Active Learning and Knowledge Creating Research Module

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How do I influence and educate the teachers and other adults around me to accept and respect the differences presented by pupils with speech and language impairment and co-occurring disabilities such as autism within and outside school?

My assignment is about my experience of teaching children who are different from the majority in their developmental path. I am the manager of a specialist centre for children aged four to eleven with speech and language impairment (SLI)within a mainstream primary school setting. The school I work in is committed to creating an inclusive education and is a happy, inspiring place to be for the adults as well as the children.

Speech and Language impairment is a low incidence disability affecting 3%-7% of the population. Clegg, Ginsburg (2006) p60 The ratio of males to females experiencing SLI is 4:1.The criteria for diagnosis of 'impairment' rather than 'delay' is that the child's cognitive levels, as measured on non verbal assessments, is higher than their language levels in comprehension and expression. There are often co-occurring disabilities such as pervasive developmental disorders, Autism (ASD) and developmental coordination delay, ADHD, dyslexia. Overall it is a neurological damage and therefore it takes time to understand the full effects and some of them arise at different stages of the child's development.

The role I take within my job as a manager is to maximise the benefits of the educational setting and to develop good practice based on my embedded knowledge of children and learning gained and tested through years of experience. As Snow commented, 'The challenge here is not to ignore or downplay this personal knowledge, but to elevate it'. p9 (2001);

I aim to address the following questions as headings throughout my essay:

- How am I showing that my primary drive is to accept differences on all levels and that this is an explanatory principle of my educational influence?
- How am I transmitting my embedded knowledge and values within my work to encourage the team, in the broadest sense, to apply methods and approaches which demand them to adjust their fundamental views on how children should be treated?
- How am I progressing towards accepting the changes to the school system brought by political and economic factors whilst continuing to strive for the preservation of all the wisdoms and beliefs based on my own experience and studies so that the education of the vulnerable child client group is respected and seen as worthy of being high on the school's agenda?

How am I showing that my primary drive is to accept differences on all levels and that this is an explanatory principle of my educational influence?

Between 1979 to the present my embodied knowledge as an educator has extended and deepened in my continuing professional development. In this writing I wish to make some of this knowledge public as a contribution to the professional knowledge-base of education. The approaches I will use draw on Dadds' and Hart's idea of methodology inventiveness, Clandinin and Rosiek's idea of narrative inquiry and Whitehead's living theory methodology, Whitehead, 2009,11).

I have tracked my own attitudes to inclusion throughout the years and realise that I have adjusted to teaching children who I used to find very hard to fathom. For example, through recalling my reaction to SR, a large boy who had a diagnosis for SLI and ASD I now cringe at my prejudices. I can remember wanting to bang my head against a wall when he simply could not understand the quantity of a number and add on one more. He was a florid looking blond child with a vacant appearance and I am ashamed to think of my impatience. I have a hunch that I experienced a feeling that many others dare not describe. I have come to understand that at some level my own vulnerability to feeling inadequate may have made me feel defensive and I recognise that this has manifested itself as low-level irritation with pupils at times. When I was at school I recall feeling a terrible, crippling sense of dread, shame and fear from time to time when I was confronted with particular mathematics tasks. As a teacher I try very hard to create a positive, relaxed atmosphere particularly when teaching numeracy and endeavour to use practical approaches. I recall a teacher who frightened me with his fierce tempers when the class did not do something as trivial as play the right notes on the chime bars. I remember finding adults hard to understand and I think I would have felt as if I was responsible for their anger. As an inexperienced teacher I have come to realise that I may have felt that children such as SR were in some way taunting me with their inability to learn when I was trying so hard. I believe it has been necessary to fully acknowledge my own prejudices and ugly thoughts about pupils who are difficult to teach and recognise them when they occur in others around me, as I am sure they do. I make a conscious pact with myself to never be heard to use words such as 'lazy' about a child. I have found that despite the team around a child knowing that they have a statement it is not uncommon for some of the adults involved to express frustration about their lack of understanding or attention.

