

## MA Unit ‘Research Methods in Education’

If I want the children in my class to extend their thinking and develop their own values and learning theories, how can I show the development of their learning?  
How do I research this in my classroom?

Word Count 4299

In my previous essays I have explored my living educational values and how I feel a tension between those values I hold dear and the ability to put them into practise in my classroom. Through my own action research and reflections from sharing and listening to ideas at the Tuesday MA group at Bath University I am living closer to my living values as my own teaching and classroom reflect these. Through the process of Action Research I have clarified and refined my own living values and the ability to articulate them and change them into actions. This assignment will closely examine the research methods I have used to reflect on the space I have created to encourage the children in my class not only to grow within the space of my ‘educational values’ but to explore their own and formulate their own theories for learning in the 21st century. I agree with Morse, (1992) that

*‘...theories are not fact. They are not the truth. They are tools. They are merely abstractions, conjectures, and organisations of reality, and as such, are malleable, changeable, and modifiable’(p.3)*

But their thoughts and ideas are an open reply to the academic community of the beliefs about learning of a group of children who have experienced the National Curriculum, Literacy and Numeracy strategies from the start of their school journeys. Children who have also tasted the freedom of independent learning, have reflected on themselves and their beliefs as learners. Children who have the vocabulary and level of thinking to truly evaluate theories of learning and develop and share their own; they are young learners, keen to reflect and be heard by a body of academics and researchers who they feel, do not normally ask or value their opinions.

I want to develop a format for the children to explore learning, including theories of others and use this as a platform to create their own knowledge and values. I want to see over time the narrative of their developing thinking in the floorbook they will keep of the journey. Pupils as researchers of their own learning, clearly being on the inside of the learning process and exploring and challenging their ideas of themselves as learners and the learning theories we impose in the classroom. We will use photographs, video and a commentary of the children’s thinking incorporated into our floorbook to record our journey as developing learners.

*‘I often find images carry more meaning than words, although I usually need words to communicate the significance the image has for me. I also find conversations with others*

*about images help to develop shared meanings of the values that help to constitute my productive life. I call these shared meanings about embodied values the affirmations of inclusionality and the representation of these meanings, visual narratives.'*  
Whitehead, (2005)

I am interested in the writings of Alvin Toffler although I have read little at the moment. I am drawn to this quote of his I have found, because it speaks of my classroom

*'Teachers become coaches – encouraging the children to open up questions for research for themselves.'*(Toffler, 2006, [www.nswppa.org.au/pwinspire.html](http://www.nswppa.org.au/pwinspire.html))

This is very true in my class, the more the children explore themselves as learners, the more the children question things around them as facts. A key question that I cannot answer for the children is this:

'Why is it only grown ups that write about learning, when it is us that does the learning? Why haven't they asked us?'  
(child N)

Kellett (2005) talks about the possibilities and rewards for young researchers, her book being aimed at children aged 10 – 14, where as my class are only aged 6 and 7. But she does describe the benefits of teaching research processes to children to create knowledge. Learning in schools is often about acquiring, understanding and applying knowledge and skills, but Kellett talks about the lack of opportunities to create knowledge. I have read research of the benefits of action research on clarifying our own ontological values (Hutchinson, 1998) but I am interested in research into the impact on the child researcher, on the 'pupil' themselves and also on the 'teacher', 'pupil' relationship.

Hutchinson (1998) writes about the: *'...empowering nature of research which takes the form of action research.....'*

This I believe will empower the children in my class to develop their thinking as action researchers, developing their own living theories. I am going to use an action research cycle to investigate and evaluate the children's developing understanding of theories of learning and the ability to apply that learning into knowledge creation of their own living theory. I will show how and why this method of researching is best suited to this question and this situation.

I have explored the work of Branko Bogner (2007) who works with children in a class in Croatia focusing on the action research process, on creativity and on validity. I am interested whether this process has been combined with an exploration of themselves as individuals, as part of a learning community, as 'receivers' of learning in traditional roles and curriculum's. Will the framework of the action research cycle be prescribed so that the children feel they have to work with what is given, a taught learning style that again the children feel they have to work within?

Will it 'frame' or 'contain' their thinking?

But perhaps the worrying part will be later in the process. Will this open the children to dissatisfaction for the education system they find themselves in? Will they have a clear 'student voice' to articulate their ideas and theories?

Will tradition and results allow that voice to be heard?

Will anything change or happen even if they are heard?

