

Critical Analysis Article

Engaging in Collaborative Research: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

A collaborative research initiative was established between early childhood centre staff and teacher educators from a tertiary institution. The aim of the research was to investigate a problem related to the achievement of boys from the centre when they started school. This paper reports on issues and tensions that arose when the centre staff realised that, although the focus of the collaborative venture was the boys' learning competencies, their professional practice would also come under scrutiny. Resolving the issues was a delicate and sensitive process for all concerned. The lessons derived from this experience may be of relevance to others who engage in similar research collaborations.

Key Words: Research collaboration, practitioner research, action research, centre-based investigation

Introduction

In our capacity as teacher educators we received a call from Marama, the supervisor of an early childhood centre, asking if we might help her and her staff investigate a problem relating to the achievement of boys from their centre when they started school. Marama explained that she and her staff perceived the boys were socially competent and ready for school. Yet according to informal feedback from parents the boys did not continue to make the expected rates of progress upon entry to school. After discussion with Marama we agreed to work collaboratively with her and her staff to investigate the perceived 'problem'. From our perspective the collaboration would be between Marama, her staff and us. We undertook to seek ethics approval from our institution's Ethics Committee for the research. Upon ethics approval, Marama offered to distribute participant information sheets and to seek written informed consent from all of the proposed research participants. The nature of the early childhood staff's proposed involvement in the project was outlined in their participant information sheet. Although Margaret and Helen are our actual names, we have used pseudonyms for all the early childhood staff to protect their identities.

Noteworthy to this collaborative venture is that the centre staff is of various ethnicities: four Maori teachers, a Samoan teacher, and a Tongan teacher. Five are qualified teachers and one is in field training. We, the teacher educators, are both Pakeha

(European New Zealanders). Helen has had extensive experience in primary teaching and teacher education, while Margaret's experience has been in early childhood teacher education. We have both worked with Maori and Pacific Nations' people and have knowledge of culturally appropriate practices. Further, each of us has been engaged in doctoral studies and we both have had prior experience of supporting teachers to engage in action research. Also significant to this study is that Margaret has had, through a previously held role as Head of Practicum early childhood, an affirmative long-term professional relationship with Marama and two of her staff members.

This paper reports on tensions that occurred between the centre staff and us as we discussed the boys' learning competencies and jointly explored how these were fostered within the centre environment.

Literature Review

Research is no longer the sole domain of academics. There is increasing demand for teachers to be practitioner researchers (Duncan & Foote, 1999; Yorks, 2005). Practitioner research has been promoted as a means of helping practitioners to understand their practice and their lives (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). It also offers potential for teachers to develop new knowledge through the examination, deconstruction, and reconstruction of their professional practice.

Conversely, teachers may encounter issues when undertaking practitioner research. These include technical difficulties associated with time constraints, workload and curriculum responsibilities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Thornley, Parker, Read, & Eason, 2004). Other substantive issues relate to teachers' knowledge and understanding. Many teachers currently employed in the workforce were 'trained' at a time when practical aspects of teaching were the order of the day (MacNaughton, 1996). Knowledge and understanding of the systematic nature of research may not have been a feature of their initial teacher education programme. Nor might emphasis have been given to the notions of reflection and reflexivity, crucial practices for practitioner-based inquiry (Yorks, 2005). Such issues may lead teachers to doubt their capacity to research their own practice (Corrie, 1999; Thornley et al., 2004).

A viable alternative to teachers working on their own is for them to engage in collaborative research with 'expert others' (Corrie, 1999; Thornley et al., 2004). The university researcher is often recognised as that expert other. Hence, research collaborations between teachers and academics have been promoted as a means to investigate problems of practice (Allwright, 2005; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Yorks, 2005).

Collaborative research is not without its own set of problems. It has been suggested that only insiders to a group or culture can adequately report on it (Brooker 2002; Shah 2004). Yet, unfamiliarity with a cultural context may allow an outsider to bring fresh insight into current practice (Shah, 2004). The multiple perspectives that 'insiders' and 'outsiders' bring to the collaborative process add to its complexity (Corrie, 1999; Hatherly, 1999; Golby & Appleby, 1995). Even when trust, mutual respect and reciprocity have been established, feelings of threat, unease and resentment may arise

when insiders and outsiders work together (Bogden & Biklan, 1998; Briggs, 1986). In such circumstances, the outsider may be viewed as a social intruder (Shah, 2004). Issues of ownership (Elliott, 1991; Hatherly, 1999) and issues of power (Allwright, 2005; Yorks, 2005), prevalent in any research endeavour, will be further exacerbated in collaborative research.

