

Developing a Shared Language of Learning and a Pedagogy of Relationship: A Centre-based Model of Continuing Professional Development.

Nicci Burton, Debi Keyte-Hartland, Ellie Reynish, Helen Watson

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Contact – debikeytehartland@mac.com

Context

Hillfields Children's Centre was the first integrated centre in the country, opened in the early 1970s. Historically, there had been an ongoing challenge to maintain a balance between staff who were leading on learning within the Centre and staff who were developing the community and family support work (despite very strenuous efforts by various leadership teams to resolve this). From 2000 to 2006 this sense of separation had become even more marked, following the retirement of the visionary leader who had established so much of the innovative and effective service. The education staff were particularly vulnerable and over the next few years, a hierarchical model of services was established, with family, community and adult learning services maintaining their growth while the Early Years education service gradually declined in quality. All staff had gradually developed what Freire describes as a "culture of silence", submerged in a situation which encouraged passivity or collusion as a survival strategy. Staff at the Centre illustrated the theory that "Cultures develop within agencies which affect the way people work as well as how they view their roles and the structural arrangements"(Fitzgerald and Kay, 2008; p55).

The purpose of this case study is to outline one of the key strategies developed over the last year to develop the 'true inclusivity' described by Day (2004, p.425) and to measure its impact. In 2009, the Centre was exploring a more dialogic inquiry approach (as described by Dahlberg et al, 2007) in their work with two artist-educators. When we observed that this new relationship was beginning to influence the process of change and professional development over and above any previous sharing of expertise, knowledge or modelling of good practice it was decided to develop a model of professional development for all staff, working in cross-centre groups. We had two main objectives: to develop a sense of the Centre as a learning

community and to develop a shared language for talking about learning¹. Harris introduces the concept of *emotional alchemy* which we felt described the process of change we wanted to engage in very clearly. “...At its most profound, it (i.e. *emotional alchemy*) suggests a radical re-conceptualization of what is meant by organizational change and improvement. It calls for normative and inherently reductionist theories of change and improvement to be replaced with more holistic, humanistic and experiential forms of intervention and understanding”. (Harris 2004, p400)

The focus for the learning groups was to explore a way to make thinking about children’s learning visible through developing a model of pedagogic documentation. Donald Schon (1974, p 73) suggested that “*Generative learning focuses on transformational change that changes the status quo. Double loop learning uses feedback from past actions to question assumptions underlying current views*”. At the root also of this work is our sense of Foucault’s idea that truth and meaning are created through discourse.

Throughout this year, running alongside the learning groups, a small group, made up of Centre staff and the two artist-educators, were conducting a case study into the process itself and looking at its effectiveness. Throughout, we were aware of the ethical challenges of engaging in this kind of action research, where we the researchers were also participants in the process. In particular, we were aware of the power dynamics as the two staff within the Centre were the Head and another member of the teaching staff. The artists were also in a position of power as they were supporting the learning of the groups. This led us into a dialogue about the nature and use (and abuse) of power. Our thinking led us to Michel Foucault’s view of power as a complex strategic situation in a given society, a concept involving both constraint and empowerment. Key to us throughout this review process was the emphasis we placed on the voluntary nature of people’s engagement in the reflections for this study. We were careful to point out their right to choose not to

¹ This process was financially supported by Cr8us (Coventry Creative Partnership) as Hillfields had been successful in a bid to become a Change School.

participate in the process at all, or to withdraw at any stage. The ethical contract (see appendix 1) signed by all of the participants also stresses their right to anonymity.²

We were also very anxious from the beginning to establish dialogue in the sense described by Paolo Freire

“It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (Freire, 1970,77)

Dialogue as Freire described it, and as we hoped to establish it at Hillfields, is much more than a conversation or a meeting. It is a rich and highly involved process, it is ‘the encounter between men, mediated by the world in order to name the world....It is an act of creation’ and this act occurs between equals, acting with ‘love humility and faith’ in a ‘climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world.’ (Freire, 1970, 77). With this as our commitment, we developed a code of encounter with each learning group and with each individual (see appendix 2).

