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How can the use of a vocabulary book improve and advance children's use and understanding of vocabulary, within the foundation subjects?

MA Education

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Introduction and Background

The concept of practitioner inquiry within education derives from the efforts of the action research movement. Although, it is difficult to determine when and where action research originated, as much of the literature provides conflicting accounts. McKernon (1988) claims that action research was first designed by Science in Education researchers of the late 19th and 20th century. While, others refer to the work of American social psychologist, Kurt Lewin in the 1940's as its starting point (Kemmis and McTaggert, 1988; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992; Holter and Schwartz-Barcott, 1993).

Regardless of this ambiguity, it was Kurt Lewin who was the first to provide a theoretical grounding and conceptual framework for action research and make it respectable in social sciences (Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, 2007: 19). In Lewin's paper on 'Action Research and Minority Problems', he defines action research as:

"a comparative research on conditions and forms of social action, and research leading social action." (Lewin, 1993: 11).

Lewin's believed that in order to understand and transform social practises, the real-world practitioners should be included within the inquiry (McKernan, 1991:10). Within the context of education, Lewin "developed the methods and principles to enable schools to act as an agency of democratic change within its community" (Adelman, 1993: 11).

It was only until the pioneering work of Lawrence Stenhouse, in the United Kingdom, that the potential of 'the teacher as researcher' was brought to the forefront of educational thought. As director of the School Council (1967-72), Stenhouse promoted the central involvement of teachers within the curriculum development). Hence, it was "essential that teachers reflected upon practise, shared experience and evaluated their work if the education was to improve" (Bartlett and Burton, 2016: 59).

Today, practise based inquiry is continually evolving within education and remains a site of debate between academics, policy makers and teachers alike. Many recognise its benefits and strive to revolutionise teaching into a more research-based profession. At a lecture for the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), David Hargreaves identified the large gap that remains between teacher and researcher and called for educators to conduct their own practise based research (Hargreaves, 1996). Self-research has been credited to facilitate self-directed

changes and improvements in a teachers practise (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Farrell, 2016). Parsons and Brown (2002) attributes practise based inquiry with developing teachers' attitudes towards professional development and creating change throughout the school.

A central discussion that surrounds modern day practise based inquiry is the methodologies used and hence, the quality of the research. Until the 1980's, quantative research was the generally accepted research paradigm (Johnson and Christensen, 2008:33). Quantative research involves the collection and analysis of numerical data (Muijs, 2004:1), such as charts and graphs and use of statistical terminologies (Charles, 1995). It encompasses the positivist or scientific paradigm, in asserting that "the world is made up of observable, measurable facts" (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 6). Yet, recently another approach to such research has gained popularity: Qualitative research, which is led by a naturalist approach and entails the application of empirical materials, such as observations, focus groups and interviews. This method focuses upon the description of routines and incidents to uncover meanings within individual lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). However, these methods are not always incompatible as recent studies have begun to support the use of mixed method research within inquiry (Gorard and Taylor, 2004; Gorard and Smith, 2006).

Perhaps the most pressing issue imposed upon educational research is that of politics. From a macro- perspective, where preference is shown towards research that is 'policy-related' (Burgess, 1993) and politically acceptable (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 53); to micro-level, in which teachers comply with 'sanitized' forms of action research as not to cause political disrupt within a single school (Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, 2007: 48). It is clear that politicians and researchers have both very different values and agendas (Anderson and Biddle, 1991). To be a successful teacher researcher, one must aim for autonomy and derive your own theories directly from your practise.

My Aim and Rationale

Vocabulary development is critical to a child's success within all aspects of academic life. Not only does it enhance reading comprehension (Anderson and Freebody, 1981), but also up levels their writing and literacy skills. While teachers are aware of the importance of vocabulary knowledge in primary schools, some studies have shown that only a small amount of the school time is devoted to vocabulary learning (Scott, Jamieson-Noel and Asselin, 2003).

The aim and rationale of Middlefield Primary School seeks to *"deliver a vocabulary rich curriculum and pupils are provided with subject-specific vocabulary and knowledge that allows them to build links and enhance their learning across other subjects".*

To promote the use of vocabulary, specifically within the foundation subjects, Key Stage One and Two will introduce and develop the use of geography and history vocabulary books. These books will become embedded into both planning and teaching, and provide pupils with a building dictionary based around the curriculum for both subjects.

