



ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS
2015-2016



TEACHERS' REPORTS

BOXGROVE ALLIANCE



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FOREWORD

BOXGROVE ALLIANCE: ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

Holly Broughton

Engaging with current thinking and research in education is crucial for teachers. It enables them to develop pedagogy, take risks, explore varied approaches to learning and enables them to be at the vanguard of educational thinking.

These projects not only allow staff the time and support to fully immerse themselves in research, others and their own, but also allows them to trial ideas and add to the wealth of emerging educational theory.

It is the best form of CPD, and helps them gain further qualifications at the same time!

Holly Broughton
Headteacher
Boxgrove Alliance



FOREWORD

BOXGROVE ALLIANCE: ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS 2015/16

Professor Andrew Lambirth

This year my Colleague, Dr Ana Cabral, and I from the University of Greenwich have had the privilege of working with a group of talented teachers from schools within the Alliance who were all interested to study their own practice in order to enrich the learning of the children they teach. Ana and I wanted to introduce the teachers to action research. The classic work by Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as being about:

- the improvement of practice;
- the improvement of the understanding of practice;
- the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place.

It was important to us that the teachers were systematic about the way they undertook their investigations. Teachers are busy people and the degree to which they applied the methodology varied. We discussed their aims – constructing research questions or identifying the problem they wished to solve. We worked on the best ways of collecting data to inform their actions and we talked about the ethical issues of being an 'insider-researcher' and how to address them.

Action Research Process (Creswell, 2012)

Identify information you will need: plan a strategy for gathering data. Decide from whom you need to gather the data. Consider ethical implications.	Identify a problem to study
	Locate resources to help address the problem
	Analyse the data
	Develop a plan for action
	Implement the plan and reflect
	Identify new focus

We met with the teachers at least three times during a term and on a number of occasions we went to schools or had telephone conversations when teachers were too busy to attend. The meetings with the teachers were fascinating. Research has informed us that the most effective forms of continuing professional development (CPD) (BERA/RSA 2014) involve:

- the use of specialist advisors and external experts
- collaborative enquiry and structured peer support
- the opportunity to explore why things do and don't 'work'
- the exploration and challenging of teachers own beliefs and assumptions (p.25 – 27).

'All the research indicates that enquiry-orientated learning is not a quick-fix, but needs to be a sustained over time to ensure that learning (for both teachers and pupils) actually takes place'. (BERA/RCA 2014: 26)

In this document we provide the reports from the teachers that describe their work. They document the processes with which the teachers were engaged. In most cases teachers collected information from their own surveys or interviews and/or from reading literature in the area. They then describe the action they felt to be appropriate and conclude with a brief evaluation of the success of their projects. They all demonstrate the teachers' hard work and determination. We would like to extend our thanks to all the teachers and the children involved.

Professor Andrew Lambirth
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1 | HOW CAN I EMBED A LOVE OF READING IN MY YEAR 6 CLASS?



Elizabeth Jenkins
Kidbrooke Park Primary School

1. | INTRODUCTION

I am a primary teacher in an inner London school. I decided to go into teaching, after a few years working for a youth development charity. I am currently in my second year teaching year 6, having completed my NQT year in year 4.

After a few weeks in year 6, I noticed that many pupils in my class were showing no real love towards independent reading. We had independent reading twice a day, around ten minutes in the morning and then again after lunch. I quickly noticed that many pupils would stare into the distance, flick through their book at random or make the daily walk to the book corner to choose a new book. While in the book corner they would disinterestedly flick through books before seeming to choose one at random to take back to their seat. This made me feel uneasy; this was my pupils' final year in primary school - they would soon be making the move to secondary, where their teachers may assume that they know what they like to read and can choose a book that they would enjoy independently. I wanted to try and make sure that my pupils left primary school with at least some knowledge of what they liked and disliked with regards to books; to be able choose a book that they would enjoy independently. As teachers we aim to be reflective practitioners, to undergo a constant cycle of reflection and improvement of practice to enhance our pupils' learning. I decided that it was important that I reflected on this observation and tried to improve my practice to help develop a love of reading in my class.

I shall begin by introducing the action research approach to this study. In doing so I will introduce the literature around this area and detail why an action research approach suited my particular needs. I will then discuss the observations of my pupils' reading habits and, after discussing the literature on the particular area of interest, I will go on to discuss my actions, the evaluation of these actions and the conclusion of my project.

2. | METHODOLOGY

All research aims to find out something that is not already known, a discovery or a new creation (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The study I undertook utilised an action research approach. It is important to establish the similarities and differences between traditional research and action research. Traditional research is usually conducted by an official researcher who is an outsider on the research situation - this researcher observes the actions of the practitioner, who is inside the research situation, and develops a theory about how the practitioner can develop and improve their performance (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Action research approaches allow the practitioner - teachers in education settings - to become researchers themselves (rather than the subject of research); to focus their research on their actions in their schools and classrooms (Pine, 2009).

As Carr and Kemmis (1986) state, action research is the improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. Traditional research focuses on linear methods; the researcher explains why and how the research must be conducted, then follows set steps of action towards an end point – the answer (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). When collecting the data in this way the 'experiment' has a controlled number of variables, the sample sizes are often random or representative – preferably using large populations so that theoretical conclusions are generalisable (Mertler & Charles, 2008). This is often referred to as the positivist tradition (Koshy, 2005). Action research, however, focuses on the local situation, aiming to get inside the individual or institution to understand the people or situation – it is based upon the interpretive tradition (Koshy, 2005). The researcher carrying out research within the interpretive paradigm does not make any generalisable claims; we agree a set of rules that allow us to interpret our results within the means of our understanding. With this in mind, action research is a non-linear cyclical process which is designed to achieve a concrete change in a specific location to improve teaching or learning (Pine, 2009); it focuses on the solution of a specific problem in a specific setting (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Action research addresses problems currently faced in a classroom or school by the practitioner; sampling is usually carried out in the school or classroom and research is designed over a flexible, quick timeframe so that results have practical rather than theoretical significance and can be used to improve the immediate practice (Mertler & Charles, 2008).

As stated, teachers are often striving to be reflective practitioners. Action research approaches enable them to be so by allowing one to learn through action leading to a personal or professional development (Koshy, 2005). The process involves a spiral of observation, self-reflective action and reflection on the consequences (Koshy, 2005). The researcher observes, plans a change, acts and observes the consequences of the change, then reflects on these consequences. The cycle then repeats; re-planning takes place, then action and observation of the actions, reflection on the consequences and so on (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). This process is not rigid however. As Pine (2009) states, this reflection-action-reflection-action process is a spiralling cyclical process in which research issues change as you move through the cycle and learn from your experience; initial plans are

disregarded, improved as action becomes more focused. The data collected from action research tends to be qualitative, not quantitative data usually collected through traditional research, which can be measured or represented by numbers (Koshy, 2005). There are a number of criticisms of action research approaches. One is that action research is subject to bias or a lack of objectivity. However, if the action research cycle is collaborative, reflections and data are shared with and critiqued by other professionals to ensure they are robust and without bias (Koshy, 2005). Some argue that action research is not generalisable on the basis that it focuses on a particular problem in a particular situation and the results are often very specific to that problem. However, arguably the results from action research can be generalisable. Koshy (2005) proposes that deliberations which help one's understanding can be offered to others; whilst not be applicable to others' situations these findings could form part of a wider search for information and the recipient may be able to replicate the study to suit the recipients' needs (Koshy, 2005).

Ethics

As previously stated, action research focuses on solving a specific problem in a specific location. As Zeni states (1998), teachers as action researchers are insiders undertaking research on the very pupils for which they are responsible. Zeni (1998) goes on to discuss that the point where good reflective teaching ends and action research begins can often become blurred. She states that action research often contains more systematic documentation of data gathering, more written self-reflection and collaboration and possible publication leading to a wider audience (Zeni, 1998, pp. 10-11). With this in mind I identified two main areas of potential risk to my pupils, which were obtaining informed consent from minors and lack of confidentiality for my pupils. To minimise these risks, I sought permission from my head teacher to undertake the research study and verbal consent from the pupils before the research began, as well as before each participated in the surveys (which they could choose complete anonymously or not). Verbal consent was also sought before conducting informal interviews and pupils volunteered to give this verbal feedback. All the pupils were free to opt out of the research at any time once it had started without further explanation. I also ensured that all data collected was stored anonymously and used pseudonyms in all presentation of data and in discussion with colleagues.

Observation

My school is situated in inner London and is an above average sized primary school. The percentage of children in the school who are entitled to Pupil Premium is above national average at 26% and 50% of our pupils have English as an additional language. In my class 33% are registered as having English as an additional language, 19% are registered for Pupil Premium and 41% have special educational needs. As indicated, my initial concern was that the pupils in my year 6 class seemed disengaged with independent reading. Many seemed to struggle to choose books that they enjoyed and to stay interested for a sustained period of time. I was concerned that this negative attitude would become contagious to the other pupils; there seemed to be very few children who had a real love of reading. To see what I could do to try and improve the love of reading in my class, I referred to the literature on the subject.

There are numerous studies exploring children's attitudes towards reading and writing. It seems fairly established that boys are often more disengaged than girls (for example, see

Merisuo-Storm (2006)). Merisuo-Storm (2006) states that a child's attitude towards reading develops at a young age, and he or she is strongly influenced by the habits of those around him or her. If the child grows up in a reading-rich home environment he or she is likely to become a fluent reader at an early age who will read both in school and outside of it for pleasure. This is taken further by Wallace (1992) who explains that keen readers will continue to improve their reading skills while reading for pleasure, whereas poor readers do not read for pleasure so do not develop their skills further, causing the gap between the pupils' reading skills to widen even further. Worthy et al (1999) go further again, and begin to hypothesise that this widening of the gap causes a further disengagement of pupils who do not read in their free time. This intrigued me; whilst we as teachers strive to ignite a love of reading in our pupils, what they think of themselves as readers will impact on their enjoyment and attitude. I did not know what my pupils thought of themselves as readers or what they thought made a good reader and I wanted to find out.

Each pupil in my class is an individual, with different interests and motivations. As Merisuo-Storm (2006) states, these interests will motivate each child to want to read different books and texts, meaning that a wide selection of books, on a variety of topics and at varying levels of difficulty, should be available to the pupils. As Worthy et al (1999) suggest, many of the books that reluctant readers want to read are not available in school. I wanted to know if this applied to my pupils, so I set about designing a pupil survey that would give me an insight into their reading preferences and their reading habits. I hoped that I would then be able to reflect on their responses and develop my next action in my cycle with a view to improving their interest in reading. I based my pupil survey on those made by Lockwood (2012) and Worthy et al (1999). I wanted to get an idea of what my pupils thought of reading, what they thought of themselves as readers and the books or genres that they liked to read. I chose to survey my pupils because I wanted to capture the information across my class. Surveys allow data to be collected on a large scale but they can also capture independent opinions; they allow anonymity for the participants and the data from them can be quickly analysed (Cohen et al 2005). However, there are some disadvantages to surveys; they can restrict answers as there is a chance that none of the options will be appropriate and they can become biased from the wording of the question (Cohen et al 2005). The survey that I created for my pupils contained a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions and open and closed questions. It was also scrutinised by other professionals to minimise bias or leading questions. Children in my class were keen to give me their feedback and the results of the survey were very interesting.

After collecting the results I decided to sub-divide them by gender. **Error! Reference source not found.** One of the questions I wanted to explore was *Reading is something I like to do...* Although I was relieved no one had said that reading was something that they *never liked to do*, I was concerned that 75% of my class read either *sometimes* or *not very often*. After further study of the responses, I noticed that not many boys had said they liked to read often; I decided to take a closer look at gender. The girls seemed to be fairly evenly split between *read often*, *sometimes* or *not very often* with approximately a third for each. However, a staggering 91% of the boys in my class said they liked reading either *sometimes* or *not very often*.