The biggest worry of the children at the moment is getting their voice to be heard outside of school. To help with this problem we have worked with Marie Huxtable to set up a learning web page for the class, where the children can ask questions or just pose thoughts. This is an immediate way of talking to Marie but also to link with other schools interested in developing thinking, reflective learners. But as this is a format and space created by adults will it have unseen, felt rules the children will feel they have to stay within?

Fielding (2002) argues that however we try to introduce children to action research we are still controlling the investigation, by the time we allow, the groups the children work in, how we encourage them to present findings or the question or area of research.

The time when we work on this just happens when a child makes a comment or asks a question. The session just develops; it is very rarely planned in to our timetable. The session is guided very much by the children as 'Learning Coaches' with myself as the scribe or coach too. The session starts and finishes when the children choose. The 'Learning Coaches' are children who were in my class last year and are confident in themselves, and as learners, that they have something to share. They will lead a class or group, planning the learning activities themselves, confident to work with children older or younger than themselves.

Cohen & Manion (1995) describe education research to be '*a systematic and scholarly application of the principles of a science of behaviour to the problems of people within their social context*'. (p.6)

This provides a scientific approach, quantitative data, and an objective means of validating your findings, but this is not suitable for my classroom, where I am not an objective observer. The subject matter of this enquiry, requires a reflective approach, video evidence and qualitative data. The changes in self belief, developing educational values and theorising about learning will not fit into this scientific framework.

The action research approach I am using is also concerned about issues of validity and rigour. In subjecting accounts for 'validation' I draw on Habermas' ideas to strengthen the comprehensibility, truth of the propositional context, understanding of the normative background of my writings and authenticity of my accounts:

*'The speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true*

*proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with on another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified' (Habermas, 1976, p.2-3)*

The scientific approach has been the traditional method of research, focusing on education research, but for this assignment I am using Action Research. Whitehead and McNiff (2006, p. 12) describe this as,

*'a purposeful investigation, which involves gathering data and generating evidence in relation to articulated standards of judgement, in order to test an emergent theory.'*

This will allow me to identify the area I want to investigate, the question I will research and reflect on, question and test my values, beliefs, theorising about my learning. A living theory, reflecting my values and the learning and values of the children in my class.

The children have been introduced to the learning theories of 'Building Learning Power' developed by Guy Claxton (2002) and 'Thinking Actively in a Social Context' by Belle Wallace (2004) and have reflected and evaluated them. Children often surprise me at the thoughtful and unusual responses they give, for example child C is convinced that one theorist doesn't like children because of the 'silly' words used in the theory.

*'If he does like children why does he use words that we can't say or understand?'*  
(Child C)

This innocuous question was the starting point and platform that generated the need to explore our (the children and myself), values and theories of learning. We shared with our learning partners our ideas and I brought them to the Tuesday MA group. This enables us to share and begin to validate our values and the process of Action Research and methodologies we are going to explore together and independently. Together we have explored learning theories by Claxton and Wallace, but initially spent a long time discussing what a learning theory is.

The discussion roamed around the circle as ideas were thought of, discussed, some perused whilst others were quickly discarded. This is a summary of the main points:

### **TASC**

- TASC is useful to all ages but can be improved, we have a good idea. (child P)
- The questions around the wheel help you think, but don't tell you what to do or think (child Z)
- It's good for all ages and all children (child F)

- It helps you think and learn (child B)
- It doesn't tell you whether you are a good learner, it just helps you to be one (child A)
- It should be 3D and not flat, thinking isn't 2D is it? (child AI)
- It helps you plan, do and reflect on things and learn about you and what you have done (child A)
- We like having the wheel on the wall (child To)
- It helps when I am stuck (child

### **Building Learning Power**

- He doesn't like children because of the tricky words (child T)
- It doesn't help you think, there are no questions (child A)
- You are good at them or not good. How do you know? (child H)
- It's for grown ups because of the tricky words (child D)
- He does like children because he has written a learning theory but he has forgotten what it is like for children. He doesn't know us. (Child AS)

I am concerned that we must enhance and demonstrate clearly the rigour and validity of our 'educational research' into our own learning, and how we influence the learning of others and communicate with the wider academic community, especially as my children, 'the researchers' are so young. This I hope will help to ensure an open response to the children's developing theory of learning by the wider academic community. I am drawn to the work of Winter who discusses enhancing rigour in the appendix of the keynote published in the Ontario Action Researcher by Jack Whitehead (2005). He outlines Winter's six criteria for enhancing the rigour of an action research account: (Please see appendix 2)

I am drawn to the work of Winter on six principles of rigour (Whitehead 2005, Appendix 2).

