

Introduction

In this essay I am going to discuss the impact of questioning on children's learning and how questioning techniques can improve higher order thinking in children (Wragg and Brown, 2001). I will also examine how the use of questioning links to Vygotsky's social constructivism theory (Pešić and Zrenjanin 2014, p.191) and how a learning environment embedded with questioning skills, scaffolded by the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has the possibility of creating an environment where children can show a practitioner their knowledge base and express their wonder at the learning surrounding them. The practitioner can then adapt their teaching style to gain the optimum level of learning for a child. I am going to consider Schon's reflective practice theory throughout this essay, reflecting on the processes which I could apply to my practice through research (Pollard et al. 2014). I will also look at the impact of questioning throughout the essay and how this will be impacted through the Successful Futures report (Donaldson, 2015)

Observation

I carried out an observation in a large village school where there are approximately 481 pupils on roll. This school has a double form entry for each year. It is neither an affluent area nor considered one of economic deprivation. The school has low numbers of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. It has slightly higher numbers of Free School Meals (FSM) than the average school in Wales, currently at 21%, this is one of the indicating levels of achievement. The budget per pupil as of 2017 was set at £2916. 90.6% of pupils achieve the desired outcome levels at the end of Foundation Phase (FP) (Estyn, 2018). The school has an open plan approach to its classrooms and has a varied and interesting outdoor area that it is committed to using. The school is developing areas of the Successful Futures curriculum and there are numerous displays depicting this (Donaldson, 2015).

In accordance with British Educational Research Association (BERA) I considered ethical issues regarding the observation and the impact that these would have on the children (BERA, 2018). The guidelines state that in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) the child's best interests should be of upmost importance Article 3. If any of the children were getting upset with the presence

of an unfamiliar adult in the room, I would have removed myself to avoid causing any harm to the children.

My observation took place in a FP year 1 class. I chose a narrative style method of observation (Sharman et al. 2000). I chose this method of observation initially because I thought this would be the most appropriate to capture classroom talk. The observation was a vignette of the amount of questioning that takes place in a classroom and this is an important note to make. With the open brief on choosing a critical incident it became apparent that the primary aim of my observation should be questioning techniques. In accordance with Wilson and Fox (2013) I observed the session in a first-hand manner by sitting in the classroom and watching the progress of the session and taking personal notes (Appendix 1). I took into account the number of children in the class and the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) within the classroom.

In my observation I witnessed the teacher using several different methods of questioning styles, to support the different styles of learners. I watched how the teacher was able to switch her questioning tactics throughout the session to provide opportunities for all learners to be able to engage with the discussion. Reflecting on my own future practice I would like to take forward with me how the teacher managed to summatively assess the children and was able to direct questions to meet the individual learner, changing her questioning technique so that children could answer and feel empowered. The teacher had a calmness to their voice which managed to hold the children's attention and there were no raised voices. The teacher used intonation in their voice to give meaning to the questioning, which the children responded positively to.

The dialogue began with the teacher using the term 'I wonder...' the open style of this question encouraged the children to engage with the teacher from the start of the questioning. The teacher was discussing a previous mathematics lesson and using Numicon as an apparatus to support the children's learning. The teacher spent a significant amount of the classroom time, asking children questions.

In my future practice I feel I would like to use Bloom's Taxonomy to engage with different levels of thinking, to scaffold my questioning, particularly in the infancy of developing these skills (Bloom and Krathwohl, 1956). I think this model would help direct my teaching.

In my observation I felt that not all the aspects of Bloom's Taxonomy were engaged with. I would have liked to see the application part of the lesson. However, as I stressed earlier this was a snapshot of a much wider learning experience. I feel that the knowledge and comprehension part of Bloom's Taxonomy can help you assess the children's learning, as you teach. The comprehension can be directed by encouraging children to use descriptive language to express their feelings and what they understand about the subject they have been discussing comparing and relating this to other knowledge they may have gained (Fisher, 2006). I feel in FP you could use different framed sentences to support children that are unsure of how to articulate their responses, you could remove, adjust or extend this framework as children gain in confidence. This would be in line with a social constructivist learning environment, using the ZPD to support children (Fisher, 2006).

