

Digging Deep: But Who Gets the Pickings When the Researcher Goes Home?

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ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses some of the issues and tensions I experienced as an outsider (albeit one who still regards herself as a practitioner) researching in an early childhood centre and argues the importance of developing a research culture amongst practitioners who work in such centres.*

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years' involvement in early childhood education, first as a kindergarten teacher and latterly as an educator of teachers has, if nothing else, taught me that I am part of a profession which abounds with dilemmas, dichotomies and challenges to be addressed. Little is straightforward or predictable. Personally I find this is one of the attractions of working in the education field, and in particular the education of our youngest citizens. I have been fortunate in that my involvement has spanned a time when early childhood has made considerable progress towards developing its own research base for advancing knowledge within the profession, both in New Zealand and internationally.

One only has to consider the growing numbers of early childhood personnel enrolled in postgraduate study to see that there is an expanding body of knowledge being generated from within the profession through research. As Silin (1988), Stonehouse (1994), and Stott and Bowman (1996) suggest, to be called a profession obligates members to generate their own knowledge base, not just borrow from other disciplines. In the past early childhood education has been very reliant on borrowing from psychology but this appears to be changing as more and more people working within early childhood education engage in research.

Yet while we can rightly celebrate our progress in addressing one challenge, another is emerging. It is the challenge of stretching the ownership of research to include those who work with children every day. For as Rodd (1994) suggests without this sense of ownership amongst practitioners, research will be much slower in fulfilling its promise of bringing innovation and improvement to the profession. This

challenge is not new to education or indeed research. The existence of a gap between researchers and practitioners has been well documented in the education literature (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Silin, 1988; Ebbeck, 1992; Rodd, 1994; Katz, 1997). On the one hand researchers are accused by practitioners of being out of touch with the “real” issues and problems that confront daily practice. On the other hand researchers see practitioners as often lacking the intellectual rigour for and interest in systematic investigations.

As research within the early childhood academic community gathers momentum, so must attention be given to how best to engage early childhood teachers in ownership of the research process. In advocating for teachers to be researchers I am not denying the value of outsider research in extending the boundaries of knowledge. There is a place for both approaches.

An important year for me was 1997. It was to be the year that I needed to complete my first piece of formal academic research in order to gain a Master of Educational Administration. As a person who had started out in early childhood as a practitioner and had since then regularly espoused to student teachers the importance of research for “better” practice, I was keen to base my research around an aspect of centre life. In terms of my intentions, one could say that I fitted Robinson’s (1998, p.17) category of “educational researchers who wish to make a relatively direct contribution to the understanding and improvement of educational practice”. This intention was reflected in one of my aims (Hatherly, 1997, p.3) which read “to raise the awareness and interest among practitioners in the field as to the importance and influence of organisational culture, on the effectiveness of early childhood centres”.

On reflection a year after the research was completed, my view is that I essentially failed to achieve this aim, either for the larger community of practitioners or, perhaps more importantly, for the participants involved in the study. As with many research endeavors, it was the researcher who got the accolades and the participants who got the bound copy of the report.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The topic I chose to investigate was the concept of organisational culture, a phenomenon that has long been known in the business and compulsory school sectors to be influential on quality and effectiveness. Organisational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs and norms which emerge within a group as members work together and interact with each other. Organisational culture has been defined by Kilman (1989, p.50) as “a hidden yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and motivation” to a group and by Edwards (1991, p.1) as “something which is not easily defined or measured but which is perhaps more readily described after being “felt” or experienced, lived or observed”. As Deal and Kennedy (1982)

suggest, culture serves to set a group or organisation apart from others and in doing so provides its distinctive ethos. Of the many definitions of organisational culture perhaps the most enduring and precise has been that of Schein (1992, p.12) who describes it as:

a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

The concept of organisational culture has its roots in social anthropology where it began as a framework for understanding “primitive” and geographically discrete societies (Geertz 1973, p.145). As Ott (1989) and Brown (1995) explain, interest in the culture of organisations arose in the early 1980s in response to disillusionment with rational solutions to organisational problems and an increasing awareness of group dynamics, power and politics.