The process of my development towards empathy and acceptance has come about through getting to know many children and their families and studying

at a greater depth about speech and language impairment and co-occurring disabilities. My curiosity about the complex effects of not being able to express or fully comprehend spoken language or understand social interaction has led me into exploring the social, emotional and psychological effects on the children and families I teach. I have always aspired to being able to enter into a child's 'space' and really listen using the techniques of 'active listening' and 'sustained, shared thinking' Siraj-Blatchford(2007). These skills are necessary and highly beneficial for encouraging the children to gain confidence and enthusiasm to learn. From having had experience of working in a Montesorri nursery school I know that providing a range of practical and life skill activities gives children a sense of competence and control over their environment and leads to an increased understanding of number, space and time.

I have kept friendly links with a lot of ex-pupils who developed differently and in many cases my confidence in believing that they would gain enough skills to be independent and employable has been confirmed. Recently I met an ex pupil from eighteen years ago who I had known when he was in Year 7 of a large, comprehensive boys' school. He and his twin brother were very delayed in their learning due to a premature birth. I was heartened to see that as he approaches thirty he has self-confidence and is proud to have a steady job as a club door-man. It has seemed as if having struggled to attain basic skills has in itself developed his resilience to overcome challenges. I endeavour to promote an acceptance of differences presented by the pupils and families I am in contact with and an open mind about their longer term life chances.

How am I transmitting my embedded knowledge and values within my work to encourage the team, in the broadest sense, to apply methods and approaches which demand them to adjust their fundamental views on how children should be treated?

To bring my embedded knowledge overtly into focus I recently decided to put a notice on the door describing the centre as 'a place to listen, learn and take time to think' so as to remind all adults that the process of learning for pupils with SLI is bound to be slower but that does not mean less useful and effective in the long term. In *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind* (1997) Claxton brings together evidence that much of learning is unconscious, done by osmosis or imitation, and that too much thinking can get in its way. He thinks that modern society overvalues speedy thinking, producing 'premature articulation' so 'slow is smart' and that the best ideas are the product of contemplation.

One of my on going aims is to develop a deep understanding amongst all those who work within the centre or visit for their professional development that the process of learning for those with SEN and SLI is to be valued more than the necessity of there being a product. To me this is a simple wisdom, which because of its simplicity makes it harder to promote. To me it means putting into practise, speaking in short, simple phrases, always talking about

what is happening in front of the child, being in the moment and attentively 'listening' to the child.

The largest group of staff, who have the most contact with the vulnerable learners, is the teaching assistant team who, typically, have the least training or experience. A study carried out by Blatchford (2011) found that Teaching Assistants are more concerned with task completion than learning and that unlike teachers who are trained to ask open questions and encourage pupils to talk, Teaching Assistants tend to' "close down" talk, both linguistically and cognitively'.Teaching assistants come from such a range of prior work experience and educational level so a great deal of in-house training and time for focused conversations as well as accredited courses led by Speech and Language therapists (SALTs) and myself is given. The research gathered for The Sutton Report p28 (2011) which investigated the best value and highest impact of strategies for enhancing learning found that teaching assistants have a high cost and low impact. I have often questioned why the least experienced of the school work force are working with the most complex children and observed that in some cases they are holding on to children to look purposeful whilst the child's attention span is exhausted. It is extremely hard to transmit my embedded knowledge to teaching assistants of the need for being sensitive and intuitive about children's needs in terms of language levels and attention span and then adapting to them for the optimum learning to happen. The teaching assistant team are given opportunities for professional development but they are largely training on the job which is similar to the governments revised approach to training teachers with the 'teaching school programme'. There is a great deal of talk of 'pedagogy' which was a large part of my own basic teacher training but it seems that with the academy programme and teacher training being given within selected 'teaching schools' there will need to be a greater appreciation of andragogy, the methods and approaches for teaching adults. I think that the same atmosphere that enthuses children to learn works for adults except with the acknowledgement that they have had more time to develop wisdom but also damage from life's knocks.

