

Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to organise, assess and analyse a close-to practice research project, namely, a lesson study, centralising on the role of a transformative teacher in renovating practice with the objective of further enriching the learning process for learners. The subject that appealed to me was the implementation of mini plenaries within a lesson on retaining the engagement of children during the lesson. The reason for this is because mini plenaries are an assessment for learning strategy, which Donaldson included as one of the 12 principles within his curriculum report, therefore, assessment for learning is viewed as a key component within the future of teaching and learning thus, forming the basis of my research focus. Secondly, in my classroom there are a wide range of abilities which has led me to conduct this study in order determine the effectiveness of mini plenaries on the engagement of children with ranging abilities.

Research context

In my class there were 26 children aged between 9 and 10 years old with varied abilities. I discussed the range of ability and learning needs within my class with my partner as I was interested in learning of the effectiveness of attempting to maintain the children's engagement during a lesson, to which she agreed that she was keen to investigate the maintenance of children's engagement during a lesson. I have been attempting to implement mini plenaries during my lessons to counteract disengagement and ensure the children are on the correct track, however it is difficult to allocate time during lessons, when there is an introduction, a main learning task, and an ending plenary. Therefore, our research question is designed to determine the effectiveness of these mini plenaries and if they are creating beneficial or detrimental outcomes for learners: How effective are mini plenaries in retaining the engagement of year 5 and 6 children? This would mean observing the children during a lesson to compare their levels of engagement before the implementation of a mini plenary and afterwards, in order to assess their effectiveness in doing so.

Literature overview

In order to research into literature regarding assessment for learning I firstly began looking at the work of Black et al who have written much literature on the topic due to their ongoing support and claim that it enhances child learning and progression. In fact, children who experience assessment for learning (previously referred to as formative assessment) during their lessons will make double the amount of progress as children who do not. This was carried out during a classroom study of a group of children who had assessment for learning methods implemented within their lessons, and a group of children who did not have assessment for learning methods implemented into their lessons. Black et al claim that the

reason the group of children experiencing assessment for learning implementation progression made twice as much progress was because they experienced day-to-day assessment along with consistent feedback. The children were more aware of what they needed to do and how they could progress further which led to a better understanding of tasks and expectations, therefore, benefitting the children's learning and progression significantly more than the group of children who did not experience assessment for learning methods during lessons. (Black et al, 1998)

Black and William outlined assessment for learning as an umbrella of strategies, namely, questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self-assessment. (Black et al, 1989b) Plenaries come under this umbrella as they involve elements of questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self-assessment, however, they are often viewed as taking place upon concluding a lesson to consolidate learning. Conversely, Watt declares that plenaries are in fact separated into 4 subdivisions. (Watt et al, 2006) This suggests that plenaries can take place throughout a lesson not simply upon conclusion, depending on the circumstances during the lesson, it could be necessary to implement a mini plenary. Ofsted support this further by reinforcing effective plenaries to entail the re-visit of lesson objectives, challenging learner's misunderstandings and validating learner's understanding, consolidation of children's learning in order to plan for future lessons and building the connection of new learning to prior and current learning. (Ofsted, 2003)

During a lesson study of teacher's initiation of mini plenaries to scaffold small group collaboration Joyce-Gibbons outlines the teachers use of on-the-spot mini plenaries upon assessing the circumstances within the lesson. A teacher identifies the situation in one group where they have misinterpreted a factor of the task set, the teacher identifies the issue and intervenes by holding a mini plenary for the whole class to follow to ensure all groups do not misinterpret the task and to put them onto the intended track. One of the other teachers identified a group who had successfully demonstrated the key thinking skills that were planned to be developed through the task. The teacher created a mini plenary using the group to emphasize what they had discussed in order to stimulate the other groups toward the aspired thinking patterns. (Joyce-Gibbons, 2017) This study demonstrates the use of mini plenaries in improving the learning of children as a stimulus for the intended learning and development, but also, to address any misconceptions encountered by the children during tasks. Therefore, it is conceivable to comprehend the beneficial features of mini plenaries in drawing children to the intended trajectory, the anticipated thinking skills of the task in hand, but also encouraging their participation to achieve the proposed learning outcomes.

