

A critical analysis of the relationship between teacher subject knowledge and effective learning and teaching in the primary school

Is good subject knowledge essential for a teacher to be excellent? Or can a teacher rely on a limited subject knowledge and a solid notion of pedagogical principles? Can teachers simply google what they think they need to know on the day keeping their subject just above that of the children they are teaching? This essay aims to look at the literature surrounding the subject of teacher knowledge and give a discussion of the different findings. Following this I will evaluate and analyse my own subject knowledge based on my experiences from my Professional Teaching Experience (PTE) and compare them to my findings. I will endeavour to maintain complete anonymity of the school and children within the school so as to adhere to the guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). I will refer to the school as 'School Z' and change any names of children to maintain anonymity.

School Z caters to pupils from 3 – 11. Pupils in the school come from a variety of backgrounds 'ranging from relatively prosperous to economically disadvantaged' (School Guide, 2018). A large proportion of the children in the school live in some of the most deprived areas in Wales. Around 27% of the children receive free school meals which is above the national average. The school themselves have identified around 43% of the children as having additional learning needs which is well above the national average (Schoolguide.co.uk, 2018). During my placement I was in one of the two split year 3/4 classes. The class has 28 pupils (15 male, 13 female). A 1 to 1 support staff would assist in the class for the first two hours of every morning, being a 1 to 1 however the staff member was limited in what she was able to assist with.

First and foremost, I think it is important to define what constitutes a great teacher. A 2014 review (Coe et al., 2019) suggests that defining effective teaching is not an easy thing to do. It goes on to state that their best interpretation of effective teaching is teaching that leads to success based on outcomes that will affect the student's future successes. With this in mind we begin to evaluate the relationship between a teacher's subject knowledge and how it can influence their effectiveness in that role.

A 1978 paper produced for the Department for Education and Skill (Primary education in England, 1978) stated that a lack of working knowledge in science; which is appropriate to the age of the children being taught, results in a teacher lacking confidence in their abilities. This lack of confidence can lead some teachers to completely abandon science from the curriculum. Whereas for those that attempted to teach science, the work they produced was superficial because they themselves did not understand what they were teaching. The DES concluded that this lack of subject knowledge was one of the 'most severe obstacles' that stood in the way of improving primary school science p(Primary education in England, 1978 p62). This obstacle was deemed to exist in the teaching of science, but it is only natural to assume this this lack of confidence also perpetuates other areas of the curriculum as well. What we can deduct from this study from a broad perspective is that the lack of subject knowledge can generate a lack of confidence in teaching subjects. This can unfortunately result in a complete abandonment of a subject or teaching a subject so superficially that it becomes ineffective.

Without a proper in depth understanding of subject knowledge it can become easy for a teacher to fall into a routine of simply conveying information to the children rather than engaging with the children (Khwaja, 2006). A study undertaken by Whitby (1993) studied the relationship between a teacher's scientific knowledge and their confidence to teach science. Whitby found that a teacher's subject knowledge directly related to their confidence in

teaching which then in turn determined their ability to effectively teach science. The study conducted entailed Whitby observing two teachers with a varying level of scientific understanding. One held a science degree while the other believed their knowledge of science was subpar. Both teachers planned the lesson together, however Whitby found that the teacher with a degree was much more comfortable in the lesson and asked a lot more questions to develop the pupils understanding. The teacher who had less understanding asked fewer questions and the questions they asked resulted in more confusion. This teacher later admitted that owing to her lack of confidence she intentionally sped through the lesson to avoid the children asking questions that she would be unable to answer. This unfortunately means that the children were not being appropriately scaffolded as theorised by Vygotsky (1978) the teacher is unable to be the help that the children require to progress. This gap in teacher knowledge also means that the children are not able to fully develop their own knowledge. Questioning allows children to fill in gaps in their knowledge and gain information they need via a specifically targeted question. If a teacher is unable to answer these questions, passes over them as not important or simply does not allow children to ask questions they are not getting the most out of their learning (MM, 2007). Piaget (1983) with his constructivist approach would suggest that the children in this circumstance were unable to construct their own learning and build on their prior knowledge in this scenario. If a teacher is dismissing a question as unimportant then this could lead the child to having a low self-esteem and less confidence in the future regarding developing their learning via questioning the teacher as well as feeling like the teacher has a lack of interest in what they are saying (Rowland, Huckstep and Thwaites, 2003). This could in turn lead that student to not want to ask any further questions leading to ineffective learning. Holt (1982) stated that most children in school area scared, this statement was in relation to children's fears about being asked questions in a classroom and the child worrying that they would not know the answer and look foolish, stating that a 'scared learner is always a poor learner' (Holt, 1982

p93). However, in the class of the teacher who lacked subject knowledge, they could find that their children are not only worried about being asked questions but also have a fear of asking questions in case their questions are dismissed as unimportant.