In response to *My best friend think reading is...*, 79% of my class responded with either *OK to do* or *no fun at all*. Again, analysing the responses by gender showed some disparities. Girls seemed to be split across all of the four responses (*really fun*, *fun*, *OK to do*, *no fun at all*) but 61.54% of them said their best friend thought reading was *OK to do* or *No fun at all*. However 23.08% of girls said that their best friend thought reading was *really fun* and the same percentage said their friend thought reading was *no fun at all*. Contrastingly, boys' responses seemed to be more negatively skewed and all of them responded that their best friend thought reading was either *ok to do* (63.64%) or *no fun at all* (36.36%). These first few results suggested that I was right to be concerned; the majority of pupils in my class only read *sometimes* (45.83%) and half said that their best friends thought reading only *ok to do*. The questions related to the pupils' reading habits were interesting too; the majority of my pupils said that they read during guided reading, got their books from the school library or book corner and did not read with anyone at home. The results also showed three main themes towards reading in my class: that my pupils were lacking motivation to read the books on offer; that their attitude towards reading had become disengaged and negative; and that they wanted more flexibility with their reading environment (for example, sitting with their friends came up frequently). These results correlated with the literature that I had reviewed. Worthy et al (1999, pp. 15-16) stated that reluctant 10-11 year olds like to read material that is often not available in schools, such as newly published books, books based on television and films, comics, cartoons and specialty magazines. When asked in the pupil survey, *If your school was to make one change to improve your enjoyment of reading in school, what should that change be?* 37.5% of my pupils said that they wanted new books. When asked to list their favourite author, a number of my pupils listed new authors that have released books that do not appear in our class book corner or school library yet such as David Walliams and Tom Gates. When asked *If you could read anything that you wanted to read, what would it be?* My pupils stated that along with newly released books, they would like to read magazines, atlases and comics. These results led me to my three main actions: to increase the number of new books in our classroom book corner in the hope of increasing motivation to read; to vary the independent reading sessions, giving them a more flexible reading environment that they could control; and modelling reading for pleasure. As Merisuo-Storm (2006) states, it is crucial that teachers are able to recommend reading material that interests pupils and for the teacher's love of reading to be present, but as the pupils' age increases the influence of their teacher decreases and the influence of their friends increases. Hopefully my first actions two will lead to improved attitude towards reading, which I would develop and consolidate with the third action of modelling reading for pleasure, both by adults and, over time, their peers.

3. | ACTION

Action 1 – New books

Following the children's feedback my first action was to get a selection of new books for our classroom book corner. I obtained a wide range of books from their suggestions with the aim that every child would be excited about at least one book. Ten or more children said that they would like to read books about: sport, drawing, graphic novels and funny books. I started compiling a wish list for my book corner covering these genres from a range of authors, following recommendations from my colleagues, professors and reading lists on the

BookTrust (BookTrust, 2015) and CLPE websites (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2015).

Action 2 – Different Independent Reading Sessions

Before I gave the children the books I wanted to make sure that I was presenting them in an exciting way; I knew that the first session with the books could influence the attitude towards the new sessions. I made the changes to our independent reading sessions in the afternoon and kept the morning independent reading session as quiet reading. Following numerous suggestions of activities by Lambirth (2016), I decided on the following timetable for the first week's afternoon sessions:

Monday: Book-type tables (when types of book – audio-books, fairy tales, non-fiction, comics, poetry etc. – are all given a separate table and children choose where they want to sit) to include: non-Fiction, picture books, comics & graphic novels, poetry and focus author (David Walliams)

Tuesday: Reading partners

Wednesday: Pupils to choose seats but read quietly

Thursday: Book-type tables - to include: audio-book (The Hobbit), classic authors/books, comics & graphic novels, picture books and non-fiction books.

Action 3 – Modelling reading for pleasure

I was particularly concerned about the opinions of the boys in my class towards reading. They had already told me that they did not read very often outside of school and that most did not read at home to anyone. I do not know if many of the pupils in my class see adults in their lives read for pleasure. Merisuo-Storm (2006) suggests that “many groups of boys have come to regard school literacy as *“un-masculine”* and thus undesirable, a threat to their masculinity”. I wanted to do as much as I could to prevent this thinking towards literacy in my class. Our class are lucky enough to have a male teaching assistant, who has been with them for almost two years; he has an excellent relationship with the pupils and the boys in particular respond well to him. He is an excellent role model for our pupils; he already models many excellent behaviours for learning and social skills and he has a love of nature which our class have become interested in through him. Between us we could model good reading behaviour in both genders. This was not difficult; I started reading Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone to my class and, not having read the series before, he became hooked along with the children and could be caught reading them on his break. The children seemed amazed at the speed with which he was getting through the books and would ask him how many pages he had read each morning.

4. | EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

I evaluated the actions that I undertook in a number of ways including: informal interviews; observations; and pupil surveys. I asked pupils if they would like to volunteer to tell me what they liked or disliked about the activities, particularly about the book-type tables. I carried out observations of the class while they were reading and also asked children to give me feedback in a second short survey. I decided to use observations in my evaluations as they allowed me to see exactly what my pupils were deciding to read and how they were interacting with the books and their peers; I felt that this was the least obtrusive method to see how they responded to the new actions and activities (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

Observations have their disadvantages however: they only allow a snapshot of the whole situation; if children become aware of the observation they can change their behaviours; and I, as the observer, may also miss key actions or meaningful aspects while attention is drawn elsewhere (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

The observations were very interesting. Monday's *book-type* tables found six of my boys sitting on the *poetry table*. After taking some time to flick through the poetry books a more able reader started reading his poem out the other boys on the table. They enjoyed the recital and were soon taking it in turns to find a good or funny poem and read it aloud. Some more reluctant boys volunteered to read a poem aloud to their peers. Potentially, they were able to do so because they were amongst their friends and liked having their reading enjoyed. The boys on the *poetry table* continued to read poems to each other throughout the session.

A mixed group of children were sitting on the *non-fiction table* where a main draw seemed to be the new drawing books. The children quickly found pencils and scrap paper and proceeded to read the instructions out loud to each other, following the steps to try to draw the illustrations and animals on the page. They were discussing the instructions in their small groups in detail and re-reading the instructions to each other to ensure everyone knew what the next step was.

The third group focused on *graphic novels and comics*, which included: *The Phoenix*, *National Geographic Kids*, *Horrible Histories* and a range of graphic novels, including Shakespeare graphic novels and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. A small group of girls across a range of abilities and special needs sat on this table; there was a quick, excited initial discussion about the books which was soon replaced with silent reading when they all became absorbed.

The fourth table was *picture books*, with a mixture of children across genders and reading abilities. Three children read the books quietly and independently, slowly making their way through a number of the books (which included, *The Day the Crayons Quit*, *The Dark*, *Voices in the Park*, *The Tunnel* and a range of others). Two of my least confident readers however were sharing the books and reading together, putting on voices and appropriate intonations. Again, it was rare for these two boys to be confidently reading out loud, especially with intonation.

The fifth table did not seem so popular. It was a focus author table for David Walliams. Many of the children had mentioned David Walliams to me before and some had mentioned him on their surveys. However, in the excitement of new books and authors to explore, he did not seem much of a draw this time.

The first experience of the book-type tables seemed to have been a success. One less confident male reader commented that he really liked the book-type tables, because he could see what type of books his friends enjoy. He could then see if he liked them too and would know what present to get them for their birthday.

Tuesday's partner reading session straight after lunch also went well. The new books were put out again and the children keenly came to get one or two books in pairs. They sat down quietly at their tables and began sharing their books with each other. This time the boys were reading the drawing books and following the instructions with care and attention. Two girls were sharing a few picture books and were doing the voices; these were some of my more able readers and they were being closely watched by two other girls, who quickly started copying with their picture books, taking it in turns to read aloud to each other. The session soon ended and it took more than a few pairs longer than expected to put their books back. One of my boys, who responded in the initial survey that he *does not read very often* and thinks *his friend thinks reading is no fun at all*, commented after the session that "I like reading with my friend, the books are very funny". From observation and brief conversations the boys seemed to be enjoying the new reading sessions.

Wednesday's afternoon session saw a return to quiet independent reading; the children came in quietly and sat down at their desks, they were again allowed the new books and they patiently took a book each. After over twenty minutes of silent reading, with me and my teaching assistant also reading, I quickly jotted down changes in the reading habits of certain children. All of the eleven boys in my class were reading books that they had chosen independently and all seemed to be on task and enjoying them. The books included: *Tom Gates*, an information text about planes, the *Lonely Planet World Atlas*, the *Atlas of Adventures*, *The Usborne Complete Book of Drawing*, *NBA Basketball*, *The Phoenix* comic and the others were reading well known authors. Two less confident girl readers were reading poetry books that they had got from the library at lunchtime and a few of the other girls were reading the new picture books. The graphic novels seemed popular again; three of the girls had made their way through over half of their books over the last three days.

Thursday afternoon saw a return to book-type tables, but with different book-types from Tuesday. When the boys saw the books on the tables they were first into the class and sat themselves between the *non-fiction* and *graphic novel and comics* tables. Three of them instantly started reading *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* together, patiently waiting to discuss what had happened when they turned the page. Two of the other boys on the table were reading *The Phoenix* comic. Again, the three girls who has been reading the graphic novels about Shakespeare all week were quick to find their books and sit silently, reading independently. The other boys sat at the *non-fiction table* where they were reading the *Atlas of Adventures* and the *Lonely Planet World Atlas* together, discussing the different facts about the countries and flags. The more able girl readers were sitting at on the *classic books and authors table* and were again sharing the poems together, taking it in turns to read them aloud to the group. In this session, I also had *The Hobbit* audio-book playing through headphones for a group of six children; they sat quietly throughout the session listening to the book, and when the session ended one girl found a copy from the book corner to continue independently. It was a pleasure to look around the classroom and see all of the pupils interacting with books and their friends with enthusiasm and enjoyment.

After initiating my actions I wanted to see if my pupils' attitudes and motivation had improved as had appeared to be the case in my observations; I decided to survey my pupils again. They began filling in their survey whilst sitting at their book type tables; the boys seemed anxious filling in the survey whilst sitting next to their friends, so I moved the pupils back to their home seats. The results were very interesting; whilst the responses to *Reading*

is something I like to do... and *My best friend thinks reading is...* had improved slightly overall, they had not improved as much as I had hoped. However, on completing the survey in their home seats (away from their friends), a few of the more reluctant boys wrote more positive comments such as: "I think reading is not that bad at all and it is really cool"; and "I like the art books because they teach you how to draw, the other books are good too. I enjoy reading"; and a third boy commented that "I have become more sucked into the new books over the last few weeks". This seems to correlate with Merisuo-Storm's (2006) idea that boys often regard reading as "un-masculine". So, there is still hope that they will leave me with a greater love of reading; I just need to keep sharing great books with them in new ways.

5. | CONCLUSION

Carrying out this action research approach project has transformed my thinking and how I approach activities in my classroom. I have always sought to be a reflective practitioner, trying to change how I teach after reflecting on my pupils learning, enthusiasm and misconceptions, but the action research cycle has now become embedded into my way of thinking. I have begun to see myself following the cycle in other areas of the children's learning; for example how I can improve their Math's problem solving. I find myself observing possible challenges or problems; I then take a step back and discuss possible actions with colleagues and research strategies from the literature on the subject, before deciding on actions to try with my children. I subsequently find myself evaluating the actions and reflecting on the next action to try to further my pupils' learning. I know that I have a huge influence on the decisions and actions of my pupils and I have always tried to model and encourage them.

This action research project has emphasised that there is always more to do to encourage them; they need to be excited and involved in the various decisions being made in order to be fully engaged. I already have my next actions in mind for my current class. I intend to try and increase the book talk in my class, which I hope will increase the enthusiasm for reading further – we are going to make ourselves reader profiles that will be kept in the book corner for others to read. These profiles will be written by each child, myself and our teaching assistants and will include: which books they like and dislike; which books they intend to read in the future; and which books they have never read. There will be a space for a post-it note on each reader profile, where another child or adult will be able to give them a recommendation, based on their preferences, detailing why they think they will like the book they have recommended. I am going to start more of our reading sessions with a 'teaser' to whet the children's appetites, and try to end each session with a 'juicy bit' from the book I am or my teaching assistant is reading and over time I hope to hand the 'juicy bits' over to the class to share with each other. I have many ideas about what I will do differently with my next class to improve their love of reading. The first thing that we will do together is our reader profiles. I want to start the dialogue about books from the very beginning, making it clear to my pupils that what they think about books is important to me. I will make independent reading time more varied with a range of activities including: book-type tables; partner reading; and poetry only days. I am also liaising with our English Co-ordinator about setting up book buddies across the school, so that each child in my class will be able to share

a book with a younger child. I hope this will allow them both to increase their confidence and enjoyment in reading and for year 6 pupils to model good reading habits and enjoyment to the younger children. I have really enjoyed the action research process and I am excited that I have been able to do it so early on in my teaching career. I plan to give myself a similar project each year to focus on with each class that I teach, as well as carrying out smaller projects as the year goes on to continue the cyclical process. It has focused me on the actions that I can perform to further my pupils' progress; evaluating these actions collaboratively with my colleagues has also made me think more critically about them, which has helped me progress my pupils' and my own learning even further.