Although it is possible to see that mini plenaries can provide beneficial aspects to learners, there are contentions that they can in fact have a negative influence on teaching and learning. Watt acknowledges this highlighting that teachers do consider them to be time constraining due to the fact that implementing mini plenaries during a lesson derives time from the planned task, thus, meaning that children do not have enough time to complete tasks and demonstrate understanding and learning. Didau argues that mini plenaries do not benefit children when it involves activities which reduce time spent teaching as they provide an expense of time. He claims that plenaries are a way of 'scaffolding' and connecting things children have and continue to learn, however, the more time allocated to these mini plenaries results in a lack of learning and content implying that children will be deprived of knowledge and learning to 'scaffold' and connect in the first instance. He also believes that mini plenaries do not provide engagement for learners of which they should be engaged through provision of interesting lesson content:

"There's also the question of why on earth you'd think a mini-plenary was more engaging than rich, inherently fascinating subject content." (Didau, 2020)

However, Didau agrees that stopping a lesson to check understanding is a key aspect of teaching, consequently, this should not be labelled as a mini plenary but just be included as general teaching. Also, he identifies concluding plenaries at the end of a lesson to be useful in summarising the purpose of the lesson and reminding students of the lesson objectives and success criteria to establish learning. Watt supports this viewpoint by stating that efficient teachers should be able to 'read' the children and assess a lesson to determine the requirement for a mini plenary as opposed to planning one should it not be required would waste key time spent on tasks. Although, Watt does confirm an end of lesson plenary to be essential while concluding a lesson. (Watt et al, 2006)

It is apparent that mini plenaries do involve some strong views on their implementation within lessons to progress learning and engage children, some in favour and some against their implementation during certain circumstances however, one cannot deny their usefulness in checking children's understanding and maintaining their focus on the lesson. Beirne acknowledges that children can often become distracted during lessons as a natural part of everyday life, but, the teacher must be prepared for these instances e.g. through interrupting the lesson with questioning in order to regain the children's focus and put them firmly back on track. (Beirne et al, 2012) Subsequently, when contemplating this aspect of teaching and learning it is possible to consider the implementation of mini plenaries within a lesson as an effective technique in regaining the children's attention. Thus, proving mini plenaries do use up lesson time, but, if the children are off task and not essentially working then they would

ultimately be of more value than allowing the children to continue 'working' and experience distraction.

Methodology

The professional standards for teaching and leadership were introduced with six overarching values and dispositions: professional entitlement; Welsh language and culture; rights of learners; Literacy, numeracy and digital competence; the system role; and the professional learner. (2019)

The professional learner is defined as: "The teacher is a professional learner and commits to continuous engagement in career long development, collaboration and innovation." (Welsh Government, 2019) Following this, there are 5 professional standards for teaching and leadership that require all teaching practitioners and leaders in Wales to abide by, they are: pedagogy; leadership; collaboration; innovation; and professional learning. Within the professional learning standard, it is expected that teaching practitioners should undertake research and evidence of broader practice conducted through further reading and research outcomes nationally and internationally. This will then enable teachers to make informed decisions about their own practice, allowing them to be more knowledgeable of theories regarding effective pedagogy, assessment, along with child development and learning inevitably contributing to planning and everyday practice. (Welsh Government, 2019) Furthermore, it is evident that professional learning is highly valued by the Welsh government for the future of teaching in Wales in order to create a body of teachers who are committed to developing their professional knowledge, through participating in research and using further reading of research findings to develop their practice and enable learners progression.