As Schein’s (1992) definition highlights, organisational culture is known to evolve over time and to play a significant role in organisational survival and ability to adapt and change. Furthermore, studies have shown a significant link between certain types of culture and the propensity for innovation within organisations (Nias, Southworth & Yeomans, 1989; Staessens, 1993). Some important influences on an organisation’s culture are its history, including the values and beliefs of its founding members, the physical environment and the current leadership (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Schein, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992). Given the functions that organisational culture serves it seemed a worthy topic to explore in an early childhood setting.

The research I undertook employed a case study method and drew on common ethnographic approaches – participant observation, semi-structured interviews and document collection (Wolcott, 1988; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). I spent a total of 15 days over a period of three months in a childcare centre. The intention was to immerse myself in centre life and in doing so get beneath the surface of what was happening on a daily basis, to collect the so-called “thick description” of norms, values and operating assumptions that gave the centre its distinctive quality, the quality that parents and others might become aware of as they grew better acquainted with the centre. I should say at this point that 15 days is ridiculously brief when most such studies are at least a year long (Lubeck, 1985; Delamont, 1992). This limited time frame was most certainly a contributing factor to some of the tensions and difficulties I experienced as an outside researcher. However, the reality is that few outside researchers can ever afford the time to spend as long as it takes to become almost an insider.

REFLECTIONS ON THE “OUTSIDER” APPROACH

When it came to planning my study I found there was no shortage of literature offering advice and pointing out the pitfalls of ethnographic approaches to research (Lubeck, 1985; Wolcott, 1988; Delamont, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Wolcott, 1995). Although I read these assiduously nothing quite prepared me for the “real” experience of undertaking my research. Some of the issues I am about to describe arose from the topic I chose. Others can be attributed more to the early childhood profession itself, and how research is perceived in the eyes of many teachers.

ONE STUDY, TWO SETS OF EXPECTATIONS OF ITS VALUE

Finding a centre where staff were prepared to let me “look over their shoulders” as they worked did not happen quickly. After I had contacted several centres, all of which were either unsuitable or declined to be involved, I was approached by a staff member of what was to become the participating centre, after a seminar I had given on my planned topic. This initiative, I realised in hindsight, was largely generated by a desire on the part of some staff to “fix” perceived problems in the communication and management of the centre. When it came to my interviews, these staff tended to “pour their hearts out” about what they felt needed to change. While it was very useful data for the research I became increasingly aware of and uneasy about their expectation of me as a trouble-shooter for their problems.

Encountering one staff member some time after the research was completed I was told, somewhat resignedly, that nothing had changed as a result of my study. As a researcher I am left contemplating the damage I may have done to perceptions these staff members carry of research and researchers. Did I, through my research, further reinforce in the minds of these staff the notion that research has little practical value? If so, then the message that they have received is sadly quite contrary to the one I passionately espouse about the value of research to improvement and innovation!

A GREAT GIFT TO THE CENTRE? - THE QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP

The problem of differing expectations mentioned above highlights what can happen when outside researchers rather than practitioners drive the research. As is usual with studies such as mine, by the time I was in a position to select a centre, the issue I was to examine was well and truly determined. If nothing else the requirements of the university ethics committee made sure of that. At the start of the study I assumed, I realise now, that the interest and passion I held for my topic would “rub off” on the participants, that they would use the opportunity to see themselves reflected by the mirror of my inquiry. Since I believed that organisational culture plays a large part in determining effectiveness so I assumed that they would soon believe this too!

Recently when I was speaking about the study to a group of professional development advisors, one person commented that having such a fine-grained analysis of their practice must have been “a great gift for the centre involved”. I doubt that overall the participants saw it this way. At one point, near the end of the study, I invited feedback on my preliminary findings. Perhaps not surprisingly I got very little. This confirmed what I had intuitively felt for some time, that organisational culture was my “problem” - not theirs. While many of the staff found it an interesting idea, the real problems for them at the time were more tangible issues like the juggling of staff shifts, planning a restructuring of the physical environment and making sure that compliance requirements were being adhered to. The danger is that when research is owned by outsiders in the way my study was, it is all too easy for practitioners to detach themselves from the results - to say, that’s interesting but it is just her opinion, and continue on as always.