For the collection of evidence, we used a number of strategies, most notably the use of semi-structured focus group discussion³, one-to-one interviews and questionnaires (see appendix 3). Written evidence is also available through reflective journals, through the progress logs of each group and through the pedagogic documentation produced by the staff participating in the learning groups.

² The study also conformed to the BERA Ethical Guidelines.

³ According to Thomas (2009, page 170) ‘*the term focus group has come to be used interchangeably with group interview, but the two kinds of group are different in important respects. In group interviews the emphasis is on the researcher taking a lead role, asking questions and being in control of the discussion - rather in the way that an interviewer leads in a structured or semi-structured interview. In a focus group the researcher plays the role of facilitator or moderator – facilitating discussion among participants, not between himself and the participants (a marginal rather than pivotal role)*’.

The process of research and how it has impacted on practice

Four cross-centre learning groups of six were led by the artist-educators. To enable shared inquiry and co-working during and post-group sessions, two educators from each area of provision attended. Participants included, teachers, nursery officers, senior management, outreach workers and a parent. Learning was negotiated as a group democratically and knowledge was considered as fluid. Using Alexander's (2004 p. 29) description of teaching as negotiation, group learning was "created afresh" rather than "handed down" thus engaging the group as active learners and co-enquirers. The process has also been influenced by Carlina Rinaldi's (2006) reflections on pedagogical documentation and collegiality. Although the artist-educators led the group they also sat as part of the group. Meaning that was established, created and shared *around the table* was learning of all and co-constructed from joint analysis from within the group.

For each group the first session followed the same plan. Inspired by Dahlberg et al (2007) participants were asked to share their personal definitions and feelings towards two terms: 'Child Observation' and 'Pedagogical Documentation'. The words and constructs of meaning were a starting point to developing a shared discourse. This baseline discussion was revisited with the same groups at the end of the academic year as a measure of shift.

Sessions 2-5 consisted of reviewing, de-constructing and analysing traces of documentation (photographs, video, journal entries and dialogue of children/educators) brought by the educators to the group. Artist-Educators facilitated the shared analysis and discussion of these traces to attempt to find and construct meaning of key concepts: of learning, of educators' active roles and of 'school'. For each group a working definition of pedagogical documentation emerged that in essence was close to Rinaldi's (2006 p.58) idea that it enabled "*opportunity to re-listen, re-see and re-visit ('re-cognition), both individually and with others...*" the processes of children's learning.

Democratic participation and group discussion were not easy to develop. The notion of the exchange of ideas was something educators were unaccustomed to. Some individuals remained quiet, seemingly letting others do the talking for them. There were moments when the artist-educators considered individuals to be fearful of talking in the group as if speaking aloud was to place them in a vulnerable position. The artist-educators felt at times they were too quick to fill the gaps of silence when instead it may have been wiser 'to let the silence hang in the air' sitting in hesitancy and allowing the silence to speak.

Session 6 was primarily given to preparation of documentation traces for *re*-presentation to the wider audience of the centre and invited visitors in a pedagogy sharing event. A wide range of materials was shared for further analysis including possible projects and lines of enquiry, methods of making visible learning processes of young children and theories of developing meaningful relationships with families. For some, this whole centre exchange was the first time they had presented their thinking about their own and children's learning to an audience bigger than the learning group.

The learning groups were sites of contextual exchange, encounter and dialogue (Rinaldi, 2006) using material collected on site that confronted actual practice (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). Through the process of *bringing to the table*, choices regarding editing and the subjective authorial voice were encountered. Some practitioners talked about their initial training as a place that encouraged objective, often highly descriptive and seemingly accurate observations. Interpretation was an area that did not sit easily within their frames of references.

The shift from describing a series of events to a search for meaning that confronted practice revealed issues that for some educators had remained as unconscious acts of habitual practice and discourse. The pedagogical traces collected and jointly analysed therefore offered punctum points that ruptured these practices and tacit behaviours.

Another layer of reflection was held outside of the learning groups and facilitated by an additional visual artist who had also worked for two terms at Hillfields. Half term reflection meetings acted as a form of supervision, allowing time for discussion of sensitive issues and providing opportunities to analyse successes and difficulties. This supervision challenged the artist-educators' thinking and through this process, they too had to make their reflections visible.