The methodology chosen for this research is lesson study which represents a method of action research. Action research in education is established as a method for teaching practitioners to collaboratively research and reflect on their practice in a critical manner, in order to understand, evaluate and inform oneself for application to planning and developing future practice. (Costello, 2003)

Teacher knowledge must encompass not only subject content knowledge but also knowledge relating to pedagogical content. The pedagogical knowledge allows teachers to relate theory to practice, through continual learning and understanding of effective practice to enhance learner progression. Dudley also alleges that efficient models of teacher learning should: occur over a matter of weeks and not days, use the classroom as the heart of the professional learning research, involve investigative trials into pupil learning to inform professional learning, and include collaborative research between one or more professionals

during the research study. Dudley stipulates that the model of lesson study research embodies all these features considered to be valued models of professional teacher learning. (Dudley, 2013)

The methods of data collection used in the research study are reflection, observation (non-participant) and focus group. The model of reflection is designed on Kolb's model which has 4 steps, the concrete experience – the actual experience, the reflective observation – the process of reviewing and reflecting on the experience, abstract conceptualisation – the process of concluding and learning from the experience, and active experimentation – the process of planning and implementing what has been learned. (Kolb, 1984) My partner and I adapted this model in order to reflect our lesson study question: step 1 is the lesson observation – which involves monitoring pupils engagement before and after a mini plenary, step 2 is reflective observation – is the process of reviewing the effect of mini plenaries on pupils engagement, step 3 is the abstract conceptualisation – thinking about what the research revealed and consult with further research to create potential improvements and developments, step 4 is active experiments – involves the planning and trialling of improvements on pupil engagement from what has been learned. After considering several reflection models such as Gibbs (1988) which is a 6 step reflective model that was a potential contender however we decided to use Kolb's simpler model as it comprises of the aspects identified as action research, which meets the aim of the study. Smith claims that Kolb's model of reflection is "the clearest exposition of the concept of experiential learning" to date. (1992) This supports our decision to use a simplistic model however it is still proficient in achieving professional learning.

We have chosen to use non-participant naturalistic observation during the study as we are attempting to gather research in an every-day classroom learning environment, therefore, non-participant observation allows the pupils to act as they would in a typical day-to-day lesson. Naturalistic observation consists mainly of qualitative data that is designed to understand situations on a more individual basis as opposed to quantitative data which is designed for comparative and statistical data. (Cohen et al, 2012?) The observation data collection used is the Leuven Involvement Scale, developed by professor Ferre Laevers who stipulates that the involvement scale is a qualitative method created for the learning environment when observing a child or adult who is experiencing teaching and learning. It allows one to measure the effect of the teacher's interventions on the learner's involvement, which can inform one of how valuable the teaching is for the learning process. (Laevers et al, 2003) My partner and I believed that this style of observation data collection is most relevant to our study on the effect mini plenaries have on child engagement in learning, Laevers' purpose for developing the Leuven Involvement Scale: to measure child/ adult involvement

during teaching interventions reflect the purpose of our study, thus being our reason for using this observation method. Although, the Leuven Involvement Scale is detailed in varied descriptions of involvement, we decided to add an additional column labelled 'additional comments' in order to gather further contextual information that could support the research reflection process with more detail.

Focus group study is a qualitative data research method to gather thoughts, experiences and opinions of individuals on a specific subject who are chosen to represent a wider group of people. The aim is to select a variety of participants who can provide a general representation of the wider group. (Nyumba et al, 2018) The number of participants can vary depending on the scale of the research but as our study involves two classes of children (26 pupils and 22 pupils) we decided to select 3 participants from each class to reflect a variety within the focus group, 3-4 participants is a recommended number for simple research topics. (Burrows & Kendall, 1997) This would mean at least one girl and one boy to ensure a mix of genders, but also a mix of ability including: 1 higher ability pupil, 1 average ability pupil, and 1 lower ability pupil. This would allow us to gather information from our focus group to reflect the variety of children within the class. To do this we approached the class teacher for suggestions of children who would best represent the classroom in this manner. When conducting the focus group interview, it was important to find a comfortable environment that was familiar to the participants to ensure they were at ease, this would avoid the effect of unfamiliar surroundings affecting the participants causing discomfort, leading to potentially limiting participation. (Kitzinger, 1995) The group interview would be semi-structured with a list of prepared questions to ask the participants, this would act as a prompt for the researcher but also ensure all aspects of the intended research gathering topic are visited. This method permits us to gather the thoughts of participants on said topic, which the Leuven Involvement Scale cannot tell us, however with both methods combined we can gain a deeper understanding into our research. Focus groups are a useful method to gather information on topics that are not heavily researched, therefore, this strengthens our decision for this method as mini plenaries have not experienced much research previously. (Nyumba et al, 2018)