Methodology

The research design was informed by a qualitative action research methodology (Kember & Kelly, 1994). Action research, arising from a problem, dilemma or ambiguity in the situation in which practitioners find themselves, consists of a number of cyclical phases. These are an initial reflection including recording the existing situation, planning, action, observation, and critical reflection on what has occurred. As Kember and Kelly suggest:

Critical reflection can take place in isolation but it is usually more fruitful if it takes place within small group discussions where ideas and impressions can be shared and where hopefully changes in attitude and practice in those concerned with the innovation can be brought about (p.11).

After informal visits to the centre to meet the staff, the boys and their parents, we agreed that we would make four consecutive weekly visits to observe and assess the boys' learning. Prior to these weekly visits we facilitated a semi-structured focus group interview with the staff and invited them to reflect upon their philosophy and practice. At the conclusion of the weekly visits we held a second meeting with the staff. The purpose of this meeting was to report the results of the boys' assessments including our observations of the boys' engagement in the centre programme; to discuss the efficacy of our findings and observations; and to jointly reflect on what should be done with the findings. With the permission of the staff, the focus group interview and second meeting were audio-taped, transcribed and returned to participants for verification.

After this second meeting had occurred, Marama, like us, was aware that staff had become resistant to the research project. In an apparent attempt to counteract this resistance, Marama decided to conduct semi-structured individual interviews with her staff to ascertain their thoughts and feelings about the research. She also wrote on-going reflections on the impact of the research process on her professional life and on the well-being of the boys. She encouraged her staff to do the same. With the permission of the staff these reflections were later shared with us and were included in the research documentation. The unexpected benefits of these additional data generating processes were two fold. Firstly, Marama had empowered staff members to let their voices be heard without the constraints of our presence. Secondly, she had found a means of providing us, the teacher educators, with deeper insight into the perspectives of her and her staff.

We, the teacher educators, kept a diary of significant events and written reflections recording our thoughts, feelings and perceptions on the research process. For example,

before the focus group interview and the reporting of the boys' learning, we met to strategise the particular approach and roles that we would undertake. Also following each visit to the centre we engaged in a de-briefing session where each of us shared our perceptions on and responses to what had occurred, our role in that occurrence, and how we might do things differently next time. Additional meetings were held with Marama, as the instigator of the research, to share reflections on the processes and to discuss issues emerging from the investigation. Much of our discussion revolved around how we might mitigate any unintended consequences arising from the study, specifically in relation to the staff participation.

Findings

From our perspectives, the findings from this first cycle of the research revealed that issues emerged pertaining to fostering positive relationships, presenting information in a non-judgemental manner, and finding a means of empowering the centre staff to identify how they might change their professional practices in order to enhance the boys' transition to school. From the centre staff members' perspectives there were issues related to vulnerability in exposing their values, beliefs and practice to the scrutiny of others, feelings of intrusion, and concern about competency.

Starting the Process

Before we started the research we were excited to have been invited to participate. It was clear from Marama's written reflection that she valued the notion of action research as a means of reflection on, and possible reconstruction of, practice:

Marama: I've always thought that any type of research that will stimulate thinking and get us to move on into areas that our children will benefit from and to investigate and reflect on our practice has got to be really good. And I was always keen to look at what was happening to our boys.

We assumed that Marama's voice was representative of the group. We thought that everybody wanted us there, and that it would truly be a joint venture. However, we discovered from written reflections that each of the five other staff members had been concerned about the research project in terms of time and extra work:

Tari: I didn't like the (thought of the) workload.

Hine: My initial barrier was thinking how time consuming that it could possibly get.

Huia: When I was told about it, I thought, "Oh no, not another one. More work".

Loselio: More work comes to mind.

Saane: I thought, "There's more work".

Marama had foreseen that time would be a concern but was philosophical about it:

Marama: Time was always going to be an issue because the centre life is already full.

The staff members' reluctance to engage in the research was not evident to us on our informal visits. During those visits we had met with the staff team, the boys, and parents who were present. We had been invited to look at the programme in operation and at all times we had felt welcome. The following reflections indicate our perceptions of those visits:

Margaret: Each time I step into this centre, I experience a culture of inclusion, harmony, and social cohesion.