The questioning technique the teacher was using appeared to be a conceptual style of questioning (Wragg and Brown, 1993). The skill the teacher demonstrated had obviously been developed over the teacher's career. I am aware as a junior teacher my questioning technique will need to be developed and expanded using different models. Often a practitioner can make mistakes and feel like they are asking open questions, when in fact they are asking closed questions (Eke and Kumar, 2009).

In my observation I noted the importance of giving children time to think before asking them to engage in the answering of questions. This is a skill that I will need to be conscious of when I begin teaching. The teacher made a definite point of pausing before expecting an answer, indicating with her fingers to her lips in a 'Shhh' motion that there was quiet for children to think and form answers (Pollard et al. 2014).

The main mathematics questioning that I observed provided an insight of how questioning could be used in a class. I observed questioning throughout the time that I had in the class. The questioning spanned the entire morning and was evident in all aspects through focused tasks and continuous provision. It was apparent that all the support staff knew that questioning was an integral part of their job and the techniques to be used when working with the children. I noted that when I start practice this must be a skill that I need to embed and work collaboratively through positive communication with support staff in

the classroom. I must express the importance of taking notes of children's responses which must be evident to inform future planning (Wood, 2006).

I observed throughout the morning with the class, the amount of time children spent talking. Often children's talk will be inhibited by the presence of an adult observing them. However, if you can be discrete in the way you observe you can catch snapshots of their conversation (Sharman et al. 2000).

It was clear in my observation which children needed to be actively engaged and which children demonstrated a natural confidence to answer questions. The teacher often had to ask the children to put their hands down to allow the quieter children time to think without any peer pressure. I also noted that some children would put up their hands to answer questions, however they appeared to have little concept as to why they had their hands in the air. This led me to question the appropriateness of asking children to put their hands up. If there was an element of peer pressure, would this be an effective technique? The children that felt confident in answering questions would often make noises to emphasise to the teacher that they knew the answer. Again, I felt that this was putting more pressure on the children that were unsure of answering questions. As a student teacher and then a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) I will need to make sure that I am aware of all the children in the class and how they are reacting to different levels of questioning and which style is right for the dynamic of the children in the class, adjusting my teaching for the individual learner (Donaldson, 2015).

Another strategy that I observed was open ended questioning with one question leading to another question with no definitive right or wrong answer. The main aim of the questioning appeared to be for the teacher to develop her understanding of what the children could recall and what the children's understanding of the topic were, to lead further planning. Again, I noted in my observation that the teacher made sure the children knew they had time to answer. The teacher mentioned several times, 'I am going to give you a minute to think...' thus allowing the children time to think before the discussion moved on. The teacher also used lots of positive praise when the children were answering questions, even if the answer was not correct. I think the praise provided a space for the children's confidence to grow. The teacher often re-worded questions after an incorrect

answer was given, to give the opportunity for the child to think about the answer again and revisit it in their minds. Again the teacher always gave the child time to think about the response.

The problems I encountered with the observation were; the dialogue was moving too quickly to write it down and therefore the observation was based on generic note taking; the intricacies of the dialogue were too expansive to process quickly. Also I could not make clear in my notes the interactions between the children and the teacher, the facial expressions and the change of voice to give the children confidence to answer.

The session I observed was a snapshot of what the children were already pre-engaged with and as such they were building on prior knowledge that I hadn't observed. I had not seen the teacher's planning prior to my observation, this is due to the school looking at ways of embedding the new curriculum into their planning, so they were not comfortable with students seeing their planning. After the dialogue of questioning the children were ready to go to their planned activities and there was no time to interact with them to find their viewpoint on the questions they were asked. It would also have been inappropriate of me to question the learners as they had already spent time revisiting the topic. The teacher left the questioning activity at an appropriate moment where the class could revisit the discussion and continue with the topic, therefore the children remained engaged throughout. The teacher was moving the classroom talk at a level best suited to the learners. A digitalized observation would have been a clearer observational method allowing me to reflect on the dialogue. I was also aware that the children may have been behaving differently because there were different adults in the room and this can often unnerve children (Grigg, 2015).