*Reflexive Critique*

*Dialectical Critique*

*Risk*

*Plural Structure*

*Multiple Resource*

*Theory Practice Transformation*

Whilst investigating research methodologies I am drawn to the writings of Dadds and Hart who describe the importance of methodological inventiveness to the researcher:

*Perhaps the most important new insight for both of us has been awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their self-chosen research focus. ....But we had understood far less well that how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes." (Dadds & Hart, p. 166, 2001)*

This very much links with my initial thoughts of keeping the framework of research methodologies as free as possible for the children. They are used to working within the action research methodology created by Wallace (2004), The TASC Wheel. We use this for all of our topics, as a starting point and framework for our learning. This will be a methodology the children may use instinctively, with no support or guidance from me. I am also very much drawn to the writings of Alderson et al (2000), who believe children should be encouraged to become the experts of their own lives. I believe action research into learning and learning theories will enable the children to better understand themselves as learners and the beliefs of academics that forge the learning environment they spend so much of their formative years in.

Whilst trying to create a classroom of enquiry with freedom of thought for the children, not a frame to work within, Dadds and Hart (2001) et al help us to examine differences between 'educational research' and 'education research'. The distinction between research methods in education that are derived from the disciplines of the philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, economics, politics, management and leadership of education and the research methods in education that emerge from our own practical educational enquiries of the kind, 'How do I research this in my classroom?'

*'If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our pedagogical approaches match the message that we seek to communicate. More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be it that of traditional social science or traditional action research. May be the willingness and courage of practitioners – and those who support them – to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries in their care. Practitioner research methodologies are with us to serve professional practices. So what genuinely matters are the purposes of practice which the research seeks to serve, and the integrity with which the practitioner researcher makes methodological choices about ways of achieving those purposes. No methodology is, or should, be cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods of techniques..'. (Dadds & Hart, p. 169, 2001)*

Action research is well documented as being 'reflective' (McNiff, 2002) and will encourage the children to not only reflect on their experiences as a learner, but also self-inner reflection of themselves. What makes them enthusiastic as a learner, what strengths do they have? How or can they overcome their fears as a learner?

From this, the action reflection cycle will enable the children to apply what they know about learning opportunities, themselves and others in the class and to apply their understanding and begin theorising about learning for themselves.

*‘ Children are acknowledged as experts on their own lives and if adults genuinely want to understand children and childhood, better ways to seek out child perspective and unlock child voice must be sought. ’ (Alderson, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Christensen and Prout 2000)*

As part of their reflections the class feel we have learned a lot about ourselves and our ‘places’ as they called them, and that they change sometimes. Child D2 said we swapped around. Meaning that sometimes I was the teacher and sometimes not. We opened this up further and recorded some of the roles. Child K and others agreed that initially they thought I as the teacher would tell them the things they needed to learn and they would practice them and then know them. I knew everything.

But the list on the board of our roles now is very interesting and different:

We are the teachers (children)

Mrs Mounter as the teacher

Mrs Mounter as the learner

Us as the learners (children)

We learn together, sometimes

‘I like learning together best; it feels nice like I am important’ Child A.

It is interesting also the hierarchy of the roles from the children’s perspective. They as the teachers are top, myself second, then myself as a learner, children as learners 4<sup>th</sup> and finally us learning together.

Hutchinson (1998, 373-379) writes about the: *‘...empowering nature of research which takes the form of action research. .... Valuable role in effecting school change’.*

For the children this is a critical point that has come out through the reflective cycle. Will anyone listen? Will they really listen or just hear what the children say and it will have no real impact. This is where the rigour and validity of the research method used is so important to bring validation to ourselves and social validation from the academic community.

This action research enables ‘the children’ as the researchers, to develop an enquiring approach to their own learning environment and the learning framework imposed on them, this will enable the children to articulate and develop their own ‘living educational theory’ (Whitehead,1993,p68)

McNiff (2002) proposes an Action Research framework, which focuses on a process of reflection to promote change and enhance ‘professional’ learning. This again sounds as

though it is aimed at adults researching into their professional practise, but I feel will provide thoughtful questions and rigour, to link to the TASC Wheel questions through the action research journey. They will also provide a framework for me to reflect on my living values and my ability to enable my children to be independent researchers themselves.

1. What is your concern?
2. Why are you concerned?
3. What do you think you could do about it?
4. What kind of data could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?
5. How would you collect such evidence?
6. How would you check that your judgement about what is happening is reasonable, fair and accurate?