GAINING ACCESS - INFORMED CONSENT IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Delamont (1992, p.94) suggests that “negotiating access is part of the data collection process – and often a very revealing one”. The experience of finding a centre that was prepared to engage in this study certainly gave me cause to reflect on the extent to which research is valued by early childhood practitioners. I found when I first approached centres that there was often what I would term a polite disinterest in the notion of research. Perhaps naively, I assumed that more centres would jump at the opportunity to engage in a study at no financial cost. While issues of ownership and perceived relevance may have been at stake here, like Rodd (1994), I do question whether the majority of practitioners really see the need and benefits of research in generating new knowledge or whether they still rely more on intuition and past

experience. If the latter is the case, then this will certainly be an impediment to the growth of practitioner research.

In discussing the role of the outside researcher Delamont (1992), Wolcott (1995), and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) acknowledge that negotiating access to the field extends far beyond the mechanics of finding a site, gaining permission to do research and managing the “personal front”. It is something that requires continuous attention throughout the fieldwork. For my research to be worthwhile, a requisite amount of richness needed to be mined and that called for participants to take risks in revealing their values, beliefs and practices. Building and maintaining trust with participants was therefore extremely important to the validity of the study. Not only is it certain to have determined the level of honesty at which participants were prepared to share but also as a researcher I felt it determined the level of comfort I experienced in pushing the boundaries of access. There were times when I knew I could not intrude on sensitive issues and therefore had to be satisfied with indirect reports of events. Furthermore, the early childhood sector is a relatively small community in which anonymity is virtually impossible. The extent to which my current position as a college lecturer might have influenced the access I had to deeply held values and beliefs can neither be measured nor ignored. While insider researchers may have a valuable advantage in the more formal aspects of gaining access, building trust with colleagues and communities still requires attention.

KEEPING THE FAMILIAR STRANGE

While the outside researcher is more prone to the problems of access, common sense suggests that it is easier for an outsider to maximise insight because of unfamiliarity with the setting. Schatzman and Strauss (1973, p.53) refer to the importance of being able to maintain “a continuing ‘de novo’ sensitivity and appreciation of all events”. This seemed particularly pertinent advice to heed when my investigation rested on the mundane everyday activities that formed the life-blood of a group’s culture. As an early childhood teacher myself I was well qualified to be a participant observer. I was confident and familiar with the way a centre worked and therefore could be of some assistance in daily routines. This was important in terms of “repaying” centre staff for the help they were providing me in gaining a qualification. But there was also a downside to my familiarity with centre life - the possibility that I was de-sensitised to some of the very data I most needed to collect. As an “outside” researcher I had the luxury of being able to apply conscious strategies for keeping an “alien” perspective. I made it a policy not to spend more than five hours at any one visit and to spread my fieldwork over a three-month period. Despite being able to do this, treating the familiar and mundane as unfamiliar remained a challenge to the end. This reinforced for me Silin’s (1988, p.129) point that practitioner research has its own particular demands. It often requires teachers to have a fairly sophisticated level of reflective

consciousness, something not usually associated with “traditional, hierarchically structured modes of inquiry”.

BEING A PROFESSIONAL RESIDES IN DOING A PRACTICAL JOB WELL – SO IS THERE A PLACE FOR RESEARCH?

My final reflection relates to some of the findings of the study itself. In the centre in which I did my fieldwork, practical activity was certainly the valued and dominant feature of the job. Staff were constantly on the go, often attending to several demands at once. Succeeding in the job involved, first and foremost, knowing the routines and systems. While both the literature and my own research would suggest that there are sound reasons for paying attention to organisational culture in early childhood practice, it is ironical that a major finding of the study – this relentless practical focus – may go some way towards explaining why staff did not embrace the concept with the enthusiasm for its potential I expected. After all, as Ott (1989, p.50) remarks, organisational culture is a rather nebulous phenomenon “created in people’s minds” and therefore not amenable to single definitions of truth or instant practical outcomes. I suspect that my case study centre is not alone in having a culture with a strong practical focus, which suggests that the value of organisational culture may continue to languish in the realms of theoretical possibility rather than contribute to improvement of early childhood services.