Since taking a definite career move into special education teaching I feel increasingly motivated and appreciative of the expertise I have developed from being in a specialist provision within what Ofsted described 'an outstanding' school'. (2010) I am aware that a large part of the success of inclusion is due to a commitment from a strong leadership and management team, of which I am a member. As the manager of the specialist centre I feel pleased by the way in which our team collaborates to produce a purposeful, upbeat, warm atmosphere where all of us are learning and being creative within our roles. There are three strands to the team; two specialist teachers, speech and language therapists with a NHS research based approach and teaching assistants, who each come from a different work background prior to employment in the school. The ranges of ages, with me being the eldest with the most experience of teaching, is early twenties to late fifties. There is a way in which the commitment to the children's welfare brings us together

whilst as individuals we vary in our values and beliefs. Snow (2011) commented, 'Good teachers possess a wealth of knowledge about teaching that cannot currently be drawn upon effectively in the preparation of novice teachers or in debates about practice'. The emotional climate and positive learning culture builds everyone's confidence thus motivating learning. This is partly due to the school adopting the Guy Claxton *Building Learning Power* (2002) ethos several years ago, which emphasises the importance of the four 'R's: resilience, relationships, resourcefulness and reflection and values the process of learning.

Despite being a school that puts a high value on children building their own motivation for learning there is always a need to reinforce an attitude of acceptance of differences presented by pupils with special educatonal needs. The way in which I transmit my philosophy of the benefit of attentive, active listening to my colleagues is by demonstrating an understanding and experience of childhood development and respecting that the time scale varies for each individual. I practice overcoming frustration with those in the work place who are very different in their background to me by being quietly aware and respectful of their differences by using what Buddism describes as 'loving kindness' adapted by me with a humourous edge. I find this approach helps me within all my relationships and enables a communication of my core values to be transmitted covertly.

Helping parents accept their child

Within the early years it is vital to build a child's trust in humanity which Baron-Cohen (p.48 2011),describes as the 'internal pot of gold'. I have found that the Alderian based 'Crucial Cs' Lew and Bettner (1996): connected, capable, counts and courage are the summary of life's necessities for individuals to thrive and if they are prioritised then children will develop on all levels.

I aim to transmit the importance of the 'crucial cs' to parents and carers, however I am strongly aware that I have not experienced being the parent of a child with special needs and being in the role of a teacher is completely different. I have had plenty of experience of life's challenges and losses and do understand that there is a big difference between someone offering empathy and sympathy. Although both are valid and necessary I think that the parents need my empathy and that I should not expect them to suppress their emotions, even if they are difficult for me to handle. I think there is sometimes too much expectation to be positive about sadness and in the case of one's child there is naturally going to be fear about their future.

The disadvantage of having had a lot of experience of children with special needs is that I may fail to recognise that parents and carers are new to the territory and that I may alienate them if I do not take a lot of time to listen to their views, hopes and fears. Having learnt about Adlerian 'encouragement' and the methods of 'solution-focused brief therapy,' p442 Watts and Pietrzak

(2000) I have found applying such approaches helpful within the time limits of a parent-teacher meeting. Within the *Achievement for All*, D.C.S.F. (2009) the 'structured conversation' has a similarity with my approach and is intended to lead everyone to a realistic educational and care package. The simple process of taking time to talk and be listened to is therapeutic and I try to give parents time to interact with each other and share frustrations and knowledge. Ultimately I hope their children benefit by feeling more understood and accepted within the family, so that they become happier and can learn more effectively.

I have observed that there are phases within the school year when some parents panic because their inflated expectations for their child's academic progress need to become more realistic. Despite having had a myriad of reports from many experts and agencies parents of children with special needs naturally strive for the very best teaching and learning and in spite of knowing the history of their child's short, complex development they are full of expectations that school and a centre, such as the one I manage, will deliver a 'cure'. I have come to accept that this is a 'normal' phase for every family and I brace myself as some parents become vengeful and want to blame us if their child does not make rapid progress. The acceptance of the child's diagnosis comes after a great deal of personal growth on the part of the parents as individuals and as a couple. Through close involvement with the parents and carers of pupils I have observed that the process of accepting their child's difficulties can take a long time and may go through many phases. In general there are some of the features of grief as described by Kubler-Ross in 'On Death and Dying (1969), such as, denial, anger and depression before coming to a level of acceptance that seems to take up to ten years. Another phase of anxiety creeps in as parents and carers realise that the secondary school does not necessarily offer the differentiation or vocational opportunities they expected. A study carried out by Bruce and Shultz (2002) described the grief of having a child with a disability as being a 'non-finite loss'. I have witnessed parents despairing about their child's future prospects and being painfully aware of their vulnerabilities.