The initial idea for Key Stage Two, developed by the Deputy Head teacher and Geography co-ordinator, is based around the use of vocabulary dictionaries as a learning tool for pupils to refer to and write in. Students would have their own personal dictionary, which would follow them from throughout Key Stage Two, providing each with a sense of ownership of their own learning.

Within my own practise, I aim to promote this initiative within a Key Stage One environment. Following the scheme of a book containing specific word meanings, I created an interactive whole-class A3 vocabulary book (see Appendix A). As a visual dictionary would, this book contains key words with clear images and understandable phrases, proving accessible for children between the ages of 4-7. In addition to this, it will be accessible to all Year 2 pupils, not only during geography and history lessons but also throughout assigned reading times.

To encourage their use and engage pupils in learning, year groups across Key Stage One and Two will incorporate these books into a range of games, usually at the beginning of each

lesson. Such games will focus upon the memory and explanation of suitable definitions. Applied research has proven that such use of memory strategies is beneficial to students absorbing knowledge and information (Goossens, Camp, Verkoeijen, Tabbers, Bouwmeester and Zwaan, 2016). Certainly, this style resonates with Bonwell's ideal of 'active learning' in which *"students are actively or experientially involved in the learning process".*

The success of the study heavily relies upon the involvement and participation of my Key Stage One colleagues. Burns (1999: 13) highlights the benefits of collaborative action research, as both encouraging teachers to share common problems and examine existing assumptions. Certainly, a key strength of action research is its establishment of self-critical communities, committed to creating change and legitimising their own educational and social values (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992: 22-5).

The aim of my assignment is to develop and analyse an effective resource that can improve and advance children's use and understanding of vocabulary, within the foundation subjects.

Literature Review – Action Research

Educational research has developed remarkably within recent decades, partly due to increased interest from educationalists, policy makers and public opinion to tackle widespread educational problems.

While its early ambition to improve teaching and learning remains the same, one main issue continue to divide opinion: what type of research can truly make an impact in the classroom.

Perhaps, the most accepted and recognised form of education research comes from studies conducted within universities or research institutions. These studies often focus on national issues within education, which has been criticized for being too impartial and influenced by political bias and values (Tooley and Darby, 1998).

Action research, or reflective practise, brings forth a growing development in educational research that places teachers at the centre of data collection. It is defined as an inquiry conducted by educators in their own setting to develop their practise, improve learning and inspire change (Burton and Bartlett, 2005; Fox, Martin and Green, 2007). This process allows for both a self-reflective (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988: 42) and social enquiry into a situation with a view to bettering the quality of action within it (Elliott, 1981: 1).

The classroom is recognised as the centre of study and teachers are equipped with a powerful strategy to become active participants within school improvement (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). In rejecting top-down styles of reform, where practitioners are passive, it recognises that *"the process of understanding and improving one's work must start from reflecting on one's experience"* (Zeichner, 1993: 204).

Drawing upon the Lewinian approach to action research, Kemmis and Taggart (1982) defined a four part framework for teacher-researchers to follow when undertake their enquiry:

- To develop a plan
- To act to implement the plan
- To observe the plan
- To reflect upon these effects as a basis for planning.

This is represented in spiral form to represent that action research is a recurring process that continues until a satisfactory results can be achieved (Kemmis and Taggart, 1988; Burns, 2010). Further researchers have expanded on this and developed more explanatory and descriptive schemes to follow (see Townsend, 2010; Elliot, 1991).

The ultimate outcome of reflective practise is to provide a corresponding practical approach and theoretical perspective to the concern. 'Action research', as a term, signals the relationship between theory and practise; each are *"two different yet inter-dependant and complementary phases of the change process"* (Winter, 1989: 66). As a followed practise by the founder of action research, Lewins himself placed great emphasis upon applying both data and theory in understanding research (Marrow, 1969:128). Theorising about ones practise is a useful skill for teachers, as it allows them to not only validate current theories (Elliot, 1991:69) but take personal ownership and develop them (Somekh, 2003:260) through their own actions.