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2 | EXPLORING THE ROLE OF STORY-TELLING AS A TOOL FOR IMPROVING WRITING



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1. | INTRODUCTION

*“...tell them true stories, and everything will be well, just tell them stories”
Philip Pullman (2000).*

The experience of telling a story ‘can be profound, exercising the thinking and touching the emotions of both teller and listener’ (NCTE Guideline, 1992). As an English literature graduate, the power of stories has always held a fascination for me, and I frequently draw on my university material within my own teaching. For example, my class studied the Old English poem ‘The Wanderer’ as part of our work on the Anglo-Saxons. The school I teach in is a 2-form entry suburban school with a higher than average intake of pupil premium children and a higher than average percentage of children who speak English as an additional language.

As a student teacher, I witnessed my placement school transition to become an ‘oral story-telling school’ and I then started teaching at a flagship ‘story-telling school’ in Oxford. The basis of the scheme was the principle that in order to write a story, you have to be able to tell a story verbally, which emerged from Pie Corbett’s ‘Talk for Writing’ scheme (Corbett 2008). Having been introduced to this new way of teaching literacy, I questioned the ‘conventional’ teaching methods that I later employed when I moved to London. It seemed clear to me that oral story-telling was an important part of literacy pedagogy that was not embedded in my current school. This research project initially sought to explore the impact of story-telling and to investigate its feasibility and effect in a Year 6 classroom. As I delved further into the material, it became clear that oral literacy was much broader than the ‘Talk for Writing’ scheme and that I would need to expand my research to encompass a wider range of oral literacy teaching strategies, such as memorising and performing poems, and talking in different ‘voices’ and in different roles.

This research took place over the course of an academic year from 2015-16 and included the trialing of a variety of drama and role-play activities to engage and enthuse the children in my Year 6 class who exhibited a distinct lack of enjoyment when writing. Collectively, there was a tendency to regurgitate stock words and phrases with little creativity or originality; my aim was to promote an enjoyment of writing and facilitate the discovery of a ‘writer’s voice’ for each child.

2. | METHODOLOGY

'Without question, being an action researcher in my own work place constituted the most powerful professional development of my teaching career' (Somekh 2006, 73). Like Somekh, becoming an action researcher was at first 'daunting', as it signaled a significant shift in my understanding of teaching and learning, and it required me to ask the children for their active criticism and input into the lessons I was teaching. My action research involved me developing an essentially collaborative relationship with pupils and colleagues in order to develop a deeper understanding of teaching and learning. Whilst the main feature of action research is that it facilitates 'practitioners to study aspects of practice' (Koshy 2005, 13), an important factor is that it should also study 'a problematic situation in an ongoing systematic and recursive way to take action to change that situation' (Pine, 2009, 2). Once change has been effected, the process should be evaluated and reflected upon, and further research can then be undertaken. Action research can be presented as a 'cyclical, repetitive process of inquiry' formed of the following stages:

'Look: gathering information, **Think:** reflecting on, or analyzing, the information, **Act:** planning, implementing, and evaluating student learning' (Stringer 2010, 1), and a final stage, which Stringer's model misses, reflecting upon and assessing the impact of the research and planning where to go next; reflection is both the starting point and the final stage (McAteer 2013).

The concept of action research can present a problem to new researchers; the expectations of any research investigation with regards to clarity, appropriate application of methods selected and ethical considerations are high, and represent potential points of anxiety for teachers new to research (Baumfield 2012). In addition, a claim to an original discovery can be problematic, 'because saying that you know something is equivalent to saying that you are holding something as true' (McNiff 2010, 16). The onus is on the researcher to substantiate his/her claims with convincing 'proof'.

The first criticism often leveled at action research is the question of evidence. Action research is frequently based on qualitative data as opposed to quantitative studies, and thus any claims made can be difficult to substantiate. This issue is encapsulated in the question 'Is this really research? What is the data? How do we really know if we're doing anything better or not?' (Erzberger 1992, cited in Feldman 1994, 4). For some researchers, such as Erzberger, quantitative data may be viewed as preferential, as it presents findings as numerical values from which conclusions can be drawn – the observational field notes, interviews and samples of work which are the basis of my own action research project are not usually viewed as 'hard data', as no numerical value can be attached to them. The question levelled at action research is, can we really know something is true without being able to do a statistical analysis of the data first? Data drawn from observations and interviews relies on an individual's ability to note, interpret and create meaning through experiences; it is 'unlike positivism, with its emphasis on prediction, control, and generalization' and is instead based on the principle that an individual interprets situations based on their own contexts and experiences, and therefore constructs their own sense of reality (Pine 2009, 2). Within this philosophy, it is possible to 'know' something without quantifying it, and action research sits comfortably within this view. Therefore, I used my 'raw data' to draw conclusions without needing numerical values.

The second criticism facing action research is that it is 'insider research, not outsider research', and will therefore be inevitably influenced by the presence of the researcher. This positioning of the researcher as an interested participant is 'different from traditional research, which is usually conducted from an outsider perspective' (McNiff 2010, 25). This can be seen as both a limitation of action research and as an advantage; the researcher is not '*distant* and *detached* from the situation', which therefore allows 'continuous evaluation and modifications' to be made as the project evolves. This provides 'opportunities for theory to emerge from the research' rather than the researcher 'always follow[ing] a previously formulated theory' (Koshy 2005, 38).

Ultimately, it needs to be acknowledged that 'you use different forms of research for different purposes. No one form is better or worse; each form is different and serves a different purpose' (McNiff 2010, 15). When I considered a method of research, it seemed wise to choose an action research project, as it promoted both the improvement of a practice and the understanding of the practice. It also aims to improve the situation in which the practice itself takes place (Carr and Kemmis 1986). Alongside these aims, action research also promotes the involvement of others, both colleagues and participants, in the research, thus maintaining the crucial element of accountability and collaboration which underpins all research (Baumfield 2012).

3. | FOCUS OF THE STUDY

My area of concern – invigorating story writing

When I inherited this cohort of children from their year 5 teacher, she told me that their writing was 'accomplished but boring'. From their first pieces of writing, I could appreciate her concern. Most of the children could correctly use a range of punctuation and sentence structures, and would diligently include the relevant writing feature that was the focus of each lesson, but none of the writing I saw exhibited a strong 'voice' and there was a lacklustre approach to writing. Some children struggled to get their writing down on paper, being overwhelmed by spelling and handwriting. This is a common problem amongst 'beginning writers' who may have ideas to include in a story plan yet struggle with the demanding task of transferring these ideas to paper (Berninger et al 2008; McCutchen 2006, cited in Dunn 2010). An example of the writing produced by a 'beginning writer' showed how this child had extreme anxiety about handwriting and spelling, and would barely write two or three lines before scribbling it out to start again because it 'wasn't good enough'.

The current emphasis on data analysis, league tables and SATs results 'hold[s] student writing stagnant' (Lamen 2011, 10). When I asked the class why we might use a semi-colon in a certain sentence, the reply came back, 'So that we can get a high level for our writing assessment.' It seemed clear that in pushing for higher standards, this cohort had started to not only be judged but also to judge themselves by a narrow checklist. In addition, the assessment data for my class showed that 15 children out of 24 were below the expected writing level for their age. When taken together, the data, the anecdotal evidence and the sample writing showed that both low and high achieving writers in my class were struggling to find enjoyment and creativity. Stoye (2003) posits that 'Stories create magic and a sense of wonder at the world,' yet for my children, this magic and wonder had somehow been very much lost. If my class were going to improve as writers, it seemed clear that we needed to start by rediscovering the magic. The aim of my research was to establish whether story-telling could be the key to bringing it back.

Literature Review

The use of speaking as an effective tool to improve writing has long been acknowledged and promoted within the work of educational theorists. Talking provides a way of making abstract thoughts concrete, which 'inevitably raises them to a more conscious plane of awareness so that they can become the objects of reflection and modification' (Vygotsky 1978, in McGregor 2007) It is essential to speak so that thoughts can be shaped, moulded and developed. In the 1980s and 90s, oracy featured prominently in discussions on the pedagogy of literacy, with the DFEE suggesting that successful teaching is 'characterized by high quality oral work' (DfEE 1998). However, even before I came to do my teacher training, it appears that this emphasis on oracy had been diminished. The emphasis on pace in the National Literacy Strategy left little time for high quality oral work and created a conflict between the two aspirations (English et al 2002). Finally, Alexander (2009) claims speaking and listening in the National Curriculum is 'conceptually weak and insufficiently demanding in practice' and initiatives, such as the National Oracy Project, need to be 'revisited' to give oracy 'its proper place in the language curriculum' (p.47).

While high quality speaking and listening forms one of the seven stated aims of the 2013 National Curriculum (DfE 2013, 3), it is worth noting that speaking and listening is referred to most often in terms of formal debating, presentation and performance, with only brief mention made of how oracy can be used as a key tool to support writing. This is in contrast to research conducted by the DfE (2012), which repeatedly makes reference to 'effective oral work' to support writing outcomes. This document also refers to research which shows that teaching grammar in context has a 'significant positive effect' on writing outcomes. Yet in 2013, a grammar test was introduced for the first time for year 6 children, which tested knowledge of grammar outside of a writing context. This further confirmed my view that a new pedagogy was needed, based on effective oral literacy, to circumvent the current climate of judging writing on a 'rubric that looks for conventions' (Lamen 2011, 10).

Researchers have consistently demonstrated the link between effective use of speaking and role-play and significantly improved writing outcomes. Teachers who use talk as an exploratory tool and who view writing as an extension of high quality speaking see 'effective learning' in their classrooms (Bullock Report 1975; Harris et al 2003; Barrs and Corks 2001; Corson 1988, 27). In light of this, it seems sensible to suggest that effective and high quality speaking and listening activities are the teacher's secret weapon when seeking to improve writing. As Wells (1986) states, 'There are a number of children in almost every classroom who are able to work on new ideas more effectively in speech than in writing' (p.138). Teachers will recognize the veracity of Wells' statement, and will be able to identify the children who experience a 'cognitive overload' when writing. The writing process requires us to concentrate on spelling and handwriting as well as constructing meaningful sentences. Removing the barrier of spelling and handwriting through talk can free up our working memory to allow a greater depth of creative composition (Fisher et al 2010).

The initial data that I sought to collect was information on the effectiveness of the 'Talk for Writing' scheme developed by Pie Corbett and the subsequent move by some schools to adopting a 'story-telling' approach to teaching literacy across all year groups. Firstly, I read an evaluation project on the value of 'Talk for Writing' (Rooke and Lawrence 2012) The report was positive, stating that in a survey of children taking part in the trial of a 'Talk for Writing' scheme, the number of children who

enjoyed writing and who perceived themselves as good writers increased. However, a second evaluation of the scheme suggested that the effects of the scheme were 'small' (Dockrall et al 2015, 6). To make my own evaluation, I arranged a visit to a school in Tower Hamlets, who had recently adopted a whole school 'story-telling' approach to teaching literacy. The school has a very similar demographic to my own, and I thought it would provide a good comparison.

I designed a set of questions, opting for an informal conversational style of interview consisting of open-ended questions requiring longer responses (Cohen et al 2011). As I conducted the interviews face-to-face with the literacy coordinator and the EYFS teacher at the school in Tower Hamlets, I wanted to opt for a style of interview that resembled a 'conversation between equal participants' (Sapsford and Jupp 1996, 96). I learnt that the school had been an accredited story-telling school for four years under the 'Story-telling Schools' scheme piloted by Pie Corbett. The move to teaching literacy through story telling was prompted by the high percentages of EAL children at the school, as it is widely acknowledged that story-telling enhances acquisition of language as well as comprehension and understanding of text-structures (Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm 1998). The school has training days for staff every half-term and all phases receive targeted planning support from trained story-telling specialists. The teachers I talked to reported that the adults in the school were fully engaged and the children had a positive approach and engagement with stories and writing.

