the Constructivist Grounded Theory of Charmaz (2006), the Phenomenography of Marton (1996) and Ethnology (Clifford, 1988). Despite the rift that developed between Glaser and Strauss and the modernist underpinnings of the original formulations of grounded theory, the constant comparative method and idea of theoretical sampling have provided a guiding light. The critique of forcing the data, central to the dispute between Glaser and Strauss, was taken up by Clarke (2005) in her rejection of Strauss' conditional matrix, acknowledgement of the value of sensitising concepts and introduction of cognitive maps. There was now recognition of multiple positions and rejection of the modernist attempts at simplification and unification in theory development. Charmaz reinforced the postmodernist rejection of the correspondence theory of truth in favour of constructed meanings. The phenomenographic mapping of the Outcome Space related well to Clarke's use of positional maps and supported a more colourful interpretation of the coding process.

Clifford's tracing of the history of ethnography led to the interesting discovery of how Griaule created ethnographic facts or fiction by stage managing the accounts of the Dogon culture during the 1930's. Although Griaule's ethnographic method was based on documenting and initiation, and is therefore part of the history of ethnography, the stage management of the events documented had more in common with the constructivist theory of knowledge than the correspondence theory of truth, and links back to the Cubist canvas, the exploratory journey and the potential for multiple interpretations.

The following transcript is from a four and a half minute edited video of a semi structured interview with a Reception class teacher. The video session lasted approximately one hour and at the start the teacher was introduced to the idea of influences and constraints in relation to the physical environment of the class. The transcript highlights a few of the topics covered during the interview and is presented here in full. The aim will then be to use Clarke's Situation Analysis mapping for analysis.

*T. This is the writing table...an enclosed quiet area, where the children can come and practice play writing...whatever they want to, it's experimental, it's unstructured, it's free for children to write what they want to write, they've got words on the wall...it's quite a good area because of the cupboard and being sunk into the wall, quite useful*

*M. Would you say this is typical in an early years Reception classroom?*

*T. Yes, you'd definitely have a writing table in an early years...the children have to be able to have free choice to go and choose...they can pick when they want to use it. I have, as you can probably see over here, these yellow signs all round the classroom, which encourages independence in the children...the children just put their name tag on...if they want to go to the toilet, they don't have to ask...they put their name tag on so I know they have gone and it's the same with the writing table....if they put their name tags on there it says 'I am playing on the writing table' then those are the two children playing on the writing table so if they go to the toilet no one else can come in... that encourages their independence. They quite enjoy the shut off feeling, the enclosed feeling, they quite enjoy that.*

*M. So what would you say are the main... the defining characteristics of a writing table, writing area? What does it have to have otherwise you would say it isn't one?*

*T. I would try to experiment with a range of pencils, pens...things that I use on my desk that children don't often have like Biros...you give them pencils in school for their work, they don't get to experiment with felt tips and Biros and staplers, hole punches...we've got envelopes, writing pads, letters, cards. It's something for them to choose, experiment and play with so they are learning through play really...*

*T....This is my resource cupboard, have to have one of these...it's full, can't get anymore in it...but it's fitted in quite nicely with the writing table and it's enclosed the sand pit as well...to try to get the different areas of the classroom, so you've got creative, writing table, role corner...and as we move on round there is the maths corner and...*

*M. So when you think about the classroom do you think about it in terms of different corners?*

*T. I try and have different areas, so I've got creative, writing, role play...they all interlink but it's nice to have...I've got the maths table over there... so if the children want to follow up on what we have done in the lesson...*

*M. Which is the maths table?*

*T. This is the maths table. It's got some maths activities on it at the moment. You've got some money sorting trays for sorting money out, which is currently in the pxxx pxx because we had a shop there this morning. I've a sweet shop for them to sort all the different sweets out...put them all in there. We've got the weather chart stored on here and some maths puzzles and some shapes for them to come and*

*empty out of the bag and match the numbers. Again this is another free choice activity ... they come, if they want to come to the maths table, I don't direct, "Right, you three go to play at the maths table"... The children come and choose when they want to play with it.*

*M. How does it compare with your ideal for a maths area?*

*T. Oh, I'd have sections, I'd have a sort of display unit here... and this would be a maths walk in section, you know and it would have maths all up the wall.... But I can't have that because I haven't got the money, I haven't got the space...*