This should prove useful as it presents a form of action-reflection that is accessible to both myself and my pupils and therefore informs a process of creating new knowledge individually and collectively, as well as providing disciplined structure in which to test understanding and claims to knowledge against the critique of a wider audience.

This seems to link closely with the type of thinking the children experience using the TASC Wheel by Wallace (2004). This will enable both the children and myself to actively participate using a methodology we are familiar and comfortable using. It will enable the knowledge creation process of Action Research to be the same for the teacher and pupil, but any form of research can be criticised if not carried out rigourously. This is discussed by Snow (2001):

*'Methodological rigor is, of course, not a concept limited in application to particular research strategies: Examples of bad research carried out with every possible quantitative and qualitative method could be cited, and bad research is not redeemed by association with any particular research tradition.'* (p3)

It is at this point I believe we need to clarify our understanding of the difference between an 'education perspective' and an 'educational perspective' in the approach we use to our research methods in education. A subtle variation or play on words but a significant difference in meaning and application. Geoff Whitty's point in his 2005 Presidential Address to BERA shows the importance of this distinction in current conversations.



*‘One way of handling the distinction might be to use the terms ‘education research’ and ‘educational research’ more carefully. In this paper, I have so far used the broad term education research to characterise the whole field, but it may be that within that field we should reserve the term educational research for work that is consciously geared towards improving policy and practice....’*  
(Whitty, 2005)

McNiff et al (2004) highlight how Action Research is about creating new knowledge, finding ways of testing its validity and sharing the knowledge, whether for personal learning or for social growth. The children having discussed and evaluated the learning theories of others decided that they would like to create a learning theory for children by children. They already had the facility to share it by using the web page with Marie Huxtable and through the Tuesday MA group.

The children have used a living theory approach to Action Research. This has enabled the children to develop their own ideas and questions, explore the learning theories of others and begin to articulate their own developing theory of learning. The process of exploring what we already know and understand on the TASC Wheel enables reflection, encourages critical thinking and application, enabling and encouraging the creation of knowledge for self and to share.

The depth of the children’s thinking shocks anyone we share our journey with. Age, knowledge and skills have often been quoted as barriers to children taking part in action research successfully, but this study will challenge these preconceptions.

Following sessions included using the Interactive Whiteboard to record our questions and thoughts, narrowing down our ideas behind our learning theory. We began thinking about how children learn best and we worked in pairs and then fours to come up with ideas, to share them and then discuss and record those we all agreed upon.

We learn best when we:

1. Understand and use our learning skills ( Child P) (**‘Understand’ in Quiff**)
2. Believe in ourselves (Child M) (**‘I am important’ in Quiff**)
3. Think about ourselves as a learner (Child A) (**‘Focus’ in Quiff**)
4. Are curious ( Child TH) (**‘Question’ in Quiff**)
5. Are happy and calm (**‘Feelings’ in Quiff**)

These are the 5 key points or rules for QUIFF that we agreed upon. Behind these are values that the children feel are important but come under the headings or rules above. Child ‘E’ felt not worrying if things go wrong is a very important skill, because even when things are wrong you are learning, just don’t worry and keep trying (Linked to **2**). Child ‘Z’ felt it is vital to do the right thing. I was unsure what she meant and asked her to explain, she said that you have to decide to be a good learner and feel right, no one can make you do it, they can try but only you can make it your best. I just thought Wow! (Links to number **1**!) Child ‘A’ wanted to include the phrase ‘Don’t let your dreams float

away'. This linked, for me, to Child 'Z' s analysis of self. The bullet points below are the other points the children felt important to list:

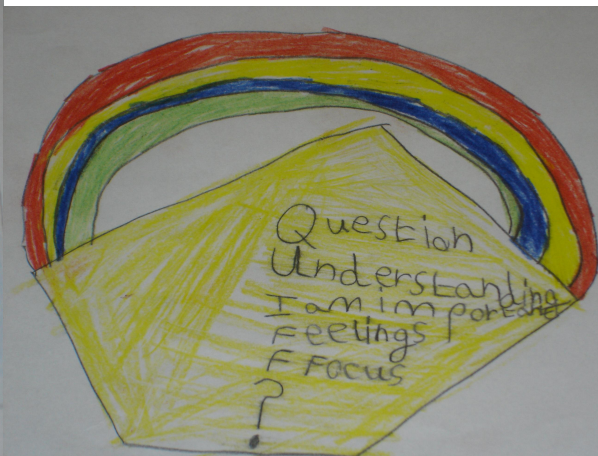
- Mixture of learning ways for all of us (Coach DC's group). Links to **1**
- Belief came up again and again. Links to **2**
- Fun learning. Links to number **5**
- You must take learning seriously. Links to number **3**
- Tricky is exciting (Coach N's group). Links to number **4**
- Be interested it is then easier ( Coach P's group). Links to number **4**
- Use what you already know.
- Concentration, only you can do it (Coach A's crew). Links to number **1**
- Don't copy, better to get it wrong and believe in yourself and just try again calmly. Links to number **5**
- Help other people but also help yourself (know when to ask for help, know yourself to help yourself). Links to number **3**