I was also shown the school's writing data, which demonstrated that writing levels in the school were improving; the data for year 6 showed that above 80% of children were achieving national expectations before the school introduced story-telling, and this increased to 95% in the most up-to-date data set. The most relevant improvement for me was the jump from 16% of year 6 pupils achieving a level 5 to 40%. This indicated that story-telling wasn't simply an aid for SEND or EAL children, but that it could raise standards across a cohort.

I still had some reservations about holistic story-telling approach; whilst I was keen to try teaching a unit of literacy in this way, it was not going to provide a long-term way of teaching unless all teachers in my school committed to it. It also did not deal with how to engage children with longer texts or classical texts, in line with the requirements of the current National Curriculum (2013). In addition, the evaluation of the 'Talk for Writing' scheme states that there is currently 'no evidence' that 'daily repetition of texts supports generic writing skills' (Dockrell et al 2015, 11), a statement which seems to conflict with Pie Corbett's statement that 'Children will implicitly internalise language patterns [...] if they read repetitively' (Corbett 2008, 1). Clearly, I need to explore a wider range of speaking and listening strategies, as simple repetition of stories would appear to have limited advantages.

In discussions with colleagues, I was introduced to the 'tell it down' (Lambeth 2005) approach to story-telling. This involves telling a story and then asking children to embellish their favourite part and tell it to a friend. This process is then repeated twice more so that the story has been orally rehearsed three times. The children are then asked to write down exactly what they have just said. This seemed like an interesting approach that could be easily adapted and incorporated into everyday classroom practice.

Ethics

Before conducting any research, I ensured that potential ethical issues had been considered and appropriate action taken. I firstly gained the consent of my head-teacher to undertake the research and to visit other schools for research purposes. I made my intentions clear to the adults I talked to, including 'why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported' in line with BERA ethical guidelines (2011). I also discussed with my class the lessons that I wanted to teach, and ensured that all the children knew that they could opt out of any drama or role-play activities. I found that there was a tension between my role as teacher and my role as researcher. My role as teacher required that children participate in literacy lessons, but my role as researcher dictated that I 'must recognize the right of any participant to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time' (BERA ethical guidelines 2011). I overcame this tension by ensuring that any written work produced from the lessons was not marked critically by me or used as evidence for any assessments and informed the children that this was the case.

Further to this, I considered the questions posed by Zeni (1998), concerning the power I had over the class. Would my research strengthen their trust in me as the teacher or would it potentially abuse it? I ensured that there was no abuse of power by gaining verbal consent from children to participate in all discussions by informing them of my intentions and allowing them to volunteer their contributions accordingly.

I also adhered to BERA guidelines in regards to confidentiality and privacy, by ensuring that the information gathered was not shared in a way that could lead to the identity of any participants being disclosed; I kept all recordings in a password protected area, and ensured that no names were used in the recordings. In this way, all participants retained their right to remain anonymous.

4. | ACTION

I decided to plan and deliver a series of lessons which incorporated different oral activities. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the lessons, I decided to conduct observations of the class, taking the role of a non-participant observer, watching without being involved (Cohen et al 2011), and moving around the classroom, noting specifically attitudes to writing and engagement of the children, in particular the children who find writing challenging. I made brief 'field notes' which I later wrote up in full. I also chose to conduct informal conversational interviews with the children in which I would record their thoughts on the writing process. The inherent danger with this method of research was the potential for bias, in that the children would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, and I would see what I wanted to see, as it is impossible to remain entirely neutral as an observer (Cohen et al 2011). However, I was confident that my relationship with the class was strong enough to overcome this potential barrier, and there were several other advantages to conducting research in this way: we would be in a familiar and comfortable setting and the class were already accustomed to me observing and questioning for the purposes of assessment for learning. Additionally, I would be able to conduct research within a reasonable time-frame, and 'minimize the impact' of my research on the 'normal work-load' of the class (BERA ethical guidelines 2011). As well as this, being in a large group allowed all children to engage at their own level without feeling uncomfortable or under intense scrutiny.

Initially, I planned a series of lessons which incorporated elements of Pie Corbett's 'Talk for Writing'

scheme (2011). I took the class text *Beowulf* adapted by Michael Morpurgo (2006) and retold it orally to the class. Once the children had internalized the story and got a grasp of its structure, we then explored the language around the story, generating reference chains to refer to the characters, and creating word lists. The children then retold the story to each other, and from this, they discovered that they could start and finish their stories with the character of a 'story-teller'. This made itself apparent in their writing and Appendix B shows examples of how children in my class played with this meta-character, getting into role as the 'bard' and drawing their audience in through their use of orally-rehearsed language. A clear sense of writer's voice is more apparent than it had been previously and the children are writing with an increased awareness of a potential reader. This supports Clarke's claim that 'talking the text is extremely powerful for children and hugely engaging' (Clarke 2010, cited in Mallet 2013, 28).

I wanted to explore the 'telling it down' approach to oral rehearsal, which involves children orally rehearsing a story or speech three times informally amongst their peers. I planned and delivered a lesson in which the children were asked to be tour guides at the National Gallery. Using the National Gallery website, I allocated each pair a picture that can currently be found in the National Gallery and then together we explored and gathered vocabulary (Getty Museum 2015) that would enable them to critically analyse and discuss their pictures. Once the children had been given some paired talking time, they were asked to find a partner and take them to where their picture was 'displayed' in our classroom. They then talked about their picture to their partner and then listened to their partner talk about their own painting. This was repeated twice more so that the children had orally rehearsed their ideas three times. I then asked them to write down exactly what they had said. Having asked the children to write a similar critical analysis of Monet's 'Water Lilies' the week previously, I was interested to see how the two pieces of writing compared. Appendix C shows two pieces of writing from the same child, one where I have modelled the structure of the writing and the child has subsequently written, and one where the child has orally rehearsed and then written. This activity and the writing that followed provided some fascinating analysis, as teacher modelling has featured prominently in recent pedagogy. The evaluation of the 'Talk for Writing' program suggested that teachers who participated 'were insistent that modelling was the most significant strategy they used to develop children's [...] quality of writing' (Rooke 2012, 6). In my own practice, modelling has been highly emphasized through Continuing Professional Development sessions and observation feedback. Yet the writing that my children produced without any teacher modelling had a feeling of immediacy, engagement and flow; it wasn't polished or accomplished, but it also was not stilted and had lost all feeling of needing to use semi-colons to obtain high levels. Most interestingly, one child commented:

'I think that it was flowing out of me quite easily because when you wrote a model and said we should write something like that it was kind of hard to get it in my own words and really understand it, but then when you gave us the opportunity to go around and talk to people about the work we were doing and then we just had to write it down, it seemed quite easy.'

Another child commented:

'I felt quite emotional when I was writing because the pen was just speaking for itself in my mind and it felt quite relaxing.'

And a third stated:

'The method I used was to just put what I said to my partner on paper and add a few bits to it.'

These comments reveal that children felt more successful as writers and enjoyed the writing process more when they 'wrote aloud', i.e. orally rehearsed the exact words and phrases which they then went on to write. For my class, being able to 'write aloud' relieved them of the pressure to 'get it right first time' and enabled them to write with more confidence, a response which is mirrored in the research of Fisher et al (2010).

From this activity, I questioned whether my carefully developed teacher modelling was actually stifling my children's creativity and whether it was in fact contributing to the 'tick-box' mentality of my class. I decided to re-fashion our unit on poetry to see if drama activities could again help my class find a freedom in writing that I had not yet unlocked.

As a class, we read through the poem 'The Daffodils' by William Wordsworth. We firstly celebrated the poem by choosing our favourite words and allocating them an action, going around the class and sharing these with each other. This was an idea I had gathered from my story-telling training during my teacher training placements. It was an effective way of engaging the children in the language of the poem, and supports the findings of Mallet that 'it may be more appropriate to 'select aspects'' from the Talk for Writing scheme than follow it prescriptively (Mallet 2013, 9). I then allocated a verse to each group of children and they performed the verse from memory, splitting the lines up between themselves. We wrote some 10 word versions of the poem together to help the children summarise the key points, and then we re-wrote the poem as a letter, imagining that we were an extremely 'posh' person. This allowed the children to feel what it was like to write in a particular 'voice'. I then played them a rap-version of the poem, and finally asked them to retell the poem as a narrative in their own chosen voice. Some of them chose particular recognizable characters, such as soldiers or pirates. Some chose their favourite celebrities and others chose on-line video bloggers (see Appendix D). One child questioned whether it was acceptable to write as her favourite blogger, because she would need to spell words incorrectly. Once we had established that any way of portraying the voice was acceptable, the children were enthused and excited. As I watched them orally rehearse their narratives, I noted that several children got into character by using hand gestures and body language, something I hadn't previously seen them do.

The writing that emerged was again unpolished and lacking in 'tick-box' elements. However, I noted during my observation of the class during this writing session that several children got up out of their seats and exchanged their books because they wanted to see others' and share their own writing. This enthusiasm was something I had not previously witnessed. I decided to give the children time to share their writing with each other, and I noted that the child who had been embarrassed about his writing at the beginning of the year was now eagerly showing off his work to his peers and enjoying the sensation of making them laugh and seeing them interested in his work. This same child commented after the lesson:

'It was really fun because we could do this in our own style without following what you said. We could use our imaginations.'

This comment is particularly pertinent, as it supports the research of Cremin et al (2006) who noted the impressive progress in children's writing when they 'imaginatively [...] inhabit a moment' (p.9). Amongst other comments made, the most interesting and relevant were:

'I like this sort of writing because you can express what you want to say.'

'I like this subject because it made us feel more comfortable to be walking around retelling instead of being like let's plan it out and then do it your way. Instead we did it our way.'

'I like this because you could add in any character you want, even if it's a character no-one's seen before and no-one understands, you can still add them in.'

An analysis of these comments shows that although the oral rehearsal played a part in children's enjoyment of the writing process, an equal factor was the freedom to find their own voice and write as their own character. As the final comment shows, the children felt that their interests, such as blogging, suddenly had value and could be shared in this new story-telling medium. This supports Stoyale's (2003) comment that storytelling 'is more than a way of exchanging information and extending ideas [...] Stories can link not only between the world of classroom and home but also between the classroom and beyond' (Stoyale 2003). For my class, we had made the link between our own interests and others', and our home lives and school lives, and this resulted in writing that had a distinct flow and a voice unique to each child.

5. | INFLUENCES ON PRACTICE

Through my research, I have become increasingly aware that the role of speaking and listening is at the moment an under-utilized tool that has the potential to be an extremely powerful way of engaging all writers of all abilities. High quality oral work is much broader than a scheme or a program, and needs to be carefully planned for to suit the needs of each cohort. As Mallet concludes, 'Talk for Writing' is 'not something new' and it is important to select from different initiatives the aspects which 'suit you and your class' (Mallet 2013, 9). From this research, I have concluded that the 'tell it down' approach is easy and effective, as it forms the basis for an entire lesson rather than being an 'add-on' or a squeezed in drama activity that gets quickly dropped when time runs out. Planning for entire units of work with story-telling or oral rehearsal at their heart have also shown themselves to be more effective at improving writing and engaging writers than stand-alone drama activities such as 'hot-seating' characters from a text. These activities will form an important part of my literacy pedagogy in the future.

Using an action research methodology allowed me the freedom to explore a problematic area of practice in a reflective and controlled manner. I discovered that collaboration is a fundamental principle of this type of research and I found myself in new collaborative relationships not only with colleagues but also with my class. This alliance between teacher and class to improve pedagogy and outcomes was deeply satisfying, and leads to several questions about how this research could now be extended. Does oral literacy present a useful tool for language acquisition for EAL children? Could story-telling be a useful tool for children who are selectively mute? What other methods and techniques are there which could support and develop writing outcomes? These are all questions which present further avenues for an action research cycle.