*M. ...It looks a very well resourced classroom...*

*T. It's very, very well resourced but a lot of the resources are old... and because of the way our school is structured we can't throw them out... we have to put it to the governors. Unfortunately there is stuff in this classroom that I have never used and I have been here four years. But I can't be the one that says "I want to get rid of that" because if another teacher was to come into the classroom it's listed as a resource so the teacher would say, "Where's this gone?... oh, Miss O'D..threw it out"*

*M. So as they are do you use them or do you just keep them?*

*T. No, it (the cupboard) is full, full of games and old videos and old toys that I'm not going to use but can't throw out because they are listed as a resource in the classroom...*

*M. That's taking up space...*

*T. ...It's taking up space and it's the same with most of these cupboards as well. I have some literacy games and some numeracy games in that I use...but the majority of it is resources that are ...*

The Situational Map (Fig.1) identifies categories and features, anything and everything, that appears in the video (the transcript corresponds only to a brief extract from the video and is therefore a subset of this Situational Map). It is essentially messy and simply maps the classroom and the action in two dimensional space. The Relational Map (Fig. 2) identifies connections between Situational Map items. Using the transcript as the data source it is evident that the teacher was aware of influences and constraints which led to a perceived lack of choice and perceived lack of space. For example, she explains how the governors require that old resources are kept in the classroom which uses up cupboard space. This lack of space led to her comments about the maths area falling short of her ideal. The Positional Map (Fig.3) attempts to summarise different positions taken by stakeholders e.g. 'Effective use of classroom space is important for good teaching', though at this stage this map is still hypothetical.

The glimpse of one possible end result is visible in fig. 4. which illustrates not so much a theory to explain a core category and basic social process (Glaser, 1992) as a mapping of the Outcome Space (Marton, 1996), including multiple positions (Clarke, 2005). The empty ellipses and rectangles represent other viewpoints and other themes. They are identified using the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling and range across teachers, head teachers, students, pupils and other stake holders in the school. The map itself exists not so much only in two dimensional space as suggested by the transcript of the video but is instead a densely populated multimedia composition.

The idea of postmodernist expressionism in educational research extends beyond the two dimensional representation of data collected through video. Whereas modernist research seeks simplification and the formulation of an abstract conceptual unifying framework underpinned by a correspondence theory of truth, postmodernist themes include retaining complexity and multiple viewpoints. Use of video is still a new area in academic research almost unrepresented as a way of disseminating research.

Moreover research is still conceptualised in terms of solutions, answers to research questions, theories that correspond to historically situated instantiations rather than in terms of process.

Computer technology is now beginning to unlock the potential of multimedia for educational research. Although the danger still exists of forcing the data to fit the current presentation capabilities of software such as VideoPaper 3, Atlas.ti and web based hyperlinks, the path needs to be explored and the potential realised.

(Unfortunately a two dimensional paper doesn't really convey the sense of excitement offered by the truly interactive experience of , for example, hyperlinked video clips arrayed in networks of Relational Maps.)