The reasons discussed above outline the chosen methodology for our lesson study, which have been selected after much deliberation and research, however, my partner and I agree that these methods are most applicable to our research and offer the best opportunity to observe and reflect on the data collected.

Ethical considerations

In any research study there are ethical factors one must respect namely, BERA (2018) – British Educational Research Association, which are requirements that cover all aspects of research carried out within the education field in the UK. This includes a number of guidelines such as, explaining the study clearly to potential participants, identifying exactly what and how information will be collected, how it will be stored (securely until it is no longer required etc), who will have access to the data and what it will be used for. Any participants will need to complete consent forms, which explain the research study clearly, for children this will be provided to their parents to authorise. Upon parent authorisation a child will also complete a child friendly consent form that is clearly explained to them. A further consent form would be provided to parents if their child is selected to participate in the focus task group interview. It will be explained to children and their parents that they are free to exit at any point or refuse to participate if they wish. We must also abide by the 54 articles within the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, originally 42 articles created in 1989 and indorsed in the UK in 1991 which covers civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children with 196 countries signed up to the legislation. Also, there is the UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice 2017 – 2020. This covers all aspects of ethical research conducted through the university, to ensure all university researchers abide by the ethical practice and guidelines outlined. This includes ensuring fair, quality research, protection of the welfare and rights of participants and researchers, to maintain the reputation of the university and its sponsors for the research carried out, supporting development within research and best practice.

Lesson study results and analysis

Lesson study 1:

The aim of the lesson was to introduce the students to direct speech of which they would be able to introduce to story writing further along the line once they have established an understanding of how to write and use it. The intention was for the students to be able to learn about and identify direct speech and its characteristics (punctuation etc.) and show their understanding by beginning to create and write their own examples of direct speech to demonstrate learning. The students had to use their thinking skills creatively to show understanding of direct speech by concocting their own sentences of direct speech.

My study partner was sat at the back of the classroom during the study, ensuring she had a clear view of the 3 children who had been selected and recommended by the class teacher for the focus group interview. My partner was equipped with our adapted Leuven Involvement Scale, to refer to throughout the lesson observation of child A, B and C.

My partner and I agreed that the lesson was successful in achieving the intended learning objectives, and the children were able to understand and explain direct speech, also demonstrating their learning and progression by creating their own direct speech sentences. Therefore, we both agreed the lesson was effective and opens opportunities for further teaching e.g. introducing it into story writing. To progress from this lesson, I would plan to look at direct speech within story writing and teach the children how to incorporate direct speech within stories, thus, allowing them to eventually progress their story writing.

Upon assessing the results of the involvement sheet recorded by my research partner, child A was the higher ability child, child B the average ability child, and child C the lower ability child.

Child A was consistently demonstrating high levels of involvement during the lesson activity and task leading up to the mini plenary. Child A was engaged during the mini plenary, also offering answers to my questions. After the plenary, child A appeared to demonstrate extremely high levels of involvement with the task working hard to complete this and even moved onto the additional task.

Child B began the lesson appearing to have high levels of involvement with the activity and the first task however they began to talk with a fellow pupil appearing distracted from the task moving to a moderate level of involvement. However, during the mini plenary child B became more engaged and moved onto the final task demonstrating high levels of involvement again which appeared to continue for the remainder of the lesson.