There are differences in the ways in which mothers and fathers deal with the process of coming to terms with their differently developing child. The men appear to suppress a lot of emotions in meetings while the mothers are often very expressive. However, I am aware of the sadness, anger, fear and frustration many of the fathers later let me know they have felt. One of the hardest aspects I find difficult to respond to is if they report that their child is being physically aggressive at home and that as a family they are struggling to come to terms with the imperfections the child presents. It is not unusual to hear about physical aggression being shown by the children towards their parents but everyone is very ashamed about it and it needs to be brought into the open for discussion.

One pupil was reported as often being aggressive, particularly towards his father who I perceived to be very image conscious. When the child was young

he was diagnosed with SLI and at the same time his parents sought a diagnosis of 'Autism' which I suspect they may have felt would be easier to give as a way of explaining his difficulties. Many of the features of Autism are similar to those displayed by children who are comprehension disordered and speech and language therapist (SALT) colleagues and I did not feel that this pupil warranted the additional label. This family were typical of one where they seemed to have a fixed view and strive always to be perfect. I was aware that their family values were very different from those I was brought up with and I found I had to work very hard to listen and grasp what their underlying motivations were. They were friendly on the surface but I sensed that they had struggled to separate away from what appeared to be a childish expectation to have fun all the time. Their level of resilience to life's ups and downs was poor. In contrast I would consider my own upbringing as warm, caring but with firm principles of social responsibility and these characteristics fall into what is described by Palmer, (2006) as ' authoritative'. p 282. whereas this family had the characteristics of being 'indulgent'. For me this father was an example of someone who behaved as if his child was an extension of himself. During sessions using 'Managing my Feelings' (Wiltshire Behaviour Service programme) this pupil remarked that he felt as if he had two managers, the football team one and his dad. I was not surprised as he was voicing exactly what I believed to be the underlying issue of his father needing to keep control of his son as if he was one of his prized accessories.

For some parents their own personal identity is wrapped up into their child's and this is a feeling I have experienced with my own children. I have learnt to separate as I understand personal boundaries and the need to 'own' what is my business. I realise that when my own children have a problem it may not be my place to solve it or save them form natural knocks that might serve to aid their self development, even if it is painful to stand by. My view is summed up by the philosophy from The Prophet (1991), first published in 1926 which talks of children having their own thoughts and 'though they are with you yet they belong not to you', (p22). I am impressed by Parenting Effectiveness Training (PET) by Dr Thomas Gordon (1970) in that he shows how parents can solve their own dilemmas and be therapeutic without requiring 'experts'. I would like to create opportunities to pass on this message to parents and enable them to believe in their own power through 'active listening' approaches combined with making rational decisions about boundaries in their relationship with their child.

Although I appreciate the necessity of using labels such as; ASD, dyspraxia, ADHD to give an understanding and explain a different developmental pattern I am concerned that in some cases labelling becomes a pathological way of describing frustrated children who are raised without firm boundaries. I have experience of parents and families of pupils with a diagnosis for ASD or ADHD who have learned to adapt, on a daily basis, to a very high level of controlling and aggressive behaviours within the home, which could have been allayed if there had been confident, clear boundaries. Some families are too ashamed to tell of the extent of control they have allowed their child to take but I have

heard of children threatening violence if they do not get their own way. With the Common Assessment Framework DfES (2006) being the first stage for a family to gain access to the social care system I am in the position of being a 'Lead Professional' for these forms and find that the responsibility I then tacitly have is to suggest practical solutions. I am concerned that a culture of 'experts', such as counsellors, psychologists, parent advisors and the like, takes away the responsibility of the parents and carers to set and uphold acceptable behaviour. These unrealistic expectations of the system's strength seem to de-skill some parents/carers and when a solution is not found they seem to blame the school or services that support schools. I am encouraged by the S.E.N. and Disability Green Paper (2012) which proposes to support parents and carers by setting out a birth to 25 care and health plan but I am wondering if awarding the funds to the parents to choose the best provision they can for their child will create further anxiety.