Finally, to conclude this research project, I find myself agreeing with Laman (2011), who states that, 'Without talk, we would only have a partial glimpse of these students as writers' (Laman 2011, 10). Before starting this project, I had only a 'partial glimpse' of what my children were capable of achieving in their writing. More than that, I only knew them partially as individuals. It was only after giving them freedom to explore their own voices, first through speech and then through writing, that I was able to see aspects of their characters and personalities that had previously remained hidden. For Stoyale (2003), stories are children's 'means of reaching out and connecting with other people' and I found that through their stories, both oral and written, I was allowed to see my children reach out and make connections with both myself and their peers, enriching their classroom experience and validating their unique voice as a writer.

6. | BIBLIOGRAPHY

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3 | EXPLORATION OF METHODS TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION IN PUPILS WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (EAL)



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1. | INTRODUCTION

Background

Learning and using foreign languages in every day circumstances is a skill I have great interest in. Having lived abroad to study and work I have found myself in situations where, although I have been able to read the main idea of a sentence, I have not understood the true meaning of individual words therefore limiting my understanding of the text. I enjoy the search to find the translation of words but in the context of a multilingual primary school classroom, where my action research project took place, effective and dynamic actions must be taken to support children to understand English texts for true comprehension.

I began my teaching career in this school and have taught across Key Stage 1 and 2 for three years. I am a year 2 class teacher of a class of 28 children for whom some use English as an Additional Language (EAL). This work was carried out in larger than average primary school in South East London. A total 33% of pupils on roll are recorded as being children who speak English as an Additional Language which is higher than the national average. In my classroom, the competency of the pupil's comprehension of English varies and I had only a small understanding of some of the children's understanding of texts in their home language. 'Home language' in this report refers to the language spoken by their families which may be their strongest language.

Aim

This project aims to improve the reading comprehension of EAL pupils in my class. My action research project is trying to find effective methods to advance the comprehension skills in reading of children with EAL.

In my class I identified that EAL pupils were not achieving as well when they were required to not only decode but also comprehend the text, therefore I thought that I would focus on this skill specifically and identify which methods were most effective in improving their understanding of English texts. This mirrored the trend from data analysed by NALDIC (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum) (NALDIC, 2013) which demonstrated that fewer EAL pupils in Key Stage 1 achieved the expected level in Year 2 SATs (Standard Achievement Tests) comprehension assessments in comparison to monolingual pupils. This was despite the fact that data from 2012 showed that when these pupils were in year 1, there was no notable difference between the decoding skills on bilingual and monolingual pupils.

Objectives

- 1) To understand the extent to which EAL students comprehend their home languages.
- 2) To explore methods of encouraging the use student's home languages to improve their comprehension of English texts.
- 3) To use data from my project and wider literature to improve my practice.

2. | METHODOLOGY

I used Action Research to conduct my project. Action research involves a number of cyclical stages as illustrated in figure 1. I followed these steps in order to carry out my project.

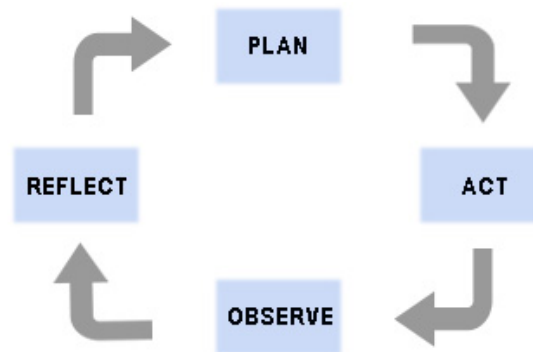


Fig.1 -The action research cycle (Warwick University, 2012)

My concern while planning my project was my awareness that EAL pupils in my class were able to decode texts fluently but were having difficulty with comprehending what they had read. This is a concern as comprehension of a text is a key skill as noted by Speizman Wilson and Smetana (2011) who stressed that a meaning-based approach develops literacy skills.

In order to inform my action I read a number of articles relating specifically to the teaching of EAL pupils from which I recognised the theme of high quality teaching and Mistry and Sood (2010) encouraging teachers to “celebrate EAL pupils” which led to my further research in how I could undertake this in my classroom. From my reading I took action from from Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) where I followed recommendations for the set-up of my classroom.

From these actions I observed EAL pupils in my class with the intention to see if having their home languages celebrated at school in a number of ways would lead them to improve their comprehension of English. Furthermore, I engaged in semi structured interviews with some parents of the EAL pupil's to gain understanding of the child's use of their home language in order to compare this with their comprehension of English.

From these observations I would reflect on my practice in the classroom in order to judge if the pupils felt more comfortable celebrating their home languages and if their comprehension of English had improved.

I have conducted action research to achieve the aims of my project. Action research has been defined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as “self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.” In addition to this, it has been argued by Bogdan et al (1992) that action research “seeks to improve social issues affecting the lives of everyday people.” As my action research was concerned with improving pupil’s comprehension of texts, my project is an example of how action research improves the lives of participants. This corresponds with the belief of Henson (2013) who provided multiple reasons how action research carried out by teachers “has been directly linked to the professional growth and development of teachers.” Action Research as described by Heller (1993) is able to create new knowledge by providing solutions to concerns noted by practitioners. These solutions must be based on theory which then has its value determined in order to inform any further practice. The solutions carried out by the researcher within Action Research are able to fulfil a number of roles in creating knowledge as it advises practitioners according to how the actions affected the participants and it contributes to theory in the area being studied.

3. | FOCUS OF THE STUDY

At the beginning of the year, I conducted an exercise in my classroom to hear the children share their home languages with each other. I observed who was willing to share and what words they could translate. I invited all the children to speak another language and would ask the children questions regarding their use of the language. There were children in the class who I have heard speak their home languages with their parents when they are collected who did not raise their hand to offer any examples of this. When I discussed this event with other colleagues from the action research group at a meeting I was convinced that that an exercise had been ineffective and seemed to only provide anecdotal evidence of children’s knowledge of another language as not all children had wanted to share their language skills. Nevertheless, through discussion with the group, I realised that I could use my research to establish a way of celebrating children’s home languages in the classroom.

In order to contextualise my study, I performed a literature review about EAL. Evidence from Gillborn and Gipps (1996) asserts that some EAL children make good progress throughout their time at school. This was not in evidence from the data collected at my school. My analysis of the whole school data would be that there is a strong emphasis on decoding in Year 1 where children’s level of comprehension of the text is not the main skill being evaluated, however as the children progress through the school, their comprehension is tested which shows little improvement throughout their time in Key Stage 2. Collier (1992, 1995) and Cummins (1993) claim that EAL pupils make good progress academically if their cultures are “valued and incorporated into the school curriculum.” In the school there is a trend of higher than average reading levels for EAL students in Year 1. I interpret this data to demonstrate how EAL children have been taught effectively to correctly decode texts. This is monitored in the phonics assessment when pupil’s phonetic decoding skills are tested. However, in the subsequent years, the pupils are assessed on their comprehension of a text and these levels are below the national average. Comprehension skills are different from phonetic decoding skills and require a deeper level of understanding of what they have read and also require the students to respond to the text. By analysing the data of the school, I recognised a trend that when there is more emphasis placed on comprehension of the text, EAL pupils were scoring below the national average. These concerns followed the trend noted by Burgoyne 2009, that “reading achievement is lower for this group of learners.”

As a class teacher my role is to remove barriers to learning for EAL students. For EAL students, this barrier may directly relate to their comprehension of the English language rather than their ability to complete the work independently. For children who have no knowledge of spoken or written English, support can be provided through differentiated resources or working closely with an adult to achieve an appropriate outcome for their ability of written or spoken English. Through my assessment of children's learning and further reading, it is key to remember that while children may be able to engage in "playground English" (Flynn 2007) this may conceal their lack of technical knowledge of English which will allow them to use the language to its full effect to communicate and develop "culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually" which is set out as a key aim of the 2016 literacy curriculum. A further aim of the curriculum is to improve children's knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. For children who can use "playground English" to communicate and comprehend texts in the classroom, it is recognised that their depth of understanding of the language is limited. Therefore, being able to confidently and successfully use 'language about language' to demonstrate their understanding may be limited.

Reading is assessed in separate strands of phonetically decoding the words and comprehending the text. I noticed in my class data that EAL children were spread throughout my reading data as poor decoders with poor comprehension, good decoders with poor comprehension or competent in both skills. Through interviews with the children I noticed a trend which is supported by the views of Mistry (2010.) This finding that children who engaged in reading activities in their home learning were likely to be better at comprehending English texts correlated with Mistry who states that "EAL may find it easier to transfer skills, knowledge and understanding as they already have a base language" This led to a key aim within my project to celebrate the home literacies of EAL children. Through developing their engagement with their home language, I wanted to track how they may improve their reading comprehension of English. By engaging with multiple literacies, it is accepted that EAL pupils have a heightened understanding of the structure of language or metalinguistic awareness which can be used to develop greater understanding of meaning (Flynn 2007). This led to my primary focus on how I would focus on children with good decoding skills but poor comprehension.

A further responsibility as a class teacher is to contact parents and keep them informed of their child's progress. For families who cannot communicate in English, it may be difficult to get support from school about how they can best support their child's learning. Moreover, the school, which is required to provide verbal and written feedback throughout the year, may not be able to let parents know about their child's achievements or needs without the use of a translator.

In order to encourage pupil's engagement with their home language, the reading of Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) gives examples to practitioners of how to set up a classroom environment that encourages children to use their home languages. One suggestion put forward by Chumak-Horbatsch is to share food with their packages and containers as this can be a method of creating a multilingual classroom by sharing what can be similarities among speakers of varied languages. Chumak-Horbatsch intends this "housekeeping centre" (2012) to be used in such a way that a teacher "plans a discussion" about what has been brought in.

4. | DATA COLLECTION TO INFORM THE ACTION

Interviews with the parents

I conducted eight informal interviews with parents that lasted up to fifteen minutes. I planned a short interview with a combination of open and closed question to guide the conversation while inviting open discussion. The interviews were conducted at school at convenient times for the parents. I wrote field notes during these conversations.

The semi structured interviews I held with the parents were useful because I was able to compare what the children had said with the parent's view of their use of the home language. Although there were key questions that I used to structure the interview I chose a more natural manner of asking questions as the role of a class teacher is to have a positive relationship with the parents of pupils. This correlates with the view of Sapsford and Jupp (2006) who explain how unstructured interviews can be used to appear like a "conversation between equal participants." While I have a professional understanding of how to improve pupil's comprehension, only the parents would be able to fully inform me of their children comprehension of their home language.

A disadvantage of using this method of data collection is the differing assessment of how parents report their child's understanding of their home language. I asked a series of questions about their assessment of the child's level of understanding when reading or being read to in their home language. As these were the parent's separate assessments of their child's comprehension it was not possible to measure them against each other and therefore a strong correlation was not possible as some of the parents may have been biased. This mirrors the disadvantages of semi structures interviews as explained by Walsh and Wiggins (2003). They explain that reliability is sometimes compromised as comparing responses is complex. A further limitation of having a parent asses their child's skill in reading is that I was not able to speak to all the parents and carers of the EAL pupils in my class as some of them cannot speak English. This made the sample smaller.

Focus group with the pupils

I held a focus group within the setting of my classroom. All members of my class participated of which 16 use EAL and 12 are monolingualistic. I created a question guide for the focus group in order to assess their use of home languages. I used an audio recording device and then transcribed and made field notes of the focus group. I chose this technique because it is a method of qualitative research that enables participants to have a collaborative discussion as stated by Walsh and Wiggins (2003) I was able to identify themes within their answers that informed further observations. A disadvantage of using this data collection technique highlighted by Walsh and Wiggins (2003) is that more vocal participants may affect the input of others however as I had planned the focus group to inform my knowledge of who was confident in sharing their knowledge of another language in my classroom, this was added to my field notes from the activity.

The focus group session took place at the beginning of the Spring Term. The aim of the focus group was to hear the children share their home languages with each other. I used different methods of questioning the children to provoke their discussion about languages spoken at home. I involved all pupils from my class in this group as I did not believe it would be best to separate the pupils in terms of their home language. This would not demonstrate an inclusive classroom as they may have felt uncomfortable having a key aspect of their home life discussed as something that could separate them from their peers.