Nonetheless, action research still struggles to gain attention and legitimacy. It was Kemmis (1986) who first identified the shortcomings of action research in failing to establish links with political forces to embed educational reform. Sachs (2000: 93) furthered this, stating that for this practise to survive there must be a change in political and professional conditions *"where new cultures can emerge in schools, education bureaucracies and faculties of education in which teacher research is rewarded and respected instead of being placed at the margins of university priorities".*

<u>Strengths and Limitations</u>

A leading attraction towards practitioner research lies within the opportunities and potential it unlocks for the researcher-teacher. It provides teachers with the tools to work towards the improvement of their own practise (Kemmis, 1988:22). Action research has been directly linked towards the professional growth and development of teachers (Osterman and Kotthamp, 1993; Tomlinson, 1995). In accordance with Mohr (1985:127-128) teachers who engaged in teacher research were more self-assured, saw teaching more as a

learning process and changed their focus from teaching to find out what students knew and helping them learn. In addition to this, they have autonomy in the classroom context (Bennett 1993) and increased job satisfaction from pedagogical practice of teachers (Widdowson 1984).

Thus, one cannot dispute the positive impact that practitioner inquiry has on progressing the role, knowledge and even identify of the teacher. However, the centrality of the teacher may also be a source of concern as it could be heavily influenced by their own personal bias (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998 :196).

Speaking from my own experience, action research is an almost unspoken process in primary schools and it is only truly understood or accessible when teachers seek out higher education. Darling-Hammond (1985) has highlighted the misinterpretation teachers have towards research work, which proves how educators are not viewed or empowered as researchers. Additionally, this is further proof that teachers are not given academic credit in the way researchers in universities are (Jarvis, 1981).

Nevertheless, the profile of action research may be raised through its collaborative nature, which leads to a further advantage of the process. While it is not necessary for research to be a collaborative activity, Corey (1953:144) explains working with others will *"result in better problem definition, more realistic consideration of action hypotheses, easier translation of these hypotheses into action, and better interpretation of the evidence accumulated".* Collaboration provides a source of moral support for sustaining action research (Frost et al, 2000:67) and assumes a shared focus and responsibility towards acquiring the desired goal (Ward and Castleberry, 2000: 4). This can be attributed to strengthening work relationships and establishing a research community within ones school or institution.

Yet, this is not a straight forward process and successful collaborative practise entails effective development and management. Waters-Adams (1994: 208) highlights how joining human feelings and relationships along with differing viewpoints and agendas can make collaboration in action research particularly problematic.

Ultimately, the success of action research is based upon its capacity to create manageable change. Kemmis (1988:17) interprets that:

> "*Changing a whole society and culture is, on the face of it, beyond the reach of individuals; in AR groups work together to change their language, their modes of action and their social relationships*".

This accepts that while teachers may hold limited influence in transforming entire educational policy and practise, they can inspire a level of change through reflecting and cultivating their own practise. Armstrong and Moore (2004:2) asserts that bringing about change begins with the engagement of day-to-day life of institutions. From this, individuals and teachers can create the school and professional culture they want (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1997: 107).

In spite of this, change is difficult to implement and many people can prove resistant to it (McTaggart and Curró, 2009:101). People are not readily directed to implement change (Fullan, 1989) and so, action research may be first greeted as a site of conflict and time must be taken to appeal to the hearts and minds of the educational communities involved to create a shared purpose for change.

Role of a Critical Friend

The prospect of reflecting and analysing one's practise can appear a solidarity pursuit. Consequently, action research places an increasing emphasis upon the importance of working with colleagues or a 'critical friend'.

The notion of a 'critical friend' or 'critical colleague' was first recommended by Stenhouse (1975) as a 'partner' to provide advice and work closely with the teacher-researcher. Costa and Kallick (1993:50) defined this role as:

> *"a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend*"

A critical friend in research can bring forth alternative perspectives, support and partiality (Foulger, 2010: 140).

During each aspect of my research, I discussed both my planning and findings with my critical friend. These conversations were particularly valuable in not only providing me with support and guidance, but also clarifying and challenging my methods. Certainly, the characteristics of a successful critical friend include, on the one hand, friendship and affirmation built on trust, but, on the other, criticism based on analysis, assessment, evaluation and quality (Handal 1999).

In addition to this, I appreciated how the involvement of a 'critical friend' imparted another dimension towards my study, being able to draw on their experiences and knowledge. Indeed, in the context of development, 'a critical friend' contributes a different or a deeper understanding (Wennergren, 2016: 263).

Research Process

Due to the qualitative nature of my study, I have chosen to use and compare a range of strategies to collect data; with the purpose of bringing together evidence from multiple perspectives or voices (Elliot, 1991; McKernan, 1991). This is known as Triangulation (Elliott and Partington, 1975) and is applied to enhance the validity and reliability of results (Denzin 1978; Patton 1990).