How am I progressing towards accepting the changes to the school system brought by political and economic factors whilst continuing to strive for the preservation of all the wisdoms and beliefs based on my own experience and studies so that the education of the vulnerable child client group is respected and seen as worthy of being high on the school's agenda?

I relate my values to those of Huxtable (2012) who distinguishes her social values of inclusion, emancipation and equality from her personal values of loving recognition, respectful connectedness and educational responsibility. As a vocational teacher I have considered myself as a 'public servant' and felt a high level of privilege to have work that suits me and predominantly makes me feel as if my own life is meaningful. From this point of view I have found the government's changes of making schools into businesses seems in essence to be contrary to my principles of fairness and equal opportunities since business means setting schools against each other and competing for pupils. However I have felt during the past decade that schools are over-resourced and sometimes profligate in their spending so I am supportive of 'austerity'. I have come to accept that my own economic values are based on my parent's ones which were to always live within their means.

One of the contradiction between The Green Paper (2012) recommendations and the Academy programme is that the development of schools into businesses is possibly going to block choice as schools can refuse to accept pupils as was cited in an article by John Harris and Jeevan Vasagar guardian.co.uk, Thursday 24 May 2012 in which they reported one case involving Mossbourne academy in Hackney, east London, 'which has been celebrated for its academic record, the school refused to admit an 11-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, arguing it would compromise other children's education and it already has a higher than average number of pupils with special needs. The London Oratory, a Catholic school in Fulham which became an academy last year, is also facing a special needs legal

challenge.The cases suggest academies may not have the same legal obligations to children with special needs as maintained schools.'

At the present time I am involved with a parent who is in a dilemma about her daughter's schooling. It has been recommended that she comes to our specialist centre but she wants to be able to quantify precisely the amount of speech and language support which she would receive compared to the local school where she is supported by a teaching assistant. Her expectations, common to many of the parents of the pupils I teach, are very high and in my experience, unrealistic, given the complex difficulties her child presents. I am not helped in my quest to support a parent in being confident and fulfilling the expectations of the forthcoming Government reforms when the media reports that Education Ministers and the head of Ofsted are demeaning teachers and schools. Michael Wilshaw, head of Ofsted was quoted in The Telegraph (p8, 11.5.12) as saying, there is, 'a culture of excuses' coming from teachers to explain the underperformance of children. It was explained that in his opinion teachers do not know the meaning of the word stress. The expectations set by Ofsted of teaching to an outstanding level during lesson observations makes teachers, such as me, tense and less able to be flexible to the naturally fluctuating needs of pupils. The ability to be truly inclusive and therefore differentiate according to the varying learning and human needs of a class takes a great deal of time in thought and energy. This undermining of teachers per se is damaging when one is striving to gain the confidence of parents with SEN children who may be full of doubt about how and where it is best for their child to be educated.

The measuring of attainment and progress is a key aspect of every school and this influences all aspects of the economics of the school. Trying to predict the key stage two outcomes for children with a diagnosis of SLI has been an on-going challenge and yet we have to find a way so as to prove the value added by placing pupils in the specialist centre. We use teacher assessments as well as standardised testing to ascertain progress but prediction tables such as those in 'Progression Guidance' (2010/2011) assume an upward development when in our experience there are some children who plateau for a long time, whilst developing in other ways and this could appear that they have stopped learning. Recently we have begun to trial, 'The Personal, Social and Learning Behaviours Checklist' from ICAN (May 2011) which aims to gauge the gradual development of the subtle aspects of these, hard to measure, aspects of children. The children with SLI have varying levels of limited attention from what Reynell (1978), describes as level 1 of being extremely distractible and fleeting in their concentration to at best being able to be taught in a group and be able to give attention whilst carrying out a simple task (level 5) and if these aspects are known then the child's slower progression is more easily explained.

How do teachers within the special needs area of primary education become successful, equal and purposeful partners with parents and carers so as to bring to a working reality the objectives of The Green Paper on special

educational needs and disability (April 2012). I feel there is a contradiction between the skills needed for being an empathetic professional for effectively teaching children with speech and language impairment and supporting their parents/carers whilst at the same time showing impact and evidence of attainment and progress demanded by the Ofsted framework.

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