As a group I enabled a discussion between children regarding what languages were spoken at home. I invited all the children to speak another language and would ask the children questions regarding their home literacy. I observed who was willing to share and what words they could translate. I used structured set of questions to guide the discussion. I filmed the discussion and transcribed the responses. From this I tracked the differences in children's responses at later times in the year.

During this initial interview I learnt that the children were engaged in their home language in a number of ways. They told me they go to Saturday schools or they are read another language in books, poems, songs or at religious events.

I observed the class in different situations throughout the year where I assessed their engagement with their home languages. These unstructured observations allowed me to identify the significance of the pupils actions after I had observed the pupil in this situation as explained by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) This method was particularly useful, as through the semi structured interviews, I found that some children where not willing to share their knowledge of languages they use outside school. Therefore, during an observation of the pupils in different contexts throughout the year, I was able to collect data. Also, as these observations were done within the context of lessons and workshops within the classroom lead by me, the pupils were in a natural environment where they felt comfortable as my observations were non-intrusive, a key aim for all my data collection techniques as pointed out my Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011). However, I found the observations proved difficult to identify strong trends and they were more useful for collecting data which could be compared over the year. It may have been difficult to identify strong trends from my observations as Cohen, Manion and Marrison (2011) explain the technique requires training to make informed judgements and the inclusion of important details.

Ethics

I had a discussion with the executive head teacher of my school to gain ethical approval for my research. I was conducting research on children which is a high risk group and would also be gathering information from their parents of their home practices of reading. For these reasons I was obliged to abide by higher ethical guidelines. Through my observations of advised classroom practice I did not cause and emotional harm on the children. Before asking questions of the children's reading habits in their home languages I asked for verbal consent that they wanted to respond to the questions.

All responses are anonymised and confidential as explain by the Data Protection Act (1998) by BERA (2011). In reference to the ethical guidelines put forward by BERA (2011) I took all the necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion. I took specific caution when asking pupils about their home lives regarding their practicing of engaging with another language.

5. | ACTION

Activities during Cultural Enrichment Week

I collected a number of ideas from my readings to inform practice that would create an atmosphere where the cultures of the pupils and their home language would be celebrated using different methods throughout the year. This included an action I took was informed by my reading of Chumak-Horbatsch (2012). In regards to creating a learning environment that catered for the varied linguistic needs of my classroom, I made a number of changes over the year and working in collaboration with a member of the senior leadership team, I suggested activities for Cultural Enrichment week. I suggested that there should be a shared food afternoon and asked if parents would write the name of the dish and share the ingredients they used. This became an exercise in sharing languages and I observed in my classroom, that due to the increased awareness of home languages that these conversations came from the children without my prompting.

Dual Language book displays

A further suggestion by Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) is to have “book displays”. In my classroom I have a number of dual language books. These books are available for free choosing by the children and pupils of monolingual backgrounds. I have observed conversations between pupils discussing the language and the writing systems of the languages. The use of dual language books in my classroom led to pupils sharing their knowledge of another language and culture with each other which is recognised a main benefit to dual language resources by Semingson, Pole and Tommerdahl (2015) is that pupils are able to recognise themselves as an expert when they share their cultures with others. I also noted how the dual language books allowed pupils that had previously been hesitant to share their home language had the freedom and privacy during quiet reading to explore the books of their home language when they chose.

Before the project the dual language books had been used by the adult reader in my class who volunteers for one morning each week. I had taught her son in the previous academic year and during parent’s evening she had asked me what she could do to help her son’s reading as her first language was Turkish and she did not feel confident in her ability to help him decode English texts. Last year, before I had begun the action research project, I had provided the family with simpler texts which I knew he could easily phonetically decode and advised her to ask him simple questions about the sequence of events or to discuss the actions of characters as I thought that it was of greater value to have him engage in English language texts, however basic they were, to practice these comprehension skills. Through my research and by following the cycle of action research to see the outcome of my actions, I would change my advice for this parent. When she volunteered as an adult reader in my class, instead of giving her a low ability monolingual English child to practice their decoding skills, part of her time in class is spent reading with children in my class who speak Turkish. When talking with her after each session I asked if these children understood the text and how she would assess their comprehension and her observations of their comprehension of Turkish regarding how it may have changed over time. I wanted to see if she found their comprehension skills improve in Turkish just as I had noticed their improved comprehension of English texts. This action therefore had a number of successful outcomes in that it is one manner that the children acquired heightened comprehension skills by improving their skills in their home language. Also, it showed how working collaboratively with the communities linked to the school can improve understanding of how they can help their child’s education. I had told the volunteer about the research I was taking part in and encouraged her to read in Turkish with her child and she and the current teacher have noted an improvement with the pupils understanding of texts.

Creating of a School Motto

A final outcome that I observed in my classroom as evidence that the children were embracing their home languages and that their various backgrounds were valued by each other was during a PSHE lesson. A task was set for the children to create a school motto. We decided on themes by ranking a list and finding common values that the children felt our school represented. In groups they then created mottos. As a plenary to this lesson, I spoke to the class about how Latin can be used in mottos and what this meant, introducing the idea that an institution with a Latin motto has a strong history as it is not a language spoken any more. Further from this, the children asked to use Google translate to translate their school mottos into their home languages. This ranged from Cantonese, Turkish, Arabic, French, Lithuanian, Russian, Gujarati, Polish, Kurdish, Hindi, Igbo, Yoruba and Nepali.

This exercise clearly demonstrated to me the value that my class now place of their heritage as they feel that this is how they should be represented by the school. This was in stark contrast to the initial exercise I carried out at the beginning of the year when some pupils did not even admit to speaking another language and now they were asking for their home language to be displayed on the whiteboard and heard by the rest of the class.

6. | OUTCOMES AND INFLUENCE ON PRACTICE

From my interview with the class I identified a theme regarding children's willingness to share their home literacies and their comprehension of English texts. This changed throughout the year. As pupils grew in confidence in sharing their home language so did their comprehension of written English. The trend in my class followed that EAL children who could not read in their home language were poor readers in English, while children who were learning their home language formally or who reported to me that they engaged with written texts demonstrated better comprehension skills in reading English.

During the initial interview I learnt that the children were engaged in their home language in a number of ways. They told me they go to Saturday schools or they are read another language in books, poems, songs or at religious events. Within my class there is a wide range of linguistic backgrounds and I found that the children that shared common languages often shared a common skill in reading comprehension and decoding. This also correlated with parent's responses to their children's understanding of listening and reading in their home languages. According to the parents who could respond during the semi structured interviews, the children who engaged with their home language, I knew were also competent at reading English. However, parents who said their children did not have a good understanding of their home language, I found were the children who did not have a confident comprehension skill as their dual language and monolingual peers.

According to my semi structured interviews with the pupils I was able to map the trends as follows. The children have had their comprehension of text judged according to Key Stage 1 SATs criteria which correlated with my teacher assessment at the end of the academic year.

	<i>At age related expectations and exceeding age related expectations in reading</i>	<i>Below age related expectations in reading</i>
<i>Children who said they read or listen to another language being read to them</i>	11	1
<i>Children who said they do not read or listen to another language being read to them</i>	1	3

Table 1. Data concerning age related expectations in reading *and* reading and listening to another language being read to the children..

At the end of the academic year when I had tracked their reading comprehension levels and I found that a large majority of the EAL pupils had made good progress throughout the year with a number of them being assessed as working above the age related expectation for year 2 pupils in Key Stage 1.

As recognised by Bourne (2002), by children engaging with the home language through texts, they are improving their cognitive development through an enhanced metalinguistic awareness. This is mirrored in the trend in my class. By listening to or reading a variety of texts in different contexts, the children are improving their comprehension skills which transfers to their ability to find meaning in text and therefore engage with what they have read through discussions.

It is important to note however that there are further reasons to explain why the majority of EAL pupils in my class were working at age related or exceeding age related expectations. As well as celebrating the literacies of EAL pupils in my classroom, similarly to the findings of Flynn (2006) I deliver literacy lessons are based on my sound teaching of literacy for all pupils. Flynn (2006) recognises that effective literacy for multilingual and monolingual pupils involves encouraging the use of Standard English which I use to communicate effectively with pupils. Furthermore, I put learning in context through the use of a range of texts to engage pupils.

My observation in my classroom that language diversity being celebrated tends to raise the motivation and attainment of EAL pupils reflects the advice of Arnot et al (2014) that to develop an EAL pupil's academic process the school should make reference to home cultures and use the home languages of pupils.

There are a number of actions I have taken during the project that will influence my teaching practice. One of the key actions that I will use to improve EAL pupil's comprehension is encouraging the parents to use their home language to engage their child in reading and develop their comprehension skills. From my reading to research my actions and seeing the positive outcome it had on the pupils in my class, I now understood the value in parents improving comprehensions skills as these are able to transfer between languages. The value of social interaction between the school and the communities of the families is valued by Arnot et al (2014) who strongly recommend building communication between the school and EAL parents who can support their child. As stated, a role of the class teacher is to inform parents of their child's progress and if asked, to be able to suggest way for the family to support their child's learning.

I have found this project to have an affect on my practice in the manner that I will place importance of understanding how children engage with their home languages. By noticing a pattern in my class I was able to differentiate the type of specific support I could provide for the pupils. For example, the children that are explicitly taught another language may need more differentiated support in the nuances of English while the children that cannot read their home languages must be shown the value in this and how it will positively impact their comprehension of reading English.

Further action I would like to take to measure the impact it had on EAL pupils comprehension is working with bilingual teaching assistants who could deliver focus guided reading sessions in the pupil's home language. While my volunteer reader was able to offer her opinion of the children's language skills in Turkish, having a focused lesson delivered by an educational practitioner would have an impact on the children's learning.

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4 | HOW CAN WE SUPPORT PARENTS OF CHILDREN IN THE EARLY YEARS TO ACHIEVE PROGRESS IN THE AREA OF PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?



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1. | INTRODUCTION

I am a teacher to the core of my being. I love being able to make a difference in the lives of young people and working closely with families as an Early Years Primary School teacher. I love teaching and have been doing so for 10 years. I am currently employed fulltime and I have been working in the same school for two and a half years. I enjoy Early Years as preference although my skills set is spread beyond primary school. My in-school responsibilities are Nursery teacher and I am also Easter and Summer School leader. The two roles are very different as one requires that I teach and carry out the daily, termly and yearly responsibilities of a class teacher, whilst the other role requires that I work as an individual building a small team and working with the wider community to engage pupils over the two holidays.

This report portrays an action research project about the support parents can give to their children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The study commenced in September 2015 and was concluded in January 2017.

This project was inspired by my experience of working in Early Years. I have worked in three Early Years settings since 2008 and I have been at this school since 2014. This is my second cohort at this particular setting. My school is a community school which is located in South-East London and currently has 350+ pupils on roll; two thirds of the pupils are from minority ethnic groups. There are high levels of EAL (English as an Additional Language) pupils and a much higher than average proportion of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). Disabled pupils and SEN pupils are above average (in comparison to local and national data) and these pupils mainly have behavioural, social and emotional difficulties or speech, language and communication difficulties. The school has a Nursery with 50 part-time places for 3- and 4- year olds. Historically, pupils at Boxgrove enter the Nursery working below the age related expectations (30-50 months) and by the time they leave Reception, most of our pupils achieve the Early Learning Goal which puts them in line with National expectations. The baseline data is as follows: the 2014-2015 cohort of Nursery pupils entered our Nursery working at an average of 36% working at 22-36 months. This trend was matched by our 2015-2016 cohort who also came in at 36% working at 22-36 months. This data informs me that our pupils on entry are working at 'lower' than national average/age related expectations. Over a third of our pupils are working at the age level of a 2-3 year old, with 51% working below 22-36 months- this means 87% of our pupils enter Nursery working below 22-36 months. The needs of this 87% vary from social communication needs, behavioural and emotional immaturity, ASD, Asperger's and a range of undiagnosed factors such as pupils of parents who display symptoms of Factitious Disorder. This information highlights that there has been a change in our pupils. Some of these

changes can be attributed to normal changes that happen in communities as people move in and out of areas, as research and information progresses and as the medical and education industries work together on a closer and closer spectrum. This project will attempt to address this trend and marry my experiences and skills in ways which will address the key research question. I am going to describe the project in this report through the lenses of action research. I have taken the liberty of sectioning the report which, for the benefit of the reader, will help in understanding the premise of the project.