The teacher can be forgiven to a degree in this scenario as they were being observed which may have led to anxiety on their part, on top of the anxiety they may have been feeling about their lack of subject knowledge. Anxiety can have a plethora of negative effects including an effect on the way we listen when anxious, 'our capacity to listen diminishes with anxiety' (Brown and Wragg, 1993, p20) placing the body in a fight or flight mode, essentially 'scrambling the brain' (Rix, 2015).

A similar study conducted by Brown and Simon (1996) concluded that the responses of the children in the class are directly related to the subject knowledge of the teacher. This is owing to the fact that the teacher with the subject knowledge is able to question the children in a way that develops their knowledge and provides open discussions through which the children can develop their own learning. The teacher with the subject knowledge is also able to understand different ways that they can convey the information to the children if they are struggling to understand, I will address this idea further on in the essay. The teacher without subject knowledge can only reiterate the information that they already know, without being able to challenge the children further, or develop discussions, this is simply because the teacher does not possess the appropriate knowledge to continue.

Both of these studies seem to correspond with Shulman's argument that in order for a teacher to be effective they must be able to make connections between their own subject knowledge and their pupils' knowledge (Khawaja, 2006). This will in turn allow them to develop their pupils understanding more efficiently and bridge the gaps they discover in their knowledge effectively.

This sees a direct relationship with Shulmans ideas that *content* should have a main focus in the classroom. However, he continued that although a large emphasis needs to be

placed on the actual subject knowledge of a teacher it cannot alone create an effective teacher. He stated that ‘mere content knowledge is likely to be as useless pedagogically as content free skill’ (Shulman, 1986, p. 8). In order for a teacher to be effective, the most influential trait they need to have is a good pedagogical content knowledge. What this meant to Shulman was that a teacher may know everything about physics, but unless they are able and capable of representing this information in a way that is comprehensible to others, they cannot effectively teach it. A teacher needs to be able to understand the different ways in which they can convey information to learners with all different abilities. While understanding the content that these learners will already have about certain topics and understand how they can develop this understanding further. At the heart of it, pedagogical content knowledge is the ability of the teacher to make their own knowledge accessible to their students. It is important to note that Shulman did not believe that a teacher needs to understand every aspect of a subject in order to be an effective teacher, what he believed was that a teacher needs not only to understand topics but also understand why they are so. (Shulman, 1986). Ball (1988) echoed this idea when he stated that there is a substantial difference between knowing a topic for yourself and being able to teach it in a way that someone else could learn it.

Studies on subject knowledge and its effects on teacher effectiveness have been carried out all over the world with differing results. A study in conducted in Brazil in 1992 by Harbison and Hanushek found that the scores the teachers achieved on their fourth-grade test results had a direct impact on their pupils’ achievements (Sadler et al., 2013). A similar study in Belize was carried out whereby the teachers took the same tests as their students and once again their results had a direct impact on the gains of their students (Sadler et al., 2013). These results show us that at least in these circumstances that a good subject knowledge or lack thereof, has an impact on the results that the children produced. This would lead us to the conclusion that at its core a good subject knowledge does lead to effective teaching.

These tests however, did not take into account any pedagogical content knowledge whatsoever, or at least not in any way that we could test. The tests relied merely on the teacher's content knowledge relating to the subject of maths. With this information we can either assume that all of the teachers in these studies had a good pedagogical understanding or that it is perhaps not as important as a factor as pure content knowledge alone.

It is important not to take these studies as fact and assume instantly that teacher subject knowledge is the be all and end all in the fight to create effective teachers. While it is true that 'teachers cannot help children learn things they themselves do not understand' (Ball, 1991, p5), Hattie provides a slightly different insight. In his study of the various influences that affect learning, Hattie found that 'teacher subject matter knowledge' was at the very end of the positive influences (Appendix 1). This implies that a teacher's subject knowledge has little to no effect on the pupil's work. Kleickmann (2013) agrees with this and argues that while content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge have a deep relationship, pedagogical content knowledge is a much larger predictor of student achievement.