Child C also began the lesson demonstrating high levels of involvement, paying attention to myself and working with their partner for the opening activity, also working well during the first task however, they began demonstrating low levels of involvement which meant at one point the child paused and was fussing with their pencil and ruler for a spell. During the mini plenary child C became more focused and had moderate levels of engagement, listening to myself and paying attention. Afterwards, child C continued to engage with the task at high involvement levels which they began to appear slightly distracted towards the end of the lesson, moving back to moderate levels of involvement for a short while.

Focus group interview:

The interview was semi-structured as myself and my research partner had drawn up a list of questions to ask the children. I began by referring to the lesson, asking them whether they thought stopping the lesson and putting their pencils down to look at the board distracted them and put them off task or if it helped them focus more on the task they were working on. Child C stated that he thought it helped him when the lesson had a pause because if he doesn't understand something, the teacher explains in more depth and he is able to understand the task in hand better. Child B agreed with child C stating he often becomes stuck when completing a task, so, when the teacher stops the lesson it acts as a recap for him to understand what he needs to do. Child A agreed stating that a worksheet may contain differing questions and by the teacher stopping the lesson, it helps her make sure she knows what to do. I then proceeded to ask, should the children have a lesson where the teacher did not ask them to stop for her to explain something allowing them to work continually, did they think they would produce more work or less work. Child A states that she would do less work as she would become more confused and unsure of what to do. Child B and child C agree by stating they would both be really confused should this happen during a lesson. I then asked the children if they preferred for the teacher to stop the lesson and explain something to help them, to which they all agreed they would prefer it. I then asked would they prefer this method applied to all lessons or rather it wasn't used in any. Child A, B and C agreed they would prefer it all the time, with child A adding that she thinks it would be better because she would always know what to do. I then asked, when the teacher stops the lessons to discuss / explain something, do the children think it helps them do more work, to which they all agreed. I asked the children if this also makes them more likely to work than talk to their friends. Child A said she thought it did slightly because she would know what she's doing, however if she didn't know what to do, she'd be confused and must go and ask the teacher for help and the teacher would stop the lesson to help explain. At this point, child C adds that he would begin talking with friends if he was unsure of a task. I then asked the children, if they were to have a lesson without the teacher stopping the lesson for any discussion or explanations, how much do think they would talk to their friends, to which child B said he would probably talk for the whole lesson, child A adds that she would most probably only write the date and title should this happen and just talk to her friend. My partner asked the children if the lesson pauses for discussion / explanations help keep them on task, to which child A, B and C agreed. I finally asked if the children would want to keep this aspect within their lessons, to which they all agreed they wished for it to continue.

Lesson study 2

Lesson study 2 followed the exact same method as lesson study 1 as they were identical.

The aims and objectives were also the same. I was observing this lesson as my partner was

teaching. I was placed at the back of the classroom with clear sight of the three children chosen for the focus group study. I had our adapted Leuven Involvement Scale to hand as I observed the lesson and the chosen focus group children. There were 22 children in the class, child A was of higher ability, child B of average ability and child C of lower ability. This insured we collected information for the study to represent the variety of children in the class, also ensuring to include at least one girl and one boy.

Child A, B and C were all demonstrating high levels of involvement during the lesson introduction and initial activity. Each child was working well with their partner during the activity. This continued when the teacher was introducing the task, and each child continued to get on with the task with high levels of involvement. As time passed, I noted child C was talking with her friend and they did not appear to be on task working consistently, she was demonstrating moderate levels of involvement. Child B was consistent with his work and demonstrated high involvement levels, he only briefly paused to talk with his friend, thus, meaning his involvement was slightly moderate for a short space of time. Child A had an extremely high level of involvement, she worked consistently and maintained her high engagement with the task, only stopping when another pupil asked her a question. During the mini plenary each child paid attention to the teacher and appeared to be listening. Child A maintained her extremely high levels of engagement during the task leading on from the plenary and appeared to be on task for the remainder of the lesson. Child B was also demonstrating high levels of engagement in the task following the plenary and was on task until the end of the lesson. Child C also demonstrated high levels of involvement with the task after the mini plenary, however towards the end of the lesson she did become distracted by her friend as they were chatting and became less engaged with the task, she appeared slightly more moderately involved.