This process of Action Research has emphasised the need for continually regenerating and exploring our living educational values. It has emphasised the importance of rigour and validity in the explanations of learning. If we want to validate and demonstrate how our living values enhance the quality of educational knowledge, we need to show the living standards we have used to judge the impact and influences of our values. In doing this I am drawn to Connelly's and Clandinin's insight about validity criteria for narrative inquiry:

*'We think a variety of criteria, some appropriate to some circumstances and some to others, will eventually be the agreed-upon norm. It is currently the case that each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work.'*  
(Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.7)

# Appendix One

## Samples of the children's thinking behind QUIFF



## **Appendix Two**

**Appendix of the keynote published in the Ontario Action Researcher Jack Whitehead outlines Winter's six criteria for enhancing the rigour of an action research account:**

### ***Reflexiv Critique***

*This is what I understand by engaging in a reflexive critique in action research. I hold myself accountable, in my claim to know my educational influences in learning to the values I hold and which I have related to the normative social order in which I live and work.*

### ***Dialectical Critique***

*In enhancing the rigour of my living theory through dialectical critique I express, define and communicate the ontological values I use to give meaning and purpose to my existence in the course of their emergence in my enquiry. The process of clarification and communication transforms the embodied ontological values into communicable epistemological standards of judgement that I use to evaluate the validity of my claims to know my educational influence.*

### ***Risk***

*I see the rigour of a claim to know my educational influence as working with the risk and fragility of being at the edge of one's competence in projecting oneself into a future that is unpredictable, with the hope that one can look back on one's life with the feeling that it was worthwhile.*

### ***Plural Structure***

*Each influence in my learning requires a different form of expression for its representation and communication. These different forms of expression help to strengthen the rigour of a living theory in terms of its plural structure.*

### ***Multiple Resource***

*In acknowledging the numerous influences in my own learning I need to draw on multiple resources from the work of others. I acknowledge the influences of these multiple resources in the creation of my living theory by showing how they influence my own learning and practice.*

### ***Theory Practice Transformation***

*A living theory at any particular time, can be understood as a transition structure in a process of transformation. The rigour of research process in constructing living theories can be enhanced through a demonstration, within the living theory, that both practice and theory are being transformed in the process of enquiry.*

## Appendix Three

### Children's Learning Theory

The starting point was the form of the TASC Wheel and the letters standing for different words. The children began discussing ideas for a special word to call their theory. Child 'A' quickly came up with 'QUIFF' and the children liked the sound of the word. The next step for them was deciding what each letter should stand for. They talked together around the circle sharing ideas whilst I acted as scribe on the whiteboard. The process from start to finish including thinking of the word and what each letter meant only took half an hour, this was with the agreement of all the children.

**Q** questions

**U** understanding

**I** I am important

**F** feelings

**F** focus

The discussion was focused, there were no disagreements about what each letter should stand for. Children of all abilities shared ideas and added detail to the ideas. The whole class are really pleased with their initial idea and then wanted time to think about it before adding more detail behind QUIFF. This point of reflecting and coming back to the task was their own idea and seemed to give all of the children time to come up with strong ideas and have a lot to share when they came back together.

Child D quickly pointed out the following day that the 'I' he had thought of for 'I am important' is in the middle of the word, just like we are in the middle of our learning. Child A is confident all aspects of learning are in QUIFF because we control the type of learner we are with how we are feeling or believe we have learned about ourselves. Please see appendix one for details of their thinking behind QUIFF.

The children like the physical representation of QUIFF as a wheel and wanted a visual picture of QUIFF. In this picture by child A, The pyramid represents our learning. The base is 'Q' questions, base of all learning and the widest part of our learning pyramid. Our focus helps us answer those questions, persevere, which appears like an egg floating in the questions. Another child explained how they had put an eye at the top of the pyramid because we are most important and stop or let all of the learning happen. Child B explained how he had put knowledge of 'things' as he called them in the triangle, but of himself higher because that is more important and harder to learn about. The whole picture is surrounded by a rainbow as that provides the skills for us to learn.

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