Helen: My initial impression was of children, who were happily engaged in a variety of activities. The children were very friendly and were eager to talk to me and share what they were doing. As I moved around the centre, the staff seemed at ease with visitors in their midst.

On the day of our planned visit to engage in the focus group interview with the staff we had brought food for afternoon tea and arrived at the centre at the appointed time. We had understood that the focus group interview would take place in the time usually reserved for staff meetings. We had also presumed that staff meetings were held at times when children were not present. However, this was not the case and contrary to the reception that we had been given on our previous visits, we were faced with what might be viewed as resistance:

Margaret: When we arrived at the centre the teachers were having lunch. I had hoped that we would have a quiet space for the interview process but this was not to be. It became evident that we were expected to find a space for our tape-recorder amidst the food and dishes. There were a number of infants and toddlers present throughout the interview, which made attention difficult – not to mention the difficulty of getting a clear recording.

We had planned to start with questions about philosophy and practice before asking staff members about what provisions they made for transition to school. However we soon became aware that this was not going to be a straightforward process:

Helen: I thought the staff members would talk quite freely. I was surprised, when this didn't happen. To begin with Margaret and I were faced with silence when we asked what the staff's philosophy was....

Margaret: It seemed there was a priority about who would talk. After a very slow start, Huia, the apparent leader of the group, suggested that they should all have their say. But, the whole affair appeared too much for one person and she remained silent throughout the whole interview.

We had every confidence that, in reading the participant information sheets and in signing the consent to participate forms, staff members were knowledgeable about their role in the research process and that their aims and expectations for the research were in line with ours. But, their perceptions of the research process as shared with Marama during her individual interviews revealed that although some understood something of the process, others did not:

Loselio: For a start, I did not know that they were going to interview us. I thought they had just come to do their own thing.

Hine: I didn't know that they were coming to interview us until that day.

Saane: I wasn't expecting it. I felt put on the spot.

Huia: You (Marama) clarified what was to happen, so I had a fair idea what we were getting into.

Marama's reflection offered an explanation for the staff's mixed understandings about the focus group meeting:

Marama: I remember telling everybody that it was going to happen and it's almost like, "Oh it's happened".

From our point of view the staff seemed reluctant to commence the focus group interview. They did not verbally protest but took their time to clear a space for us. Their on-going reflections revealed the turmoil that was going on for each of them:

Loselio: I was nervous because I didn't even know them that well. I felt really uncomfortable and I was just sitting there that day, saying nothing about it.

Tari: That was intimidating, I guess because they are well known and they are respected in their field. It's just that getting those other people coming into our own environment, it just upsets the balance, I think. We just get so used to working in our little team that when others come in from outside, it's almost an intrusion on our area, our environment.

Hine: I felt apprehensive because I felt unprepared.

Saane: A bit anxious because I wasn't expecting it. It was good it was a group interview, so we sort of all helped.

Huia: I think it was a bit daunting. I was a bit overwhelmed by the fact that you had these people – and then I thought, “well they have a job to do”.

Despite their inner turmoil, the staff engaged in the focus group interview. Their disclosures gave us insight into their philosophy and practice, particularly in relation to transition to school. At the same time, we also sensed that our collaboration was in a precarious position. We remained positive and continued to visit the centre weekly to assess the boys' learning. Each time we were warmly welcomed.

The Fragility of the Research Partnership

In light of the fragility of the research partnership a number of decisions had to be made prior to the second group meeting. A key task for us was to decide not only what would be presented in regard to the boys' learning and social competencies, but also how this reporting might occur. A glimpse of our reflections at that time reveals our tentativeness in sharing our findings:

Helen: I'm worried about the group's response. I can see that they are doing some really good things but I think there are aspects of the programme that could be strengthened which would help not only the boys but the girls too. How are we going to tell them this without them feeling we are criticising?

Margaret: The staff have [sic] strong bonds with the children. They really embrace the mana atua strand of Te Whaariki. I wonder how they will react to us making judgements about their children.

We decided that an appropriate way forward would be to develop individual written profiles of the boys, which could be used as discussion points for the meeting. Consistent with early childhood philosophy and practice, the profiles described what the boys could do and were reported under the following headings: Literacy Knowledge and Understandings, Mathematical Knowledge and Understandings, Social Competencies, and Knowledge of School. There were two other sections in the boys' profiles headed: Where to Next? and How To?. The 'where to next' section contained suggestions about the types of activities that could be beneficial to the boys in relation to their current capabilities. We decided that before the meeting finished we would emphasise to the staff that the suggestions offered were negotiable and that we did not intend to dictate changes to their practice.