When asking the teacher on completion of the lesson what the purpose of the questioning was, the teacher said that it would influence the planning for future lessons. The questioning also gave the teacher an insight as to which children had grasped the concept of the topic. This is a key strategy of every lesson applying an assessment tool at the end of each session. The questioning approach was topic based and the children would appear to deviate occasionally from the topic, however the teacher managed this, by way of another question to bring the subject back around to the topic that was being discussed.

The topic in question was relevant to their current scheme of work and influenced the focus, enhanced and continuous provision, that the teacher was providing. Glaubman et al. (1997) supports this theory and extends it further by suggesting this method of questioning and the amount of questions can bring the standards of the questions and the discussion up to another level and can therefore better the comprehension value of a lesson. Grigg (2015) suggests that “Who, What, Where” questions also let children make links between the now and what they already know from prior experiences, letting their previous concrete experiences support their ongoing learning. Unfortunately, in my observation the questioning couldn’t continue as the children had to go to other activities which cut the dialogue shorter than the intended period. The teacher had made a note of this and has intended to revisit and use it in further sessions. It was unfortunate for my observation that the questioning had to be cut short, I felt the children could have continued the discussion and gained more from the questioning.

Theory

David (2006) discusses the theory supporting children’s learning styles, inherently children grow up being social beings, influenced by the world around them, taking influences from language, culture, and those people that support them. It is not enough to indicate that children just grow into adulthood through the process of maturation, there needs to be support from others. Vygotsky (cited Artur et al. 2006, p.54) argued that children need others to inform their learning. It is not enough to merely have an external source to stimulate a child, they need social interactions to make sense of the world. Vygotsky believed that children needed to be motivated with their own level of learning and how this influenced and underpinned their understanding of the world around them. Therefore, social constructivism style of teaching lends itself to various methods of questioning and the discussion that ensues around a topic to support collaborative learning.

Wragg and Brown (1993) suggests questioning that takes place in a classroom environment is very different to questioning that takes place anywhere else throughout life. The questioning that happens in a class is to reveal different information. Questioning in a classroom is not knowledge that we gain to become more knowledgeable about a

subject. The information gained in questioning is to support what children already know and be able to scaffold future learning. In accordance with Vygotsky's ZPD, we use scaffolding to support children in their learning this scaffolding then needs to be moved to allow children the autonomy to learn independently. Questioning provides some scaffolding that can support their learning (Grigg, 2015). Donaldson (2015) states that for children to become ambitious capable learners, they should have an enquiring, questioning mind which contributes to problem solving.

Donaldson (2015) suggests that every child should have an individual learning plan. Questioning can give the teacher an opportunity to find out what the children already know and what they don't know. It is worth noting that children who are unsure of themselves and reluctant to engage in questioning could be encouraged by approaching the subject through play, maybe using role play to support the child. Vygotsky states that through play children can develop a language rich experience and often exceed their own levels of abilities (Egan, 2005). Egan (2005) states that using different scaffolding methods to support a child's interest in the discussion, can create seamless links with children's pathways of thinking giving them cues to ask questions which stimulates their natural curiosity. Muijs and Reynolds (2001) advocates that questioning should appear in all lessons.

Kohn, (2016) suggests that teachers need practice at questioning strategies and that questioning is not a skill that can be taught in a day long course. It is a skill that will develop holistically and over time. Although Barnes (2001) suggests that questioning is an integral part of classroom life, he also argues that if questioning is done incorrectly this can lead to shy, uninvolved children becoming more disengaged. Roberts (2006) also agrees, stating that the interaction between the teacher and the child is a crucial element of questioning. However a teacher needs to listen well to what a child is saying, talking with them rather than directing them in a similar style to instructional talking. There are naturally children that are enthusiastic and already have some degree of skill at answering questions and although these skills need to be nurtured in those children, it is the child that appears anxious or shy that may need a focused effort to reach out to them to engage them, whilst not stereotyping any child (Eke and Lee, 2009).

The talk in a class is extensive and questioning forms a large part of the children's day. Talking should be apparent throughout FP classrooms as the very nature of play forms a basis for children to discuss and make their own rules within the boundary of a classroom (Egan, 2005). Grigg (2015) states that questioning can provide a language rich environment and can therefore promote language, literacy and communication again this is supported by Vygotsky's ZPD (Egan, 2005).