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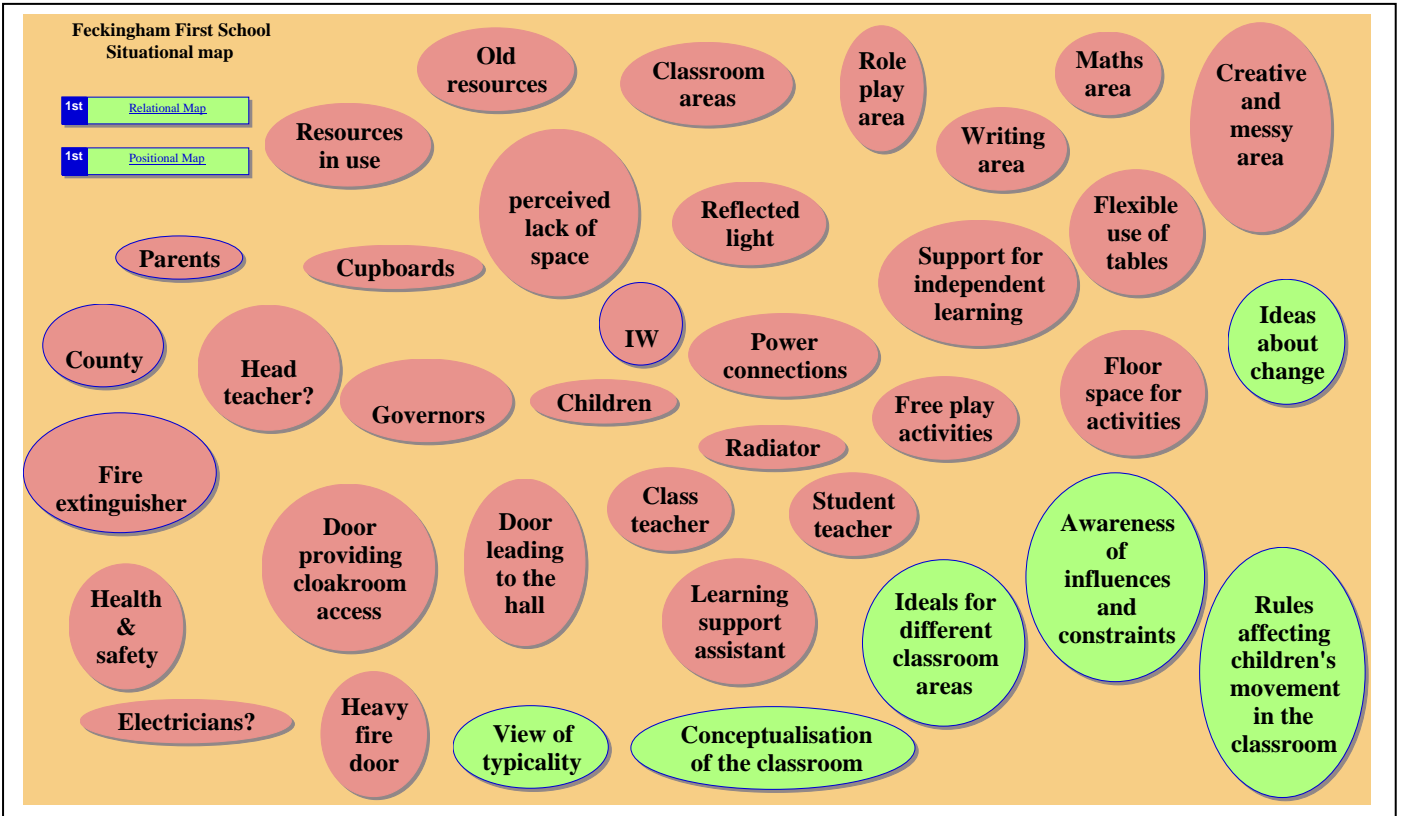Strauss, A and Corbin, J (1998) Basics of Qualitative