As anticipated it was hard for the staff to accept our assessments of the boys' knowledge and skills. We realised this during the meeting when individual staff sought to provide us with possible explanations for some of the results:

Marama: He hasn't been with us for long.

Huia: When I worked with him, most of the time he doesn't want to stay. You know, I have to try and keep him interested and it's a mission to keep him focused.

There was some feeling that we had not acknowledged the progress a particular child might have made. For example, when Helen gave feedback that the oldest of the six boys, who was soon to start school, was unable to distinguish between letters and numbers the staff seemed to view this as an implied criticism of the child:

Tari: I think he's made some amazing progress in terms of social stuff since he's been here – because he was quite domineering.

Huia: When we visited him at... his social skills there at that centre... there were absolutely none. He was an absolute handful. But he's taken enormous steps.

The staff appeared defensive when we came to discuss the 'where to next' section of the boys' profiles and made suggestions about including possible activities in the centre programme. They seemed to interpret our suggestions as shortcomings in their work and felt the need to justify their competence. For example, when we were talking about activities that might develop the boys' textual awareness, Saane, who is the team leader for literacy, was quick to interject:

Saane: Can I add something? I need to say it's our girls that pick it up. Our three-year old girls are doing it.

This defensiveness was echoed in the staff members' interview responses to Marama. Responses revealed the staff considered that we had not been there long enough to gain a holistic picture of the boys' capabilities. They felt the way we had collected data about the boys was not congruent with their practice. Doubt was cast on the accuracy of our findings. This doubt was tempered, in some instances, with an apparent need to be positive about the research:

Loselio: At first I was a bit upset because, what I see here, we did a lot with our boys. Like we did as much as we can with them. And then, when they came over here, they said all those things that we didn't do with them individually. And I was a bit upset because ... all the staff they work hard with them.

Hine: Considering they were only here for one day a week, one morning - so the lack of time. What they could assess in that time was quite relevant.

Huia: Given the time they had to do them, which wasn't a lot, so given that time frame and what they came up with, I felt they opened up an area.

Saane: It was quite good to see where they were at [the boys] and how they [us] did it, and what they [us] looked at – but – when I looked at it and read it [the profiles] I thought, 'that's how they're testing. Or the outcome was on that day'.... I knew the kids were able to do some of the things previously. But with the testing, it's what they [us] see right there and then.

Clearly while we perceived our assessments of the boys to be an informal strategy the staff did not. In their opinion, assessment equated with testing.

Moving Forward

During the second meeting, we emphasised that the 'how to' section of the boys' individual profiles had been left blank with the intention that it would be completed by staff. We stressed that it was their decision as to what strategies might be implemented and how this implementation might occur. Marama's immediate response was:

Our philosophy and programme are very focused on literacy and numeracy, and social competency. So all of these things fit in anyway. And I think that we can clearly do all of this in the way we work with our children.

She went on to suggest that staff should individually brainstorm ways in which strategies might be implemented. Subsequently, Marama collated these ideas for discussion and staff made decisions about collaborative action. We were not present during those discussions, although they were recorded for purposes of the research.

Over the next three months as staff put new strategies into practice they noted changes in the boys. From the staff point of view the boys were keen to participate in a greater range of activities, their attention span increased, they were more willing to persevere with a task, and they appeared to enjoy the activities offered. In noting these changes, staff perceptions of the value of the research became more positive:

Tari: I think it was really good. Because there were things that they picked up that I had missed and when we targeted – like having more writing for the boys, having more book work or more reading stories they just picked it up so easily – and it was something they grew to like.

Marama: I've seen a huge impact.... the last three months are the first time that... I have walked past on several occasions and found every boy engaged.

Discussion

In relation to this research collaboration, Marama and her staff had identified a 'problem' and were eager to seek our help in finding a 'solution'. At the beginning of the collaboration, it could be argued that the staff owned the problem (Hatherly, 1999). However, as the research progressed, it became evident that the staff had different understandings and expectations than us about what the research might involve. Despite both oral and written explanations of the proposed nature of their participation, there was a breakdown in understanding of what would take place. It appeared that the staff thought that because the research problem related to the boys, then the focus of the research would be solely on the boys. They had not considered that a starting point for the research would be an examination of their philosophy and practice – a potentially painful activity. This misunderstanding was worrying, but, in retrospect, not surprising. Participants may not fully understand the implications of what they have agreed to until the research is underway (Spoonley, 1999).