It would be criminal to talk about the effects of teacher subject knowledge on a teacher's effectiveness without mentioning the Knowledge Quartet (KQ) (Rowland, Huckstep and Thwaites, 2003). Rowland (2003) described the KQ as an essential tool to help understand how subject knowledge has a role in the classroom with relation to mathematics. The KQ is broken down into four units; foundation, transformation, connection and contingency. Foundation consists of what knowledge the teacher already possesses. Rowland (2003) suggest that this is the most important unit as through it, the other three units flow. It is with this foundation of knowledge that the teacher makes their pedagogical decisions. Shulman (1987) suggested that without this foundation knowledge; the basic subject knowledge that a teacher needs, then the pedagogical content knowledge cannot be achieved. The second of these units is transformation. This unit relates to the ability of the teacher to use the knowledge they possess and transform it into forms that are 'pedagogically powerful'

(Shulman, 1987 p.15) for students. This idea directly relates to Shulmans theory that a teacher needs to possess a good pedagogical content knowledge in order to represent what they know in ways that children will be able to access. With an ability to transform one's knowledge we are able to find connections between what we already know and new ideas. This allows us to present analogies to children which allow them to draw up conclusions between what they already know and their new knowledge (Loughran, Berry and Mulhall, 2006, p. 34).

The third unit in the KQ is connection. Connection appears to be heavily focused on pedagogical content knowledge. Connection is the section that relates to how a teacher arranges their lessons, how a lesson is structured and what is taught in what order. It also relates to knowing what topics and levels of complexity are appropriate for whom (Rowland, Huckstep and Thwaites, 2003).

The final unit is contingency. In my opinion this is where a teacher's subject knowledge needs to strong. Contingency relates to the teacher's ability to think on their feet and be able to respond to events that cannot possibly be planned. Without a proper background knowledge of a topic a teacher is unable to provide answers to inquisitive children who only want to ask 'why?' It is through the unit of contingency that new links can be made where a teacher can discover gaps in children's knowledge. Not only this but it enables teachers to discover what topics interest students and plan accordingly. Without this base subject knowledge, a teacher would be unable to answer questions that they had not planned for which could lead to breakthroughs in a child's knowledge of that subject or develop a whole new line of questioning.

During my PTE I had the privilege of both planning and teaching lessons. This consisted of lessons where I felt confident about my subject knowledge and also lessons where I felt that my subject knowledge was less than I would have liked it to be.

Welsh is a subject where I feel that my knowledge is below where it should be in order to teach it as effectively as I could. It is a subject that I have endeavoured to learn through various means for the past two years but unfortunately it is a very slow road. Welsh is a subject that I am very keen to promote in a classroom, so it provides me an internal conflict. On the one hand I want to use as much Welsh as I possibly can in a classroom but on the other hand it makes me quite nervous that I could end up teaching the children something wrong, i.e incorrect pronunciation of a word or using the wrong tense. I first noticed how anxious welsh made me during my first observation. I found myself having completely forgotten the basic incidental Welsh that I had previously been capable of using. Throughout the lesson this anxiety became worse as I struggled to remember any of my Welsh, by the end of the lesson I had failed to use any welsh at all. This led to an unsatisfactory in my use of Welsh (appendix 2). This poor subject knowledge initially meant that I was unable to use welsh as a cross-curricular subject which Donaldson (2015) is promoting in his paper. I learnt from that observation that I would have to over plan my use of welsh in a classroom to compensate for my lack of instinctive welsh. I also made sure to plan and deliver a welsh lesson soon after in an attempt to build up my confidence using welsh in a classroom environment. This welsh lesson was a success as I had religiously read through the welsh text, I was going to read in class beforehand, meaning that when the inevitable anxiety struck, I was able to combat it because I had rehearsed the lesson. I decided to go completely over the top with my teaching style, putting on a ridiculously over the top welsh accent. I did this in an attempt to not only make it silly and fun for the children but to make it easier for myself to accept making a fool of myself if I did end up making a mistake. Pekrun (2000) has discussed the enjoyment and happiness that children get out of seeing their teachers enjoying themselves and I do believe that this accent helped with this. It has also been proven that the interaction a student has with a lesson and the teacher is directly affected by a teacher's passion for the lesson (Witt, Wheelless, and Allen, 2004). The children appeared to be fully

