



Learning Conversations: Developing dialogue in early years settings

A Research & Development Project

LED Research Centre

Teacher researchers contributing to this project from Everton Nursery School and Family Centre and Our Lady Immaculate Catholic Primary School, Liverpool, England: Emma Cox, Kate Doyle, Ellen Guy, Faye O' Connor, Louise Roberts and Cassie Surrey. The project was supported by consultancy from school leaders Dr Lesley Curtis and Jamie Wilson with in-school coaching by Joyce Humphreys and expert input by Lin Savage. The LED Research Centre based research mentor was Pete Boyd. The R&D project was funded by the North Liverpool Teaching School Alliance with additional scholarly time funded by the University of Cumbria.

The Focus

This project focused on adult-child interaction in early years settings. It is important for adults to encourage dialogue with young children to get them thinking and to develop their speech and language. Children from some homes, especially where there is disadvantage and / or poverty, may fall behind in speech and language development, even by the age of four, and this may have long-lasting impact on their educational development.

'The North Liverpool Teaching School Partnership commissioned the University of Cumbria to facilitate and challenge Foundation Stage and Key Stage One teachers in two schools (one primary, one nursery) to question how they enriched language when engaging with young children. This collaborative research and development project has enabled the teaching staff to gain confidence and enhance their professional development.'

Dr Lesley Curtis, Executive Head

The study asked 'how do early years practitioners develop dialogue with young children?'

Early years teacher researchers from a nursery school and a nearby primary school collaborated with a research mentor from the LED Research Centre in a two year R&D project. Parents were involved in follow up workshops led by the teacher researchers.

The Research

Teacher researchers used Go Pro body mounted cameras to capture their interactions with children during continuous provision play. Video clips including 'hedgehog hunt', 'wiggly worms', water play' and 'santa's sleigh' were transcribed and then collaborative thematic analysis was used to analyse the interactions. A framework based on 'sustained shared thinking' was used in the analysis to identify and evaluate teacher strategies.



The Key Findings

Teacher strategies identified from previous studies on sustained shared thinking were identified and included: building on the child's interests; recasting; extending; questioning; allowing thinking time; making connections; introducing new vocabulary; and aiming to achieve a balanced dialogue despite the teacher's position of power. The study identified an additional strategy of 'transportable identity' so that

practitioners adopted an identity role as a friend or family member to encourage dialogue. A new 'REAL' framework for analysis of classroom interaction was developed through the project:

Table 1. The 'REAL' framework for analysis of classroom discussion.

Progress	Metaphor for learning	Speech role of the child or adult	Criteria
1	Acquisition	Repeats	Repeats the utterance
2	Participation	Edits	Reconstructs form and content
3	Contribution	Authors	Introduces new content
4	Framing	Leads	Sets a new focus for discussion

The Implications for Practice

The implications for practice include:

1. Many teachers and other educators have strategies for dialogue but benefit from critical engagement with theory, classroom experimentation and coaching
2. Collaborative analysis of classroom video clips is a powerful driver for professional learning – it needs a high level of trust and a research ethical framework is helpful
3. The teacher researchers found that disseminating the project themselves, at workshops and conference events was a powerful professional learning experience

The Outputs and Impact on Practice

The project directly developed the practice of 8 teacher researchers and was disseminated across their teaching teams and alliance. It was also presented at five education conferences and at five workshops across England to early years networks. Workshops based on the project and the CPD resource have been rolled out across early years settings in Derby Local Authority.

- **An open access research journal paper has been published:**
Boyd, P. (2014) Learning Conversations: teacher researchers evaluating dialogic strategies in early years settings. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22 (4), 441-456. Available open access online at http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1802/1/Boyd_LearningConversations.pdf
- **A CPD resource pack** to support school to school professional learning was produced. This has a DVD with professionally made video clips of early years practice with transcripts for analysis as well as teacher and facilitator guidance booklets. It is available for purchase from Everton Nursery School and Family Centre (£45). <http://www.evertonnurseryschoolandfamilycentre.org/>
- **A forthcoming chapter on leadership** based on the project is in press:
Boyd, P. & Curtis, L. (2018 in press) Instructional Leadership of Schools: Dilemmas for professional inquiry in high accountability contexts. In Joanna Madalińska-Michalak (Ed.) *Teacher Leadership*. Warsaw: FRSE.

If you have read this far and have an interest in raising attainment and addressing social justice issues through developing work on classroom dialogue then please get in touch with us at LED Research Centre: LED@cumbria.ac.uk
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