2. | METHODOLOGY

I have adopted an 'action research' approach as I am attempting to address and examine issues within my practice which have risen in light of my in-class experiences. Action research is defined by Carr and Kemis (1986) as being about two specific things: the first is 'action' (what you do) and the second is 'research' (how you learn about and explain what you do). The action aspect is defined as being a process where ones 'actions' during research are specifically for improving practice. The 'research' aspect is defined as being about creating knowledge about your practice. The knowledge that myself, as the researcher creates, is my knowledge of practice (Carr and Kemis, 1986). The studies developed using an Action Research approach follow an Action Research cycle. This cycle is defined by Tripp (2003) as four main sequences, namely; Plan Action, Act Thoughtfully, Research Action and Evaluate Action. To expand on this cycle, Cohen et al (2011) summarise the cycle as 'initial problem, proposed intervention, implementation and outcome'. In recent years, concern has been expressed by many, for example, Hargreaves (1996) and Rose (2002) that "education research was not always reaching the practitioners, as quite often work done by academics was published in journals generally not read by them". Action research combines the ideas of taking purposeful action with educational intent. It also entails testing the validity of any claims that we, as educators, make about the process we become involved in during action research (McNiff, 2010). "Action research is a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world to address practitioners own issues, and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992). Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as being about three core factors, including the improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of practice and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. Action research makes it possible for practising teachers to experience the research process, whilst also benefiting from the experiences they become involved in. Action research is unique in its research approach because it opens up opportunities for practitioners to actually be involved in research, which has immediate relevance and application (Koshy 2005). "The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge" (Elliott, 1991). Gaining insights and planning action are two of the main purposes of being engaged in action research. During this action research project, I adapted a core foci which supported me in helping to carry out this project successfully. I adopted Cohen, Manion & Morrison's (2011) model which encourages action researchers to 'stay small and focused, to identify a clear research question, to remain realistic about what one can practically do, to plan the research carefully, to set realistic time scales whilst involving other professional and observers (including participants, validators, critical friends or potential researchers).

Action research is the appropriate method for my aims because unlike other formal types of research, it integrates research and action in a series of flexible cycles involving, holistically rather than as separate steps- everything from the collection of data about the topic of investigation, to reaching an outcome or decision. Another reason why I chose action research was because it

involves exploratory engagement with a wide range of existing knowledge drawn from a variety of schools of learning, such as from psychology, philosophy, sociology and other fields of social sciences. Action research locates the inquiry in an understanding of broader historical, political and ideological contexts that shape and constrain human activity at both the local (school) and international (cultural factors) levels (Somekh, 2006).

Ethics

The 2011 edition of the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011) considers that all educational research should be conducted within: an ethic based respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom. There was a set of standards associated with the research practice which I followed with relation to my project: during this research process, the wellbeing of all participants was of high importance and it was a priority. As the research and participant involvement was very generic, non-intrusive and voluntary, all participants' wellbeing has been maintained and protected. Another ethical consideration I had to make was ensuring that the rights of the child were of paramount importance throughout the whole research process. I complied with Articles 3 and 12 (of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child); which requires that 'in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration' (BERA, 2011).

Some of the ethical considerations I had to make during this process included gaining voluntary consent from my participants; as a researcher it was important for me to take the necessary steps to ensure that all the participants in this project understood the process in which they were to be engaged. I also informed all participants on why their participation was necessary and how their data would be used and how and to whom it would be reported. All participants were given the right to withdraw participation at any point and this was made very clear to all participants. The letters inviting them to take part in the research right down to the parent workshops allowed them to withdraw participation. For example, during one workshop, a parent withdrew her participation and I am assuming that it was because she did not feel that the information I was providing was relevant, nor applicable to her son.

Participant confidentiality was maintained and upheld so no parent or children were named so as to identify them. The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data was considered the norm for the duration of the research process and during the writing of this project. As an ethical consideration, I held in high regard the participants' entitlement to privacy and I awarded them accord them this right to confidentiality and anonymity; no parents or guardians at any point waived that right.

3. | FOCUS OF THE STUDY AND INITIAL DATA COLLECTION TO INFORM THE ACTION

My concern started to build up when, in September 2015, the Early Years Practitioner (EYP) and I attended home visits in preparation for the 2015-2016 cohort of pupils who would be starting Nursery that September. Home visits are used by school teachers as a way of introducing themselves to their prospective pupils, to give parents a chance to ask any questions they might have regarding the upcoming school year and to build a personal relationship outside of the school building with both child and family. I work closely with the EYP during home visits. During the home visit, I take the liberty of asking the parent/s questions which inform me about the child. This includes crucial information such as name and date of birth, to medical history, general information

about the child's family, interests and the parents' hopes. I also use the opportunity to give parents a start date, answer any questions that they might have and put in place, if necessary, a specialised settling in our classroom or within the routine for the pupil at hand. We visit every child who will be starting school that year, in this case, it totalled 52 children; including some who are siblings and those who are new to the school. When pupils start Nursery, we begin to collect data on their first day. The data we collect initially is qualitative; we complete a formative assessment form. This gives us an initial snapshot of the child on their first day and becomes very informative as the year progresses. It is always nice to look back and compare the progress; whether measurable or otherwise, that each child makes over the course of a term or a year. Within the first half term, we collect baseline data (around October). This shows us where children are working in relation to the Early Years Outcomes (DfE, 2013). The advantages of doing home visits are that it puts the child's mind at ease; they are able to make the association between self and school and they are better prepared for school once they start. It also gives us a great opportunity to discuss with the family, any concerns they might have. It puts everyone's mind at ease. The disadvantages of doing home visits are that there are some parents how feel reluctant to allow 'strangers' into their homes; this could be for fear of judgement or mistrust in the education system. Breaking down this barrier is challenging and it is always at the forefront of our minds when we do home visits. We are first our natural selves and we try to be open and warm to all parents, children and family members who are present. In sum, I think that they are a necessary part of Early Years. They give us a great insight and provide invaluable information about the child, their needs, their families and their religious and cultural background. The information that these home visits provide played a large part inspiring the focus of this project.

Some of the questions that I ask parents during home visits, which allow me a micro insight into children's life experiences prior to coming into nursery include:

- "What do you enjoy doing together as a family?"
- "Has your child been referred to any professional agencies such as social services and speech and language therapists?"
- "What are your expectations of us as a nursery?"

Some of the responses I received included;

- "We go to church together"
- "I do not read to my child"
- "He used to go to speech therapy but they gave me the option to withdraw him so I took him out"
- "I want him to learn everything [you know] his a b c's and also his numbers and things like that"

In my professional analysis and subsequent conclusions, there was evidence that indicated that:

- 1: There were little to no trends to consider with regards to the early childhood/pre-school experiences of our pupils. Each child had a very unique and individual home life which was reflected in their brief initial contact with us, during the 15 minutes home visits
- 2: The area in which we are located serves a wide community with diverse languages, backgrounds, cultures and experiences. Thus, this meant that the 2015-2016 cohort of pupils would indeed reflect the diversity of the local community.
- 3: Each adult/carer whom we spoke to had relative knowledge of the children with whom we were visiting the homes. All adults were able to provide answers to all the questions that we asked. Even if some of the answers were very brief, the adults were able to

communicate a sound level of knowledge about the young pupils who would be joining the nursery.

4: About 65% of parents were keen/eager for their child to start school, with about 15% displaying a reluctance to separating from their children once they started school. 20% of parents would be classed as those who had no previous experiences with the British educational system thus expressing a desire to become involved and to support their children as best as they could during their year in Nursery.

5: It was evident from the home visits that we would have a much higher than pre-registered number of pupils who would require additional support. The school registration form allowed parents to disclose prior knowledge of additional needs. I had 15% of pupils on paper as having been diagnosed or identified as high need. However, it was clear within the first term that this figure was closer to 60/70%- which is reflected in the 87% of pupils who worked at 22-36 months on entry (against the DM scores, 2012).

An analysis of all qualitative and quantitative data for the class of 2015-2016 allowed me to conclude that there was a need for providing support to the families - not just the pupils whom I was teaching.

Literature review to inform the action.

The nature of a home visit allowed me to be able to discuss with parents what their parenting philosophies, ideologies and priorities are, their adult-child interactions and their family enrichment activities- to name but a few. Home visits also allowed me access in to children's cultures, traditions and beliefs. I then, as a practitioner, use this information to set up an environment that is supportive, reflective of all pupils- and one that celebrates their sense-of-self and their personal identities. For the pupils who enter into the nursery, Bridge (2001) states that "...teachers must be aware of the importance of culture and context in children's learning' and this philosophy is echoed by Arndt and McGuire-Schwartz (2008) who stated that "when teachers are able to converse with families, they can collect detailed information about their incoming students so that they are better able to meet the children's needs".

Literature about parental involvement in pre-school children's learning tells us that it is instrumental in children's educational success (Bridge, 2001). Piotrkowski (2000) echoes the bases of my contextual analysis and preliminary action- "to prevent school failure, communities need to facilitate children's school readiness" for the individual child. School readiness refers to the personal readiness resources (human capital) a child may bring to school to help him or her adapt successfully to the challenges of [early years provision] (Piotrkowski, 2000). Using the scale, "Public School Kindergarten Teachers' Views on Children's Readiness for School," Nelson (1995) examined 1,339 kindergarten teachers from a sample of 860 schools across the country. The results revealed that the metropolitan status of the schools, race and socioeconomic status of the children influenced teachers' views of readiness (Nelson, 1995, as cited in Lin et al, 2003). In my classroom, pupil scored very low in their Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and in the Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL). PSED is where young children's 'school readiness' derives from. Considering that our scores were reflecting 3 year olds who were emotionally and literally functioning at the level of 2 to 2 ½ year olds, I was inspired to conclude that pupils entering into the school setting were just not ready for school. In a study done by Piotrkowski et al (2000), a study titled "Parents' and Teachers' Beliefs About Children's School Readiness in a High-Need Community" compared the beliefs of preschool teachers, Nursery teachers, and parents in one mostly Hispanic and Black high-need urban school district to learn their views of what children

should know and be able to do at school entry-level. Beliefs regarding the importance of 12 school readiness “resources” were assessed with the CARES survey designed for this study in particular. Researchers found that parents held remarkably similar beliefs, regardless of ethnicity or education; the same generalisations can be applied in my setting based on the results of the surveys I collected. Parents and teachers agreed that children must be healthy and socially competent, and be able to comply with teacher authority- parents rated this latter resource higher. Parents rated all classroom-related readiness resources as more important than teachers did which is a misunderstanding that most of the parents within my Nursery setting had; the home visit data suggests that parents believe that a child’s ability to read, write and have number knowledge was in fact of more concern than their emotional development. Participants in Piotrkowski et al’s (2000) study believed that it was necessary for a child to be able to communicate in English and to have basic knowledge and skills, also stating that this was more important than a child’s approach to learning.

Raver and Knitzer (2002) integrated important evidenced-based corollaries of social–emotional competence during the pre-school years, which bear on the need for social–emotional assessment. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Young children without developmentally appropriate emotional and social competencies participate less in the classroom, and are less accepted by classmates and teachers. Teachers provide them with less instruction and positive feedback. They like school less and thus, they learn less. In support of this theory, my data has shown that without additional support and interventions provided for pupils on an ongoing basis, those pupils who score low during the baseline data collection period, thus would have struggled more during the first term (before we start our interventions). However, it is important to also note that this trend is not static and some children who score high on our PSED scores during baseline data collection subsequently need interventions for other areas such as behaviour and with regards to teacher acceptance, this would be a challenging scale to measure as I believe that I treat all my pupils fairly and have equally high expectations of all of them.

2. Such social–emotional competences (PSED) of young children predicts their academic performance in first grade, even when controlling for their actual cognitive skills and family backgrounds. With relation to the pupils who enter my classroom low and thus present as needing additional support as the year progresses, it has been a trend as they progress through the school. For example, those pupils who formed the focus group and whose parents were given additional information and support, have continued to need it right up until they enter reception at the age of 4. What is not a universal trend however, is that these same pupils will achieve poor academic performance as they progress throughout their school and academic lives. I believe that a change in circumstances, different practices at home or a child’s maturation can play a large factor in helping a low achieving child change their grades from low to average and above.