In the FP where children are learning through play, it is possible to observe the importance of their speech and how this informs children's beliefs about the world around them. Their speech is complex in its own rights. They make rules to help them play their games, they discuss their own versions of the world in front of them and how they fit into it, they creatively problem solve and sometimes they need scaffolding from adults to help solve disputes (Egan, 2005). Questioning can again inform practice in the way of problem solving. Asking the children questions in alternative ways to promote a higher level of thinking to solve their own problems (Muijs and Reynolds, 2001). Wyse (2006) suggests communication and oracy is an integral part of the curriculum and precedes reading and writing. This is significant as the level of children entering school with speech and language difficulties is apparent. These skills are hindering children's ability to communicate and therefore making it more difficult for them to move forward educationally and socially. The very nature of play is a social activity and gives children a way of expressing themselves (Save the Children, 2016).

Melhuish (2010) states that adult child interactions are crucial to a child's development, suggesting that children form opinions of themselves and their learning from these interactions, although this can be inherently difficult to observe. Roberts (2006) suggests that observing and watching children's behaviour over time can reveal essential parts of their personalities. Certain aspects that we may have dismissed as a practitioner we may need to revisit and look more closely at the behaviour to give us a thorough understanding of why a child is behaving in such a way. Roberts (2006) suggests that there is also dialogue or aspects of body language that as observers we are prone to missing. Observing children over a longer period of time would be beneficial.

My Learning Environment

My learning environment is based on a Foundation Phase classroom, it would support Nursery, Reception and Year 1 and Year 2.

My learning environment design has been carefully considered and I believe I have tried to incorporate all aspects of the current curriculum in to my pedagogy. Furthermore I feel these areas support the Successful Futures framework (Donaldson, 2015). I have designed a learning environment that can encompass learning on many different levels to suit all levels of learner. Clegg and Billington (1994) suggest that a learning environment is determined by the practitioner that is building the setting. They suggest that some practitioners merely focus on fitting furniture into a room, however the process should support the practitioners teaching style. In my classroom design I have tried to develop a holistic style of classroom, incorporating key aspects of the curriculum, I have arranged stations for the children to work at to support different aspects of the curriculum around the outside of the classroom. I would like these areas not to be stand-alone areas, rather areas that children can make links to all areas of learning which complement each other.

Liebschner (2006) suggests through the teachings of Froebel that an outside area where children can facilitate their learning on the study of the natural world to help them make links to the world around them. The teachings of Froebel would lend to my optimum learning environment. I would encourage the natural world into my learning environment. This would be supported by natural hedge borders to encourage growth of blackberries and animals which need these environments to thrive. I would have orchard trees which would provide natural shelter and distinguish a Forest School and this area would support and extend children's learning outside of the classroom. It would be a space where children can be messy and make noise and build large scale projects with natural materials, which liken the children's senses to the weight and texture of real objects and how they fit together. This would be a rain or shine environment. The sessions in Forest School would be open ended, giving children the opportunity to develop their levels of play (Maynard, 2007). I would also have wildflower borders to show the children the native species that thrive within their own communities and the effects these have on the rest of

the garden showing interlinking. I would have quadrants readily available for the children to be able to study their garden, alongside magnifying glasses and bug collectors (Department for Children, Education and Lifelong learning and Skills, 2008). This would enable children to make connections between their physical being in the world that surrounds them, through this sense of self they can connect with their emotional, intellectual and social selves. Waite (2010) supports the initial findings of Froebel and extends it further by suggesting that learning in the outdoor environment can support children motivationally, through enjoyment and fun, therefore creating a desire for children to learn. This desire makes learning meaningful and has an outcome for their learning, Waite (2010) suggests that this level of learning will allow children to build upon their prior knowledge and give them the ability to recall concrete experiences that they have met in an outdoor learning capacity.