engaged with the story and were able to translate the story largely through context. I believe that this engagement and enjoyment led to them producing some good work based on the story. Although my content knowledge wasn't great in this circumstance, I was able to present the knowledge I did have in a way that made it accessible and engaging for the children. This follows Shulmans (1987) theory that although my content knowledge was not vast, I was still able to create a fully engaging lesson based largely on pedagogical content knowledge. Griffin (2005, p140) insisted in his paper that learning needs to be fun for learning to be effective, coining the term the 'pedagogy of enjoyment'. I believe this was a large influence as to why the learning in my lesson was effective. I was able to make the lesson fun for the children even with my imitated content knowledge.

Having gained a history degree, which specialised in both World Wars, I feel that my subject knowledge on topics relating to the wars is very good. Owing to my enthusiasm for history I wanted to impart my knowledge on the children. I did this during another observation session. I delivered a humanities session which focused on letter writing and literacy through the themes of World War 2 evacuees. This lesson enabled me to include a cross-curricular literacy aspect as suggested by the Donaldson Review (2015).

I began the lesson by getting the children to walk into the dark classroom with the sounds of air raid sirens and bombs going off to instantly hook the children. I then began a discussion with the children about what they thought we were going to talk about and what they already knew about WW2. This instantly grabbed their attention and as it was something out of the ordinary from what they would normally do. I was very impressed to see what the children already knew about the War, meaning the questions and thoughts that they presented had led us to a number of open debates. I was only able to fully engage with the class and make the most of these discussions and questions because my subject knowledge allowed me to. Had my knowledge not been as strong, I would have lacked the confidence to teach the children about topics which I had not planned for. During this discussion the children asked a

number of questions about the war which weren't directly related to evacuees, I faced a dilemma here, I could either; tell the children that we would come back to these topics (knowing full well that I would not have the time before I left) or, I could spend more time than I had planned on the questioning part of the lesson. I decided to go for the latter and allow the children to ask me whatever they wanted about the war. I knew that this could have resulted in a lack of work completed at the end of the session, but I decided to give the children as much opportunity to explore what they wanted to. It was a session like this that first developed my passion for history, therefore I wanted to give the children a chance to develop that passion. It was here that I was fully engaging with the contingency aspect of the knowledge quartet as I could not possibly have planned for the questions and avenues we delved down as a class.

During the main activity of the session I set the children the task of producing letters to send back home to their families as if they had been evacuated. I created a success criteria with the class about the sorts of subjects that should be in a letter home which formed the letter content (appendix 4). I told the children to think about the diary entry we wrote the week before, telling them that this was essentially a diary entry to somebody else. I set my more able group off without much input from myself informing them that if they wanted some ideas they could come and grab some of the information cards that I had created. I created these information cards for my middle group as an idea booster for them. They contained information such as who they were living with, where they were living and what sort of house, they were living in etc. I created these cards to look like evacuation tags and stained them with tea to make them look old, keeping in with the war theme I had set at the beginning of the lesson. I wanted the children to feel as immersed as possible. For my lower ability group, I printed out template letters and left key bits of information for them to fill in. As was usual in my lessons the children were able to move around in their groups if they felt the work was too easy or too difficult, but they first had to come and justify themselves to

me. I feel my pedagogical content knowledge was vital for this differentiation of workloads in the class. Had I relied entirely on my content knowledge I would have simply just presented the information to the children and sent them on their way, shortening the questioning time where the students' knowledge on the subject or task would have been enriched potentially resulting in better work. I believe that owing to my rehearsal of a welsh lesson the week before I was also able to improve my incidental welsh throughout the class, for example, getting the children to repeat 'llythr' which is welsh for letter. This new-found confidence enabled me to fully access my pedagogical knowledge and include welsh in ways that the children would actually learn. I was not just including welsh to tick a box I was actively encouraging the children to improve their welsh as oppose to simply repeating commands they are already confident with. This in turn lead me to a good in my 'welsh language standard' of my observation (appendix 3).

My pedagogical content knowledge has also helped me reflect on my lessons and help me to improve in future lessons. For example, I noticed very early on that I was selecting the same few students to answer my questions. These were the students who were the most confident in the class and were willing to raise their hands. This did not promote good assessment for learning as it allowed the rest of the students to simply switch off. I decided that moving forward I would devise a way to include all of the class in my questioning segments (appendix 5). I eventually decided on the use of lollypop sticks with the children's names on, this meant that they would be unable switch off as anybody's name could be pulled out to answer a question, the children would have to have an answer ready in their head.