From the outset of this project, I have kept a research journal. Following Kemmis (1981) advice, this was used to document my own personal accounts of *"observations, feelings, reactions, interpretations, reflections, hypotheses and explanations"*. It provided me with a starting point to my research and then allowed me to bridge the gap between knowledge and action (Calderhead, 1991; Surbeck et al., 1991).

The study developed from a discussion with the Curriculum Leader/ Deputy Head teacher concerning writing opportunities within the foundation subjects. Coinciding with the school's curriculum intent, the particular area that stood out was the application and understanding of subject-specific vocabulary. As a project that followed a similar objective

had begun in Year 4 for Geography, under the lead of the Geography co-ordinator, it seemed only suitable to begin a discussion across the Key Stages.

Following this, we organised a series of focus groups, with myself, the Deputy Head teacher and Geography co-ordinator, with the aim to develop and pilot a resource in Key Stage One that made this vocabulary accessible and memorable. This would come in the form of an A3 vocabulary dictionary, with key geographical terms.

Subsequent to creating and implementing the vocabulary book, we agreed upon undertaking a series of classroom observations to provide first-hand evidence of how the resource was used by both the teacher and class. These observations were carried out in Year 2 and Year 4, by the Deputy Head and either teacher. This occurred during regular lesson time as to allow the situation to be as 'normal' as possible (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995).

The Reflective Journal

The use of a reflective journal was vital towards my own understanding and application of the reflection process within my research. As Phelps (2005: 39) explains:

"Reflection is a non-linearity approach to learning and reflective journals embrace non-linearity, enabling intermingled documentation of ideas and experiences from the past, present and future"

Indeed within my own practise, it provided me with the freedom to accumulate and analyse my own thoughts and experiences, without feeling the pressure to reduce my views into a 'logical, sequential argument'. The practise of writing itself can trigger a range of different thoughts and insights about teaching, thus becoming 'a discovery process' in its own right (Richard and Lockhart, 1996:7).

At each stage of my inquiry – defining my focus, literature review, reconnaissance, focus groups, observations, ethical considerations - I documented a detailed account of my findings and ensured each event was properly dated (Elliot, 1991: 77). This proved effective in referring back to previous ideas and events, while acting as a physical reminder as to how far the enquiry had truly progressed (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996: 49).

Focus groups

A focus group involves a small group of individuals brought together to take part in a carefully planned and moderated informal discussion (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998: 285) to explore a specific set of issues (Kitzinger, 1994: 103). The aim of the focus group is to identify the extent of shared views (Denscombe, 2010: 177), highlight the respondents' attitudes and encourage a variety of discussion (Kitzinger, 1994: 116).

As previously noted I selected the Deputy Head teacher and Geography Lead to engage in a focus group, as I felt this these colleagues were in the best position to provide the information I needed. Following guidelines in conducting a focus group, we maintained that each session lasted 1 ½ to 2 hours long (Denscombe, 2010:177) and would take place after our weekly meetings to provide *"a natural, relaxed and secure setting"* (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998: 287).

During each session, we discussed any developments during our lessons, possible limitations and ways to further our practise. These were very insightful, as it gave us a wider picture of how these resources were being applied across Key Stage One and Two.

Classroom Observations

Through observation, the researcher is involved in *"watching, recording and analysing events of interest"* (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2006: 199). This method is accredited to provide a deeper and more complex understanding of real-life situations (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003: 117), given the added dimension of having direct experience of the activities under investigation (Scott and Usher, 2011: 100).

As the original class to pilot the vocabulary books, the Geography Lead and her Year 4 class were the first to be observed. This was done by myself and the Deputy Head teacher, during the starter of the lesson. Children were very familiar with the books and showed great enthusiasm towards both recalling and reading out their definitions. A range of interactive words games were applied which involved students further and clearly displayed the classes progression within their vocabulary knowledge.

The second observation was held on my own Year 2 class, by the Deputy Head teacher and the Geography lead. During this session, I reviewed the terms we had learnt, referring to both the vocabulary book and powerpoint. Then we began a memory game, in which children were given a geographical term, which they could only describe without saying the word.

Ethics

An 'ethic' is understood as "a moral principle or code of conduct which governs what people do. It is concerned with the way people act and behave" (Wellington, 2000: 54). In terms of educational research, those conducting the enquiry must recognise the implications of their research while offering security and protection to their participants. The responsibility for ethical research lies ultimately with the individual researcher (Anderson and Arsenault, 2005: 32). As Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2010: 167) point out, ethical consideration extends to every part of the research, from protecting individuals to the methodological principles that underpin the research design.