While there was a belief in and active support for gaining qualifications, training seemed to be valued for the new practical ideas and ways of working it offered rather than for the theoretical foundations it afforded. Furthermore, I found that recourse to theoretical knowledge in decision-making was infrequent (this was hardly surprising given the ramifications of shift work which permitted little time for discussion and debate amongst staff). Much more common was the tendency to make decisions for change on the basis of something not working in practice, on regulatory requirements, or in response to external pressures from (say) parents and schools. In this centre, compliance with regulations was taken very seriously. In fact it appeared to underpin much of the very definition of what it meant to provide a quality service.

Although one cannot easily generalise from these observations of one site, tacit knowledge of early childhood practice in the 1990s would suggest that this centre is not unusual in its concern for compliance. We can only speculate on the degree to which the escalating requirement to be subservient to regulations and systems reduces the potential for reflection and creates what Fullan (1998) refers to as a culture of dependency. This surely begs the question, what future does practitioner research

have in early childhood education if much of the change is being driven by outside requirements over which teachers have little control?

CONCLUSION

What then are the implications of my study for practitioners doing their own research and what outside assistance is needed to promote such endeavors?

Rodd (1994) has argued that there needs to be greater attention paid to raising the status of research in the early childhood field, to developing what she calls a research culture. I do not deny that an important implication of practitioners generating their own investigations is the modeling and encouragement that they provide to other staff members about the value of research in extending professional knowledge. However, I believe we need to think critically about the possible hidden curriculum of such research endeavors. Are our investigations meaningful to other teachers or are they simply reinforcing the notion that research is not really relevant? As my own research demonstrates, unless the participants in the study also share in the ownership of the problem or see that it will have direct relevance to their practice it is unlikely to make any significant contribution to change.

MacNaughton (1996) suggests that if research is to improve practices in centres (surely the ultimate aim), then the focus needs to move from research “about” quality to research “for” quality. She argues for increased attention being given to emancipatory action research; that is, inquiry which centres on problems generated in practice and which aims to improve practice by increasing self-understanding amongst practitioners. Researchers who are also practitioners are well placed to initiate action research of this kind in a centre and should be encouraged to do so. However it also needs to be said that, as long as we continue to condone (actively or passively) a variety of training and qualification levels in early childhood centres, we must expect that there will be many staff who will have had no direct contact with, interest in, or experience of research. The extent to which the practitioner as researcher owes a duty of assistance to such participants remains problematic.

One of the greatest challenges for practitioners undertaking research is achieving a requisite degree of objectivity. As Silin (1988) and Rodd (1994) argue one way to address this challenge is to increase the amount of opportunity for collaborative research which involves a combination of insiders and outsiders - for example, projects involving academics and practitioners as equal partners or which work across centres. Projects like the one currently being undertaken here in New Zealand on assessment and programme evaluation, directed by Val Podmore, Helen May and Margaret Carr, offer promise in bringing a practitioner’s voice to the fore. In this project, centre staff are designing, trialling and evaluating a range of tools aimed at providing them with concrete data that will assist in future programme decisions.

However, I suspect that a considerable proportion of practitioner research currently being undertaken is at a postgraduate level where the constraints of programme requirements tend to isolate and individualise the researcher from and in relation to the participants. While we can be justly pleased with this growth in New Zealand early childhood research, I would like to see the academic community establish protocols that recognise research can sometimes be a more collaborative undertaking.

My own study highlighted how little time staff members had for discussion and debate. Shift work ensured that staff who worked within the same team never had a break from children at the same time. On the rare occasions that staff did meet (once a month at the end of an 8 hour day) discussion tended to focus on the practical problems of the moment - for example, what duties were attached to a particular shift, what needed to be purchased and who was going to do that. If the notion of “teachers as researchers” is to become a reality in full-day childcare centres, then some means of releasing staff from the relentless practical demands of working with children will need to be found.

Finally, one could argue that a number of the issues and tensions which I have raised here are in part due to the particularly searching and intimate nature of my topic – one which aimed to get beneath the surface and expose the values, beliefs and often-unconscious operating assumptions of the centre. Yet as Spodek (1988) points out, it is these very elements which play a considerable role in shaping the quality of early childhood education practice and therefore cannot be put in researchers’ too hard basket. We need more, not less, of this type of qualitative research which attempts to understand what drives our practices in centres.

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