[A Reflection on the Learning Groups' Contribution to Practice](#)

Developing a Culture of Dialogue

The developing quality of the traces collected for shared interpretation and the deepening reflection and analysis around them enabled us to gauge and understand staff's own evolving understanding of pedagogy and learning. Through the presentation of documentation we were able to see the increased visibility of practice and a language that described and analysed it across the centre. When educators revisited the initial question regarding their thoughts around 'Child Observation' and 'Pedagogical Documentation' it revealed their increased confidence to talk about the flow between what they saw children doing and their own subjective provisional theories to explain why and to consider how they might proceed.

Through creating a ring-fenced and protected place for encounter, dialogue and exchange a strong sense of collective ownership, inclusivity and value over the sessions developed. Practitioners realised the importance of time to talk and reflect and respected the strong commitment placed on it from senior management. Creating this space and place for shared dialogue enabled staff to share what it was that they did and cultivated a culture for valuing, challenging and listening to each other. Through the sessions staff built on their descriptive language and confidence to interpret, be subjective and develop their own personal sense of being able to say "I think..."

The development of the Code of Encounter and the progression of individual assertiveness within groups through the weeks had seen a notable growth in confidence of staff to talk about children's learning and in

presentation to peers. Through this, there has developed an openness and honesty to say what staff feel and think and a willingness to challenge others and the dominant discourse.

Relationships

Building and nurturing relationships have been an integral part of the process. Relationships have been forged, strengthened and boundaries have been crossed between the individuals within each learning group, between the various groups and agencies across the centre, between educators and children, between the artists, between staff and parents and between the teams within their own bases. Creating a space of encounter enabled relationships to grow and develop and for multiple opinions to be expressed and challenged without fear challenging the culture of silence that preceded this work. The open communication and discussion about children within the Hillfields context encouraged talking, multiple perspectives and action across boundaries in an emotionally safe environment.

Vignette: Erin the Story-Maker

An educator had captured a video of Erin animating a collection of plastic animals alongside objects on a shelf, using them as props in an emerging story.

Erin had been doing this for some time, noticed but not acted upon or shared by other members of staff in the room. The video was analysed and interpreted by the group and suggestions made to share the film with her parents. Having shared the footage it transpired that Erin's Dad had been setting up imaginative play scenarios at home for some time encouraging her to create and re-enact stories. Erin's Mum filmed her and her Dad engaged in one of these story-making sessions. It captured the establishment of a storyline and the use of open-ended questions that involved Erin in the creation and construction of the unfolding events.

Without sharing the film, Erin's interest in creating stories would have remained tacit, unvoiced and invisible. Through capturing and sharing these traces of children's strong fascinations, we develop a shared collective responsibility to do something about it. Looking at ways of sharing and communicating knowledge of children's learning with others and reflecting with parents adds multiple perspectives to our understanding of individual children and their interests in order to think about what children are doing and why. Staff were able to break the talk about children's learning out of the comfort of the group and begin a dialogue with parents.

Learning as Inter-Connectedness with Others

As well as the development of staff relationships across the centre, educators began to see children's learning in a wider social context. Systems of record keeping geared up to profile individual children were guiding educators to see children's learning on an individual basis. Discussions through the sessions widened their lens of vision and documentation began to substantiate this through presentations of children's

communication, friendships and relationships; a reflection of the staff seeing children as social beings, inter-connected with others and understanding the social constructs of learning.

Sessions were often a launch pad into self-initiated mini research projects investigating areas of interest around, for example, schemas and friendships. Something that had sparked their own curiosity and interest enabled participants to link theory and practice in a meaningful way thus deepening and broadening their knowledge around their pedagogic values, beliefs and practices.