It is clear throughout my readings and research in this debate that subject knowledge is an essential aspect in being an effective teacher and delivering effective learning. Shulman (1987) breaks subject knowledge down into content knowledge and pedagogical content

knowledge, although they are separate concepts, they are inseparable when talking about effective teaching and learning. This can also be seen in 'The Excellence in Teaching and Leadership (ETLF) Frameworks' where it states that teachers need to 'demonstrate relevant knowledge of subject pedagogies and disciplines' (p6) and also that they need to 'have secure, up to date, subject knowledge' (p7). Pedagogical content knowledge is ever more important in a time where people are asking if google can replace teachers (Gilbert, 2011). It is important to remember that content knowledge is becoming easier to access with the click of a button, but the role of the teacher is becoming more of a role of inspiration. We are here to make learning fun and accessible for learners, to provide learners with the skills to know what to do and how to use the information they find. As long as the internet remains simply a base of facts the teacher will never be redundant as they strive to teach children life skills and present information in ways that children can fully understand and utilise. In essence a computer can provide a child with subject knowledge, but it cannot provide a child with the pedagogical content knowledge that teachers possess, allowing the child to develop and put into practice said knowledge. The internet cannot tailor how it provides a child with information nor can it make it relatable. So, while I believe that content knowledge is an important factor with regards to effective teaching, I do not believe that a teacher can provide effective teaching without a strong pedagogical content knowledge.

Word Count - 4399

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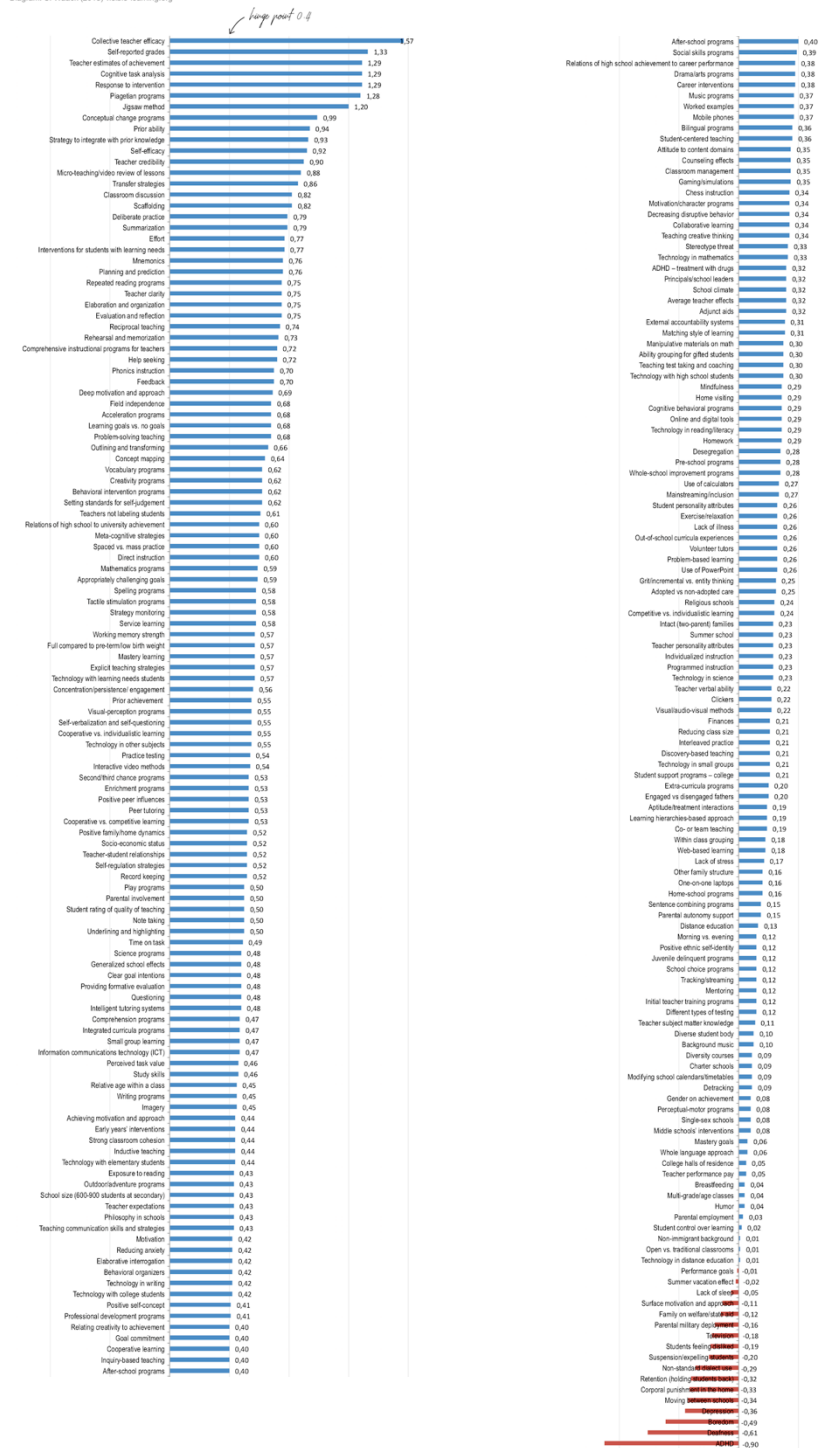
Appendices