Throughout my research, I consistently referred to the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and the British Sociological Association.

The most central of ethical principles is to protect all children involved in research. Certainly, primary school children have been widely studied through action research, within their classroom environment. Yet, as Alderson and Morrow (2011) points out there is no leading ethical guidelines for working with children, as it all depends upon the research context, target and selected method. Within the conditions of my own research in focusing upon use of vocabulary resources, I ensured all methods were not harmful to the pupils emotionally or psychologically (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Fontana and Frey, 2005; Tomal, 2003). As the observations were undertaken by familiar staff during regular lessons, I was assured the children would feel comfortable and not anxious in any way (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). In addition to this, there would be no disruption to regular or negative effect to the pupils' learning environment (Tomal, 2003).

The final ethical dilemma I had to address was that of the privacy and treatment of all participants' data. During all observations and reflections, children were not referred to by name, to ensure that they remained unidentifiable to anyone outside the permitted few taking part in the research (Doyle, 2007: 81-82). Further to this, all electronic data was kept on a password-protected USB and any paper copies were stored in a safe place, to avoid a breach of confidentiality. Throughout the inquiry, the access to such data was limited to the researcher and the participating staff.

Challenges

From the outset of the inquiry, I identified time management as a pressing concern. It proved an inevitable struggle to balance my role as both classroom teacher and researcher. Action research is understood as a time-consuming and highly labour intensive practise (Casey and Dyson, 2009), in particular for teachers dealing with the demands of their own instructional practise (Bailey, 1999; Hine, 2013; Wong, 1993). Waters- Adam (2006) raises concerns that such demands may disrupt the methodological rigour of data collection. To avoid any time constraints and implications upon my duties within school, I devised and followed a timetable that scheduled both aspects of my work within a manageable time frame.

Research Findings

In my search for a resource and strategies that introduce and embed subject-specific vocabulary, I developed a deeper insight into how pupils absorb and engage with new terminologies.

For language to be ingrained in one's mind, this must begin with repetition of the word. According to empirical research in this area, repetition strategies are viewed as crucial when starting to learn vocabulary, (Gu, 2003). In reference to the vocabulary book, each lesson must begin with referencing and repeating previous key terms, followed by their definition.

Going beyond recollection of the word, children would be asked to provide examples and sometimes include facts. The vocabulary book provided both visual and written aids to prompt this, such as for Continents – a map labelling each continent. This would be reiterated at the beginning of each session.

The vocabulary books provided the children with a sense of ownership of their own learning. As observed in Year 4, students were enthusiastic about using their personal geography dictionaries and would readily look up words the teacher would question them on or challenge themselves to recall the definition. In Year 2, the book proved central to lesson, as it was used by both teachers and pupils during the starter and then was on display throughout the lesson. Children were in such a routine of starting the lesson with the book, then it was taken in turns who would come up, read from it and introduce the new word.

Additionally, the use of memory games added to the effectiveness of the resource. As Richard and Amato (1988: 147) states "games can lower anxiety, this making the acquisition of input more likely". These activities ranged from hang man to charades, and all proved successful and effective in involving all children, across ability groups. Within Key Stage One, it was also useful to apply phonics games the class were already familiar with.

Conclusion

"A view of teaching as research is connected to a view of learning as constructive, meaning-centred and social" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1992)

This embodies the enlightenment action research possesses upon the teaching profession and the classrooms they practise in. The democratic nature of action research allows teachers to regain their identity within their practise; through developing their own theories of teaching (Schön, 1987) and instilling a sense of autonomy (McIntyre, 1992). In a profession that is so accustom to accepting top down directives, it is refreshing that teachers are empowered in their role as critically reflective practitioners (Dinkelman, 1997: 257).

Through my own inquiry, it became clear that action research is not a linear or straightforward process. In my experience, this type of research adequately accommodates the uncertain and changeable nature of a teachers working life. Patterson and Shannon (1993:9) perfectly summarises how practitioner research is "organic, sometimes messy, unpredictable and generative – just like the teachers lives in and out of school".

The potential of this research goes beyond changing individuals but also the culture of groups, institutions and societies (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982: 16). It is important for all teachers that support change, to have the opportunity to participate in action research and shape and influence their own classrooms and communities.