Focus Group Interview

The questions used were from the list my partner and I had created for guidance; this also was a semi-structured interview.

When asked what they thought when the lesson was halted for the teacher to explain or discuss something, child A stated she found it distracting as she was eager to carry on with her work but had to stop to listen to the teacher. However, child B and C said it was useful as it would better their understanding and give them more confidence when completing a task. Child B and C agreed that they were less likely to talk with friends when the teacher stopped the lesson for explanations, however child A said it made no difference. Child B said it helped him understand more when the teacher stopped the lesson, and child C also said it helped her to know what she is doing more after the teacher has stopped the class. Child A

said it stopped her doing work as she doesn't need the teacher to explain more. Child B and C both thought they did more work when the teacher stops the lesson to explain and discuss tasks, whereas, child A thought she could do more work without the teacher stopping the lesson. Child A said she would not talk to friends anymore if the teacher left the class working independently for the whole lesson and would prefer this than having to stop and listen to the teacher. Child B and C both thought they would be more likely to talk to friends without having the teacher stop the lesson for explanations and discussions. Child B and C were happy to continue with mini plenaries in their lessons, however, child A said she would want them to stop so she could produce more work.

Upon carrying out the lesson studies, my partner and I began looking at the information gathered from the Leuven Involvement Scale, and considering the answers given by the pupils during the group interviews. This was a process of reflection after looking at what we had observed and gathered in terms of information. The introduction of a mini plenary during the lesson certainly influenced the children's engagement with the lesson. During lesson study 1, child A, B and C all appeared to demonstrate increased engagement after the implementation of the mini plenary during the lesson, which meant they were more engaged with their work and on task. This was consistent with the group interview as each child agreed that they felt the use of mini plenaries during their lessons helped them work better as they understood tasks more. This is like the research discussed by Joyce-Gibbons (2017) when teachers implemented mini plenaries to address misconceptions and steer the pupils on the right path overall ensuring children's understanding and learning is clear. I believe this means that my class would certainly continue to benefit from the use of mini plenaries within lessons as they appear to increase engagement, thus, meaning it benefits the children's learning and progression. During lesson study 2, the situation appeared the same with child B and C who both demonstrated increased engagement after the mini plenary during the lesson, however child A showed no change in engagement before or after the mini plenary although she was highly engaged. Child B and C had positive thoughts about the use of mini plenaries on their learning, but child A said it stopped her doing more work. Child A's thoughts relate to Didau's thoughts of mini plenaries depriving children of direct learning and knowledge, although he does acknowledge their usefulness to consolidate learning etc. (2020)

Conclusion

The research methods used for the study have been useful in gathering data and information to enable my partner and I to answer our research question. We were able to use Leavers Involvement Scale to gain first-hand experience of the difference in children's engagement

when implementing a mini plenary but also learn of their thoughts about them during the focus group interview. I believe the methods have been successful in providing us with enough data on children's engagement in learning through using mini plenaries and allowed us to understand how the children value their use within lessons. To conclude, it is evident that mini plenaries are highly effective in retaining the engagement of year 5 & 6 children despite placing time constraints on teaching and learning, it cannot be denied that they do in fact engage children in learning thus, proving the sacrifice of time is worth the risk in order to enhance children's engagement with learning in the short-term and leading to progression in the long-term. This research is beneficial to my next placement as I will be sure to implement mini plenaries within my lessons, after having witnessed the beneficial factors first-hand. If I were to do this lesson again, I would certainly use the mini plenary within the lesson due to its obvious increase in engagement of the children with learning. The findings of this research could be used to support the implementation of mini plenaries within lessons confirming their value, despite the time constraint they present. If I did this research study again, I would look further into the effect of mini plenaries on the engagement of higher ability children, as child A from lesson study 2 claimed they stopped her completing more work. Therefore, I would be keen to look at this further to determine what improvements can be made to avoid this issue.

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