1) Hattie Ranking: 252 Influences and Effect Sizes Related To Student Achievement

a. Retrieved from <https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

Hattie's 2018 updated list of factors related to student achievement: 252 influences and effect sizes (Cohen's d)

Source: J. Hattie (December 2017) visiblelearningplus.com
Diagram: S. Waack (2018) visible-learning.org



2) Portion of my first assessment relating to my lack of welsh.

S4: Welsh Language Standard

Unsatisfactory

- **Comments and Evidence**
- **Targets for improvement and suggested ways forward**

Thomas you planned to use some very basic commands in your lesson but did not use them to dismiss the children. You could have introduced some vocabulary to the children shop ,money,sweets etc . This is an area that needs developing .Try to integrate subject specific Welsh into your lessons . Target -To plan and deliver short 'slot drilio' on a daily basis – this will help develop your confidence in using the language as well as the confidence of the pupils -integrate subject specific Welsh into your lessons

3) Portion of my final assessment relating to my improvement in welsh.

S4: Welsh Language Standard

Good

- **Comments and Evidence**
- **Targets for improvement and suggested ways forward**

Some use of incidental Welsh through the lesson and asked the children to repeat Welsh phrases related to the lesson back. Correct Welsh was used. Areas for development: Write key phrases on the board and encourage children to use them throughout the lesson.

4) An example piece of work produced during a history letter writing session

om

Success Criteria

- Address (Think of the areas where children would have been evacuated from)
- Dear (who are we writing to?)
- How are you feeling about the strangers you are living with?
- Where are you staying?
- What have you been doing since you arrived?
- Is there anything happening at home that you want to know about?
- What sights and smells have you experienced?
- Closing line (can't wait to see you, missing you loads etc.)

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andrews avenue

15.

Dear Dad

I'm really loving living on a farm there's loads

of wild birds I'm glad I brought a bird book.

I help Dave and Julie with the farm jobs. I arrived

last week it took forever I didn't like I was in

~~at school~~ ^{Colchester} when I saw a sign. I go to St. Catharine's

Primary School. I made a friend called Lizabeth.

I have my own room with a bed and a window, deer

~~and a wardrobe~~ ~~at~~ I'm writing this letter on the desk in
 my room. Julie taught me how to knit socks, blankets
 and scarves. George has separate rooms in the which is good
 because I get to sleep a bit longer. In the sittinghouse
 there's a toilet, bath and big stove and a kitchen here
 Julie and Dave cook warm lovely meals. We ~~have~~
 walk the dogs called Samy, Willie, Melian, Marley and
 Stacy we walk them through the deep forest there
 loads of birds which I keep record of.
 missing you loads,

your sincerely,
 Oliver

The town Oliver this is a
 very descriptive piece of writing

5) Section from an ARC relating to AFL strategies

<i>Creating for Action</i> <i>How would you adapt your afl strategies to create a more effective learning experience?</i>	In future I would like to adapt my questioning strategies so that I make sure to get to everybody rather than just those children who are confident with their hand up – I would like to either set up a spinning wheel on the laptop so it will randomly select students or use lollypop sticks to again select random students.
<i>Transformed experience</i>	