3. This situation persists into the later elementary years. Young children who behave aggressively or antisocially are more likely to perform poorly on early academic tasks, and to be held back. Later on, they are more likely to drop out and persist in their antisocial behaviour. Given these circumstances, it is imperative for children’s long-term well-being and academic success to have assessment tools that help pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in social–emotional competencies, as well as programs’ abilities to foster such competencies (Denham, 2006).

Varying research projects over time have concluded that children entering kindergarten (or Nursery) with 'positive' profiles of social-emotional competence have more success in developing positive attitudes about school and successful early adjustment to school, and these children also show improved grades and achievement over time (Birch, Ladd, & Blecher-Sass, 1997; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). Children who start school with 'friends', are well liked, able to make and sustain new friendships, and are able to initiate positive relationships with their teachers overtime, display a difference to those who enter school displaying the opposite. Namely, they generally feel more positive about school, participate in school more and achieve higher and more in comparison to their counterparts. Within the group of pupils whom I teach, it is evident that there is a varied range of social and emotional competencies on entry- this is reflected in both their baseline data and their qualitative assessment (Tapestry). Some of these competencies (or 'factors') include: positive interactions with teachers, positive representations of self-derived from attachment relationships, emotion knowledge, emotion regulatory abilities, social skills and non-rejected peer status- such competencies have been described as being great markers of uniquely predicting academic success, even when other pertinent variables, such as earlier academic success, are already taken into account (Denham, 2006). It is important then to note that although Raver and Knitzer (2002) provided an excellent study with great corollaries of social-emotional competences but these are not static and universal. Each child is unique and individual and it is up to us as adults, educators and carers to put in place additional support to help child 'catch-up' emotionally if they enter school working low on the socio-emotional scales. Whether or not the term "school readiness" is used, helping young children be prepared for initial success in school is an extraordinarily important challenge that is especially pressing in high-need communities. Kagan (1994) advocates that schools and communities work together in creating schools that are ready for young children, not only getting children ready for school by providing developmentally appropriate preschool programs, but also getting schools ready for children. Teachers play pivotal roles in creating environments that nurture children's development and learning through positive interactions and age-appropriate instruction (Willer & Bredekamp, 1990). Thus, findings related to kindergarten teachers' perceptions about readiness have implications for understanding what those teachers, based upon their own understandings of children's readiness, may actually do in their classrooms to be ready for children (Lin et al, 2003).

4. | ACTION

In Autumn term, I started out the research by assessing children's baseline/on entry scores against EYFSP/national expectations. One benefit of assessing these pupils is that it highlights their need for support at an early stage which allows us to put individual need interventions in place. A limitation of doing the baseline data could be that pupils who are identified so soon in the school year have not yet been given a chance to socialise and get used to socialising in an environment that they are not used to being in.

I compared the data of pupils within my class against National data, previous schools baseline and Developmental Expectations (DFE) and decided to develop my action around the strategies to support parents to achieve progress in the areas of personal, social and emotional development. In the Nursery, there are 52 pupils in total, split into two classes of 26. All children come from a home with at least one parent or carer; none of the pupils in this study were looked after children. The next step after this was to discuss my findings with the members of staff who work in Nursery as they occasionally have historical knowledge of pupils within families; this helped to strengthen my 'core' group of pupils and parents who I would work closely. To track children's progress, I used the

John Sinnett tracking programme and this is a good tool to use because it gives a clear colour coded picture. Towards the end of the Autumn term, I tracked children's progress after their settling in period and used the data to put children in intervention groups. Coincidentally, the parent-teacher meetings occur in Autumn and I took the opportunity to have meetings with parents whose children I had particular concerns about. This was a particularly busy time with regards to providing support for pupils. I put together an action plan for the core group of pupils which included, interventions, meetings, stay and play sessions, liaising with SENCO's, working together with GPs, SALTs and other professionals and refer children to the appropriate authorities (i.e. a paediatrician). In January 2015, I invited parents to complete a questionnaire that was anonymous. Questionnaires are a practical way of gathering data. They allow the researcher to collect large amounts of information in a short period of time and a cost effective way. Parents were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire and return it. This questionnaire gave parents the freedom to respond by giving me answers about their personal relationships with their children, their beliefs about their strengths and information about areas which they felt they needed additional support or information in. I sent out 52 surveys: one per 'family'. I got back 17 questionnaires (all were anonymous). The results of the questionnaire highlighted two significant issues: the first was that most parents believed that they spent sufficient quality time with their children and the second was that all parents who returned the questionnaire requested further information of one kind or another. For example, parents requested further information on issues such as Maths and English, developmental stages of development and/or more information on cognitive growth (in relation to age related expectations), and behaviour management. The conclusions that I drew based on this information supported the idea to hold workshops which touched on: the importance of supporting learning through play and strategies to develop life-long learners (Spring Term). Unfortunately, only 8% of parents came to the workshops. I believe there were reasons for this. The timing could have been better planned; first- it was in the end of the year were parents could have felt that the better part of the year had passed therefore little impact on pupil progress would be implemented at this point and also, the workshop was held at 9:00am. This was the most convenient time with the least distraction for pupils and the wider school, however, it meant that parents who usually drop their children off at 12:30 were now expected to come at 9:00, which would undoubtedly put off some parents who had a double journey to make on that day. 8% of parents who attended the workshops were both morning and afternoon parents in the Nursery, 10% were from Reception and Year 1 classes.

Parents were also invited to weekly 'stay and play' sessions (am and pm done separately) where they contacted with the teacher and other professional such as Speech and Language Therapists and received handouts about learning and cognitive development. The attendance was successful (Nursery am class- 85% and Nursery pm class- 92%).

5. | OUTCOMES AND INFLUENCE ON PRACTICE

Carrying out this research has been an interesting and fulfilling process. It has been wonderful watching the research progress from an idea to research and finally, to concluding the research. It is clear from analysing the tracking data that pupils made progress, however, there were also pupils who have not made progress. Some of these pupils' lack of progress can be assigned to a variety of reasons including the fact that some pupils could have undiagnosed additional needs such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Selective Mutism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Pupils in Nursery made the best progress in the Spring term, where they jumped from 69% below expectations in the Autumn term, to 71% above expectations in the Spring term. This change in data may be credited to a number of factors including the parent workshop, the Stay 'N Play sessions that were put in place, the handouts given to parents with information on how to support their children at home, inviting the speech therapist to the sessions and the in-school interventions that are carried out on a weekly basis.

Although this project seems to have been successful in ensuring that pupils made progress, it is important to note the low return of the class surveys. Less than half of parents (40%) returned the surveys. Some parents might have seen the process as intrusive, thus dismissing the completion and return of the surveys. Other parents might not have judged the surveys as important nor found it to be relevant to their child's learning- so they did not return the surveys at all. A few ways in which we could overcome the low attendance (8%) of parents to the workshops, would be; to call them 'coffee mornings' instead of workshops, to carry out a series of workshops throughout the whole year (not just in Spring Term) and to do workshops based on parents request and need (such as Maths and English) rather than what I solely, as researcher and teacher, found important in this instance.

One limitation of this action research project is that my own perception of 'school readiness' has been influenced by my background, my understanding and the expectations of the authorities with which I am employed. This has been studied by Smith and Shepard (1988) interviewed 40 kindergarten teachers who worked in different administrative school structures and found that the teachers' conceptions of learning and development seemed to be congruent with the administrative practices and philosophies of their own school systems (Smith and Shepard, 1988 as cited in Lin et al, 2003). Embedded in a sociocultural context, kindergarten teachers' readiness perceptions are shaped by many factors, including their own experiences as learners and teachers, school structure, school teaching conditions, the expectations of schools for children, social forces, community needs and values, children's backgrounds, and external societal attitudes toward early childhood education (Lin et al, 2003).

Another limitation of this study and action point for future research is that when school readiness expectations differ substantially between the variables of home and school. Some early years practitioners potentially view some children as "unready"- thus, treating them differently upon their start in mainstream education (West et al., 1993). However, this notion is not universal and should not be applied as such. Teachers' views are important because their early assessments of young children's readiness play an important role in special education placement, ability grouping, grade retention (e.g., Entwisle, 1995; Gredler, 1992; Powell, 1995; Rist, 1970; Shepard & Smith, 1986 as cited in Piotrkowski, 2000). Providing children with access to the interactive life of the classroom, to develop social skills, and to acquire appropriate forms of behaviour in groups are consistently valued educational attainment goals in early years (nursery/kindergarten) (Heaviside & Farris, 1993). This finding is similar to the findings reported by public school kindergarten teachers a decade ago (Heaviside & Farris, 1993). In that survey, more than half of the teachers placed considerable emphasis on following directions, not being disruptive in class, being sensitive to others, and taking turns. Teachers appear to be consistent across the decade in their perceptions of important aspects of development in kindergarten children's development; thus, reflecting a relatively sustained conception about the value of kindergarten as the beginning of academic life for children. These types of social skills help set the stage for students to be able to engage in academic activities, either individually or in groups (Heaviside & Farris, 1993 as cited in Lin et al, 2003).

Conclusion

The action research project I carried out suggested that a host of factors, as well as high quality teaching and an outstanding learning environment, support children to make progress over time. Some of these factors that support children aside from daily classroom routine include: providing daily interventions based on class need, working with outside agencies [such as Speech and Language Therapists] to provide advice and support to teachers and parents, building strong rapport with all parents, providing opportunities for parents to come into the classroom to 'play' alongside their children and making or making referrals to appropriate outside bodies such as paediatricians or the school nurse [to support pupils who present with having an additional need]. On reflection, it is not a conclusive statement to say that parent workshops do not work, they simply did not work on this occasion because we had a very low attendance rate and as prior mentioned, some of our parent's absences can be justified and others, not so much. The results of this project have inspired me to first, carry on with all the additional support that I provide pupils, secondly- to provide early intervention workshops to all Nursery pupils and third, to continue working with external agencies such as Speech therapists to support pupils as early as possible in the school year. Professionally, the research and the results themselves have been a learning curve for me. This is because in Autumn 2015, I was unprepared for the high rate of low entries into Nursery. However, being able to do the research alongside supporting parents and pupils, has been an invaluable experience. In the future I am going to start doing parent workshops from the Autumn Term; I think this will help to get parents used to the flow and frequency of workshops, or 'coffee sessions' as I would prefer to call them. I have also learnt that building positive, strong and consistent rapport with parents in the beginning stages of our working relationships helps when I need to have those challenging conversations. The most important lessons I will take into my future career is that first, I cannot change parenting styles on a major scale. Small scale changes consistently done over a long period of time are effective and enough. I will also take into consideration the notion that 'it takes a village to raise a child' (African proverb): parents cannot do it alone, teacher's cannot do it alone, the medical industry cannot do it alone and of-course, children need us to do it all together.

My action research journey has been fulfilling; I have we enjoyed every part of it including the challenges and the victories. It has taken a lot of extra work, commitment and dedication from my end. It is a path that I am glad I took because I have now been able to put into practise what would have been a lingering question in my classroom. I would take the opportunity to share the information that I gathered and the results of my project with other Early Year practitioners if it should arise. I would do this so as to encourage them and inform them that there are various paths, avenues and ways that you can use to support your lower on-entry pupils to achieve higher than expected results by the end of Nursery. How has this journey transformed your image of teacher, teaching, students, schools, learning? How have your paradigms been altered, confirmed, and/or challenged? I have learnt that action research is a unique and excellent opportunity to be actively involved in research that is relevant and unscrupulous. I have enjoyed the journey of the action researcher and I have learnt invaluable lessons knowing that the fundamental aim of my research was to improve the practice which I was a part of. I knew that my goal here was to enrich the learning experiences of all those around me. My definition of action research has not changed, in fact, it has been interesting living out the theory. I can attest to the notion that action research as defined by its many writers, is different to traditional forms of research. Namely, because action research as defined by Carr and Kemis (1986) is first about 'action' (what you do) and secondly about the 'research' (what I learn and explaining what I do). I would take the opportunity to carry out action research again. It is a worthy process that is invaluable in any industry or public service field.

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