From Professional Development to Everyday Practice

There was a big shift in staff from seeing documentation as one person's role to everyone seeing it as being relevant to their role, finding their own ways of working it into their everyday jobs and discovering their own authorial voice within the process. Strong quality traces of pedagogical documentation emerged from the process, methods of team planning developed and changed as a result of the group sessions and the language surrounding and describing them has also changed. Planning meetings are now termed pedagogy meetings and supported by a centre teacher and traces of documentation are encouraged to be *brought to the table* to aid discussion and interpretation and a shared plan of how to move forward based on what has been seen and understood. This marks a move from something that existed with the group sessions to something becoming everyday practice⁴.

Conclusions and Next Steps...

Our analysis of documentation including our journals and feedback from staff supports our belief that through this process of developing thinking about pedagogic documentation, we had developed a sense of

⁴ **Technology and Skills**

The collection and presentation of traces of children's learning highlighted problems around educator's technical abilities. Use of cameras and computers was a major aspect of pedagogical documentation and lack of skills impeded the process. In response, photography workshops were built into the programme to support staff's developing needs but lack of time was always cited as a reason for not practicing and not using these new abilities. However, as the sessions progressed, staff began to seek out each other, finding the experts and sharing skills within their teams. Application and use of cameras and processes of looking, editing and refining have dramatically improved.

a learning community with a shared language and more importantly a shared sense of identity and culture. In many ways, therefore, we believe that we have now established a foundation on which we can begin to build.

We see that there are many lines of possible development:

1. Looking at how we communicate with different audiences
 - Finding ways of opening up the dialogue between staff and parents
 - Looking at the skin of the centre – how do our walls communicate our shared values to multiple audiences?
 - Reassessing current forms of record keeping e.g. profile books
2. How do we ensure sustainable learning and embed the thinking, making the process continuous and indivisible from everyday practice.

Our principle learning, and our principle thought for future development, is to trust the process – and each other - and not to be afraid of the unknown, to be willing to see uncertainty as a place of possibility rather than a place of threat.

Word Count: 2766 (excluding footnotes, appendices, references)

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Appendix 1

(printed on headed paper)

Helen, Debi, Ellie and I are writing a paper/case study for Eecera (European Early Childhood Education Research Association) to share the journey we have gone on so far with Developing a Shared Language of Learning: A Centre based Model of Continuing Professional Development. The case study may include your perspectives, photographs and reflections. You are welcome to have a copy of the case study once it is completed. We may also in the future want to share the paper with other settings/agencies.

I would like to gain your permission for your voice to be heard in the case study. Can you please sign below to give your permission? If you have any further questions please come and ask me. If you would like any more information on Eecera the website is <http://www.eecera.org/> or come and ask myself or Helen. You do have the right to withdraw from the research.

Nicci Burton

Name :

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 2

Our Commitment

1. To connect session content to your everyday practices of working with children
2. To be supportive to facilitate group discussions on themes that are relevant and applicable
3. To support you to think about your next steps in documenting and acting on children's learning
4. To supply appropriate and useful materials for reading
5. To provide individual and additional support based on your specific enquiries
6. To challenge and provoke thinking on practice whilst being encouraging and open to learn from our shared experiences
7. To arrange additional skills based workshops as they arise

Code of Encounter



To take notes that will be copied and shared to all members within the group

Your Commitment

1. To attend all 6 sessions (on time) and be an active participant (9-11.30, kitchen)
2. To contribute material* for discussion and reflection
3. To follow through ideas and next steps arising out of discussions
4. To read and engage in discussion of provided texts/set tasks
5. To feedback (to your colleagues) and action opportunities for developing learning and learning environments
6. To re-present your thinking and development to a wider centre audience in a pedagogy meeting in the final week
7. To engage in and be open to questioning and challenge (with good intent) regarding observations, reflections and actions.

Code of Encounter



To take notes that will be copied and shared to all members within the group. To look after and take responsibility for cameras and memory sticks

*Observations in your journal, annotated photographs, profile books, examples of children's work and scribed comments and conversations

Appendix 3

Making Learning Visible

1. What has your journey been like throughout the CP sessions?
2. Are these sessions improving the cross centre links?
3. Are there aspects that you would like to improve/change
4. Are the aims of the CPD sessions being achieved?
5. How did you find the pedagogy sharing?
6. Other Comments