Research, London, Sage Publications
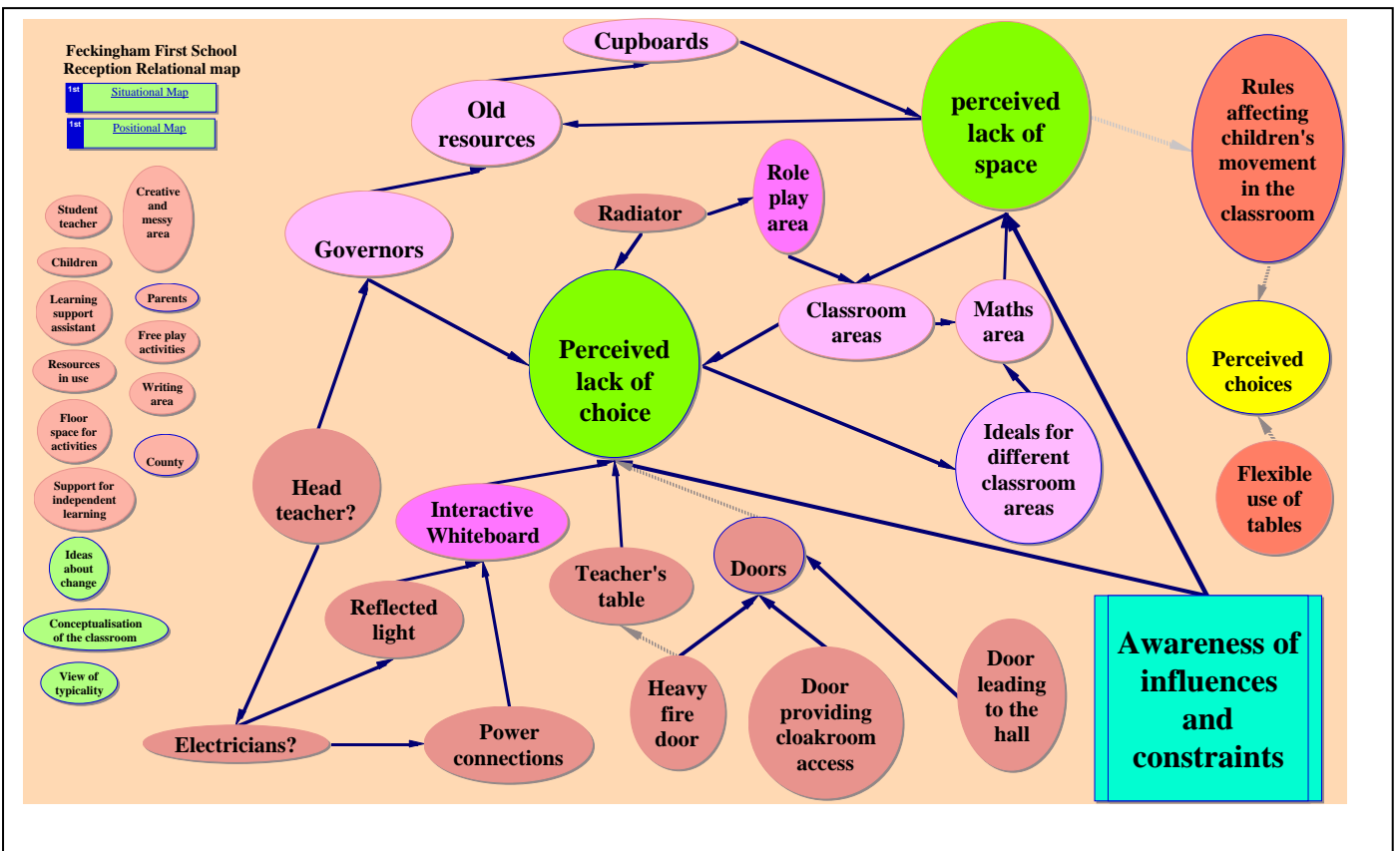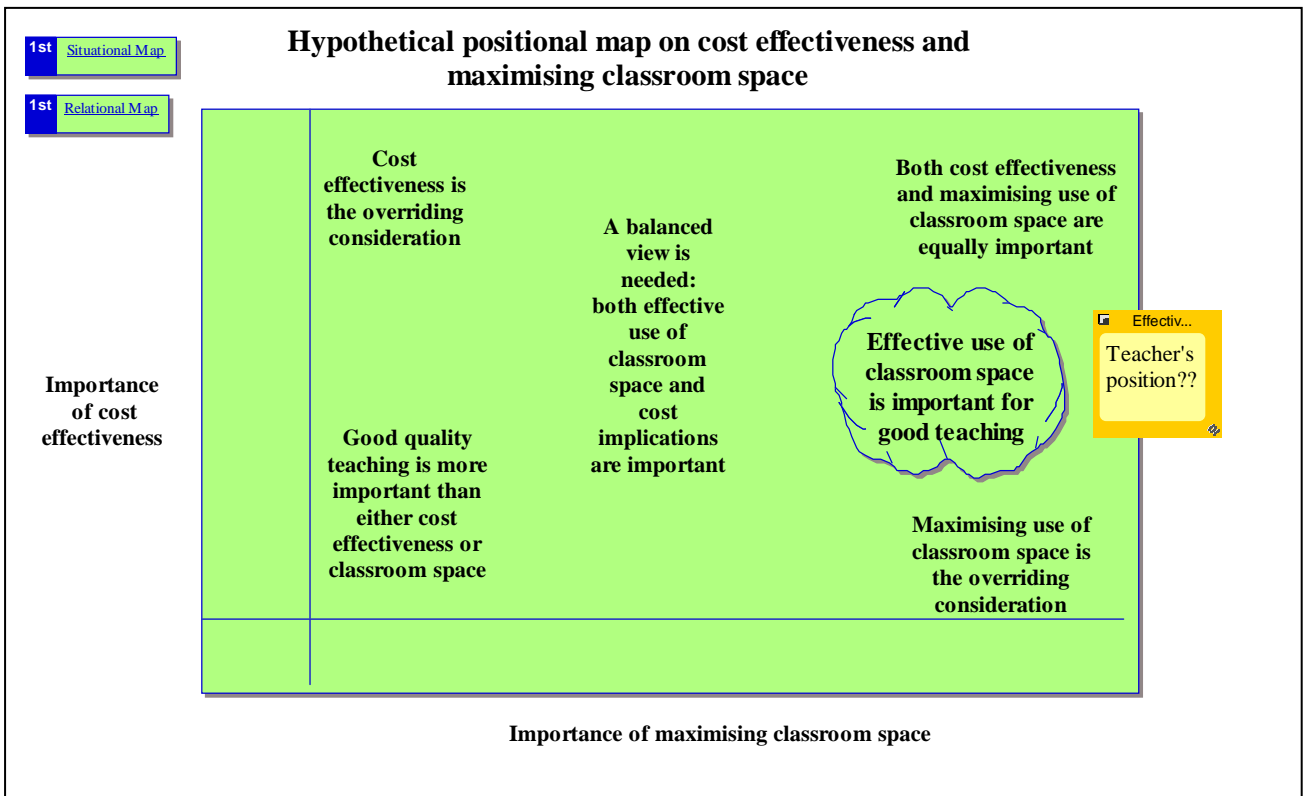
Fig.1 Situational Map