Louv (2009) also agrees and suggests that children need to form a connection with nature which will allow them to progress easily into adulthood. He states that although many children could tell you various facts about the natural world that is far removed from them, for example, the Amazon Rainforest, it is difficult for them to make meaningful connections with the environment surrounding them and how the world is interconnected. Therefore, I have put a garden in my ideal classroom environment, I believe children need the freedom to explore the outdoors. Incredible Edibles (2018) displays a healthy crop of fruits and vegetables that children have grown in a local school. I would also like to have chickens within my outdoor area for children to be able to look after them and recognise the importance of animals within the food chain and the Biology of animals and how they contribute to our natural world. I could cover many areas of the curriculum including Knowledge and Understanding of the World and Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) (Department for Children's, Life Long Learning and Skills, 2008)



Gill (2007) suggests that children need opportunity to take risk and that children of today are finding it difficult to find an outlet to take risk, therefore this could be creating a wider problem, children seek greater risk. I would like to make an area within my garden for children to take some controlled risk. This is an example of a risky play, play area (The Weather Network, 2015)



Ouvry (2000) emphasises the need for outdoor play suggesting it is crucial to develop the child into a confident adult. Some opportunities for children's play can only be developed in the outside environment. McMillan (1927, cited in Ouvry, 2000) describes children needing access to space to develop movement. The space for this type of large-scale movement should be accessible year-round. This need for space can be seen in children that find being in enclosed spaces all day frustrating, this image shows the value of space, (Teaching Ever After, 2017)



Beauchamp (2012) suggests that an ICT area within a classroom is a useful tool, particularly in research and suggests that ICT should be used when it is a tool that can

speed up a task and make it therefore, a faster learning device than a traditional method. I have placed a non-fiction library next to my ICT area for concrete experiences using reference books showing that ICT and hard copies can work together to support the learner. Whitehead (1997) stresses the need for varying forms of literature within classroom environments. I have developed various areas around this classroom to enhance language and literacy. I would like to develop this area over time to meet the learners demands of a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) space.

I have a designated area within my classroom design, for the whole class to come together for discussion points. This area is near to the bi-fold doors, to allow this to happen inside or outside. I would like to create this as a more informal area where children find that they can sit comfortably and therefore relax into discussions, this may be through a style of Circle Time. Ashbrook (2012) suggests Circle Time can reinforce classroom rules and also help children recognise the quality of communicating and listening to others within their group. Clegg and Billington (1994) also agree with Ashbrook that this can be an effective teaching strategy to bring the whole class together in one space for the sharing of ideas.

Whithead (1997) suggests that having a wide variety of literature within a classroom, may engage children. However, literature engagement is a unique experience to each person. Having literature present in a classroom gives children the opportunity to engage at their own leisure. In my theoretical classroom I would have a role play area close to my fictional library, so that children could use the medium of drama or song to engage with stories in a creative way (Donaldson, 2015). Whitehead (1997) infers that it does not matter whether the child's interest be in comics, on trend titles or the classics. Literature can reach everyone on many different levels, it gives children the opportunity to make links between what they know now and what they may be beginning to understand. I would like to combine a box of role play items within this area, not with set costumes, with items that children can manipulate and use as whatever they want such as glasses, briefcase, long pieces of different colour fabrics, wands, shields, and writing materials, as well as Dictaphone for children to record and hear their own voices and for story telling.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay, reflecting on my observation, I feel questioning is an important tool to use in a classroom. Vygotsky (cited in Arthur et al. 2006) suggests that it is important to provide a language rich environment in which children can learn and explore, so giving them meaning and understanding of the world. Questioning is one strand that can support a social constructivism approach to the learning environment. However it needs to be a carefully mastered skill and if it is conducted in a manner which makes children feel uncomfortable then this will be detrimental to the child's confidence and self-esteem therefore inhibiting their learning altogether (Melhuish, 2010). It is vital that teachers engage children in questioning. This enables children to make links between their previous knowledge and new information being presented to them (Wragg and Brown, 1993). Questioning techniques can also provide a teacher with a platform for children to engage in higher order thinking and also assess whether a child has a grasp of topics that they are being presented with. Questioning can also give teachers an input into their future planning and how much they need to revisit topics before moving on to further the children's understanding. My observation technique could have been improved through observing digitally and capturing the dialogue (Sharman et al. 2000). Further observations would allow me to see the influences that questioning has on the planning of further lessons. The very nature of questioning promotes a Vygotskyian style of social constructivist classroom with children scaffolding each other and the teacher providing a framework for the children to feel at ease to engage in a questioning discussion (Arthur et al. 2006).

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