

Early childhood practitioners developing an academic voice within a community of practice: making sense of the research process

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In September 2011 the authors presented a paper to the European Early Childhood Research Association. It reported on research which examined the tensions involved in researching active lived experiences as both tutors and researchers, asking if this made a difference to the research process. It revealed how a community of student practitioners were encouraged to publish the findings of their own research and describes how this process led to transformational learning from both students and tutors.

Summary:

Students studying for a Foundation Degree in early years education came together to publish the results of their practice based investigations. These were small scale dissertations based on their work as early years practitioners. The participants formed what may be termed a 'community of practice'. This is examined in terms of its purpose and the learning processes that took place within that community. Also explored are the tensions involved in researching active lived experiences as both tutors and researchers: in particular, the movement between being 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. A qualitative approach was used to consider how participants were making sense of their world and the researcher attempting to make sense of the process and critically examine their own role. Methods of data collection included phenomenological interviews, participant observation, journal entries, content analysis, and the use of critical companions. The investigation revealed issues about student practice and student research in particular, that we should not see the terms as mutually exclusive, but as mutually responsive. It provided insights into what motivated the 'community' to engage in practice based enquiry and what sustained their engagement. It suggests that the community fostered learning that was transformative. In terms of methodological approach, it underlines the importance of positioning oneself as a researcher as well as recognising the 'insider outsider' phenomenon. Importantly, asking if this makes a difference to the research process.

Background:

The research was conducted over a 14 month period. It explored the process by which experienced early years practitioners, having completed their Foundation Degree programme at the University of Worcester (hereafter the University) came together as a community of practice to edit and publish the results of their practice based investigations. The degree was taught in the local community in partnership with a Local Authority which

provided the impetus to publish and disseminate the results of the students' work based investigations within the local professional community. Our aim was to actively participate in the process, to understand how the participants evolved within a community of practice and to reflect upon our role as researchers.

The approach:

This was based on a dual interpretation (double hermeneutic) approach where participants are making sense of their world and the researcher is attempting to make sense of the process and critically examine their own role (Smith and Osbourne, 2003; Smith, 2009; Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008). This allowed us to consider how we were both insiders and outsiders in the process. We were in part tutors, helpers, confidants, colleagues, critical friends, editors and researchers which resulted in us having to make transitions between the positions of insider and outsider (Dobson 2009). Professional propriety and ethicality were embedded into the process from the outset. Consent and assent were obtained from participants and the Local Authority. Methods of enquiry included phenomenological interviews with students, content analysis, journal and diary entries, researcher notes, minutes of meetings and participant observation. Critical companions (University colleagues) assisted throughout in developing a reflective stance. An examination of published work in the field was carried out and organised into a matrix, following the process recommended by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Lawson and Benefield 2007). Data was cross correlated with content analysis taken from written responses from students' pre-and post-inquiry. The quality of the research process was compared with the CASP Self Review of Qualitative Research (2002) and the work of Furlong and Oancea (2005). We used these review guides to ensure we were positively engaged in the process and to guide us towards areas we needed to revisit to shed light on particular issues. We were therefore investigating a complex weave of issues involving a desire to share good practice, ethicality, approaches to teaching and learning, interpersonal dynamics and professional status.

What did we learn?

Our investigation revealed how students valued the opportunity to develop a publication which was designed, created and published within the Local Authority. It has inspired other students and had a profound effect in sharing good practice with others. It was innovative and underlined the risk that novice researchers took in publicly sharing their work based investigations. Student motivation to be involved ranged from wanting their University research to be seen as more than a typed dissertation – as one student suggested – “not resting on a shelf”. Other perspectives included valuing being published and receiving recognition from the Local Authority. Above all, a central motivating theme was a desire to be viewed as professionally qualified and competent, serving the needs of children and families. Such motivating forces were important as students had to give time for additional study, deal with the fatigue created by drafting and editing work and producing as one student said: “even more written material”. Nevertheless, the group actively supported each other and developed a genuine desire for mutual success. It was this coupled with being part of a ‘group’ which was an important facet of their own lived community of practice. There was also evidence that the group had learnt how to learn when they reported the editing and publishing process to other students who were commencing their own work

based enquiry. They encouraged colleagues to take care, be rigorous, plan carefully, justify their methodology and use a critical friend. In particular, the research revealed how students began to perceive their practice in the workplace and their practice based research, not as mutually exclusive, if anything, mutually responsive. This was important in informing us about the way that future teaching and learning can be adapted and refined to accommodate purposeful and reflective practice based enquiry. Participants transformed their views, sometimes their actions and certainly their position. Sometimes this could be seen in the way competence shaped their experience and the community helped to develop and re - forge that competence.

In terms of ourselves as researchers, being both part of the process and researching the process; it became clear that students were intrigued by the role of tutors as researchers especially the way we had to revisit and reform data to ensure the accuracy of our research. They saw how the tutors were modelling research practice and this underlined what Ashton and Newman (2006:832) consider as students becoming 'heutagogues', learning from others and learning to learn. The methodological approach underlined the importance of positioning oneself as a researcher, recognising the insider outsider phenomenon and asking if this makes a difference to the research process. We feel it did as we realised how easy it was to take up an insider outsider position and perceive the research as something to be written up for others, for ourselves and perhaps least of all with students. On reflection, we have to concede that on occasions we fell into an almost laboratory perception of research. In this way, we saw how the process highlighted how we as researchers must consider our position at the outset of any inquiry into practice including our background and professional viewpoints. We needed to listen carefully to the voices of participants and review our pre-existing opinions – one example being the way we perceived the separation between practice based research and practice. Critical reflection was an ongoing necessity including exploration of professional and personal perspectives within the process. As for the critical question: did we leave the research area the same? We think not and recognise this as unavoidable because we see our actions and those of others as transformative. It has changed our views and we think changed the perspectives of the participants. It could be seen as just working with students, but perhaps it was more like transforming the ordinary into something quite special. (Le Gallais 2004).

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Rosie Walker is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Worcester within the Institute of Education. She trained as a social worker and has operated in a variety of childcare settings, including social care and child guidance, and has been directly involved in training to promote the safeguarding and welfare of young children. She has acted as a Guardian ad Litem and set up a Family Support Service and managed a large Children's Centre in Gloucestershire. She has published work for Sage and is currently developing a book on research.