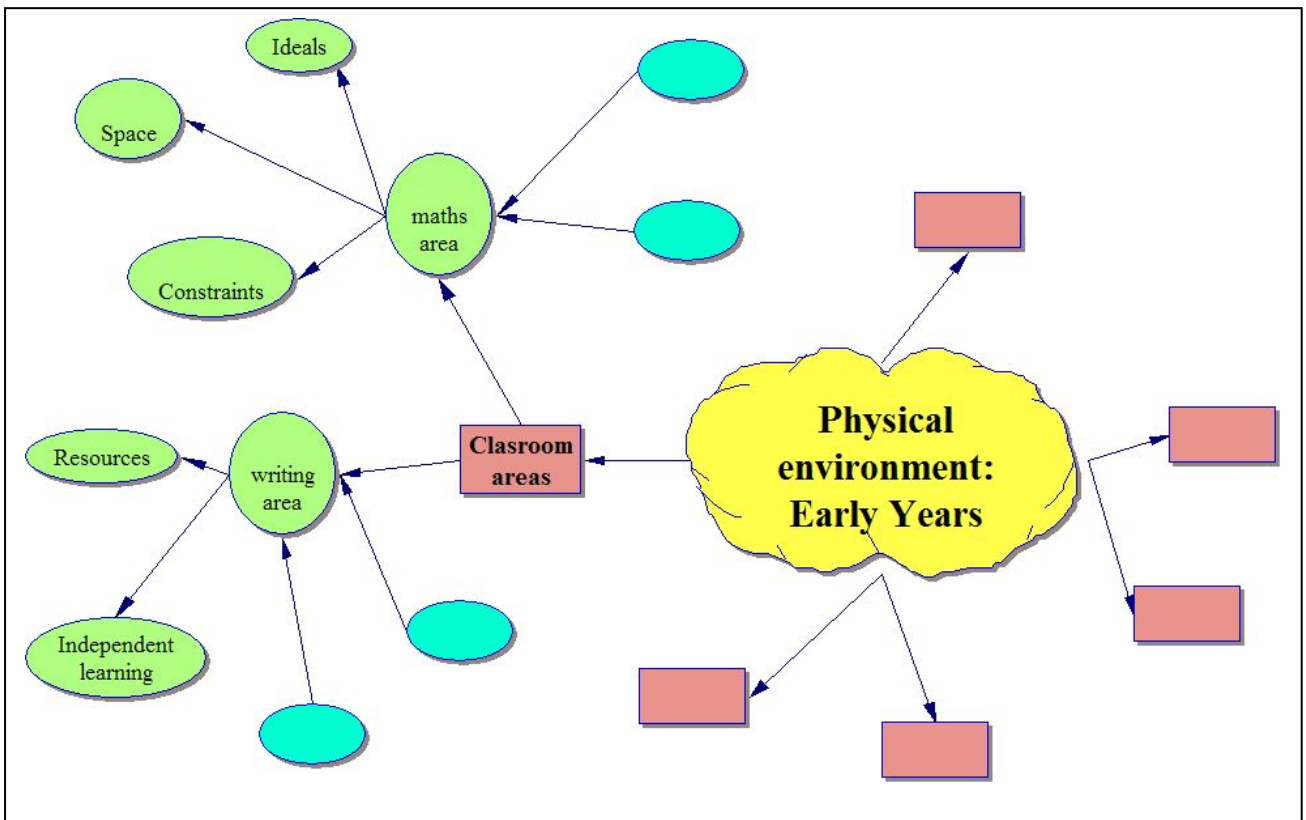
Fig. 2 Relational Map

Fig.3 Positional Map



Fig.4 Clusters of multimedia links organised as Relational and Positional Maps