Margaret's changed role also contributed to the complexity of the situation. The staff had previously welcomed her into the centre as a visiting lecturer for practicum. In that role, Margaret's focus was the practice of the student teacher; on no occasion had there been a need to examine the professional practice of the staff. Margaret represented an outsider's perspective but this had not previously been regarded as problematic. In undertaking this research collaboration it became apparent to staff that Margaret's role had changed. As a researcher and outsider she was now perceived to be casting a critical eye on their centre, their boys, their philosophy and their practice. Her changed role and the presence of Helen, known to have a junior school background, led the staff to become apprehensive. So whilst our initial warm welcome might well have been influenced by social obligations and the cultural values of the insiders, we were soon to be viewed as not only outsiders but also as social intruders (Brooker, 2002; Shah, 2004).

The following two accounts further illustrate the tensions that were created when there was a mismatch between insider and outsider perspectives. In their commitment to the principles, strands and goals of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whaariki*, it appeared that the staff embraced the concept of whanaungatanga, or sense of family (Ministry of Education, 1996). In contrast we considered that on some occasions four-year-old children might benefit from small group and individual interactions with staff without the presence of younger children. The concept of mana tangata, where each child's contribution is valued and affirmed, was another key feature of the staff philosophy and practice. From the perspective of staff our individual assessments of the boys were incongruent with their philosophical stance in regard to what learning is important and how learning is acknowledged. These insider and outsider perspectives challenged their philosophy and practice, created tension, unease and anxiety for us all, and could not be ignored.

In searching for a way forward we had to grapple with a moral and ethical dilemma. As outsiders, who had a strong commitment to the aims of the research, our role was to provide new insight into the investigation (Golby & Appleby, 1995). Yet it was important that staff patterns of thought and action were not disrupted to the extent that

they felt their practice would be undermined. We felt it necessary to remove ourselves from the foreground of the process to allow staff to decide if, when, and how any change to practice should occur. As insiders, staff needed to decide for themselves which, if any, of our outsider perspectives could be integrated with their philosophy and practice. A further consideration for staff was how they could safeguard the internal logic, coherence, and integrity of their shared systems of thinking and acting.

Marama, as an insider and co-researcher, was a key player in the facilitation of those decision-making processes. She involved the staff in considering what strategies might be adopted and implemented, and how these might be reviewed. With her guidance the staff tentatively and gradually reconstructed aspects of their practice. Subsequently, positive changes in the boys' learning were noted and led to staff attitudinal change. This transformation in attitude is consistent with Guskey's (2002) model of teacher change in that staff commitment to new practices occurred not at the time of implementation, but when they found practices that worked for them and their children. Changes to beliefs and attitudes arose from a noted improvement in the boys' learning.

Conclusion

What are the lessons to be learned from this collaborative venture? In our enthusiasm and excitement to get the project underway, we spent insufficient time in the preparatory stages of the collaboration. When we planned and shared tasks with Marama we assumed that her voice was representative of the other staff members. In hindsight, we realise that we neglected to actively involve all the staff members in all our discussions. Essentially our collaboration was with Marama. As a result, the informed consent of staff proved to be problematic. We have learned that who speaks for a community is a major issue in any research collaboration (Spoonley, 1999).

At the outset of the collaboration, we made the mistake of driving the research. As the more 'expert others', we collected, analysed and reported the data. In taking this amount of control we reduced the insiders' opportunities to retain ownership of the investigation. Once staff members were encouraged to take a more active role in the problem solving stage of the research a better balance in the collaborative process was achieved.

The "bond of common concern" in our research partnership was a desire for the boys' transition to school to be more successful (Brooker, 2002, p.17). This shared ambition provided the impetus for the research and later became the motivational force that sustained the process and maintained the collaboration. The positive change in the boys' learning as an outcome of this collaboration affected staff attitudes toward the research process. Their feelings of anxiety and unease diminished as they found their own means of taking outsider perspectives and incorporating these into their practice. They felt professionally affirmed when they recognised they had played an important part in the investigation. This realisation affected their attitude to the action research process and to us as participants within that process. Although we remained outsiders, we were no longer viewed as social intruders.

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