

# Process over Product

## What Happens When You Allow Your Research to Talk to You

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**Abstract:** This is a reflective account of my journey, as a student, into research. I uncovered powerful learning through the use of a reflective journal, which made the process of doing the research a genuine learning discovery; I developed my philosophy as I listened to the emotions of the process.

Through an understanding and passionate research supervisor, I was mentored to design a piece of research that talked to me. The design allowed for learning in between the lines – which I don't think either of us expected. The emotions of what happened gave me my greatest learning.

Children deserve passionate teachers and I believe that research can play a big part in inspiring new ideas and developing quality that can only be in the best interest of children. My advice to students who are doing practice-based research is, "Throw yourself into your research; don't have preconceived ideas but allow the process to lead, inspire and influence you to new discoveries and learning; don't make it just about passing the course."

**Key words:** collaboration, English as first language, children as competent learners

### Introduction

I had been looking forward to having the opportunity to do this research since my initial year as a student when I attended my first research symposium. I wanted to look for a research question that was meaningful to me. One of the key reasons why I feel that this research design inspired me was that I was open to listen to something new, to be guided by the answers of those around me. Not for one moment, when I started this journey, did I believe that I would travel through the most amazing self-discovery process that would shake and make me confront my personal philosophy.

The subject that I was, and still am, passionate about is giving children the opportunity to learn outside the centre environment through going on outings. I was very conscious that some children spend all week at the centre, never leaving the centre walls, and I felt that it was important that they had the opportunity to experience real-life experiences and play in nature as part of the curriculum, instead of just being contained by the four walls of the centre.

I was perplexed. I knew that I volunteered for a wonderful team of teachers, and from conversations I had had with them over the years, I knew that they wanted to be getting out and enjoying outings. Yet while the board of trustees of my centre was telling my head teacher that the parents wanted whole-centre outings, I was not sure whether that was really the case, as this message was not consistent with passing conversations that I had been having over the last three years. So my original research question set out to ask what everyone wanted: "How can we meet the needs of teachers, children and their parents with regards to outings?" When I look back at this research question now, it sounds so stuffy and boring. But this was the start of the most amazing research and learning journey for me.

As you continue to read my thoughts, this may not be the most intellectual article you will ever read, but that is not important – my driving force is to inspire others to love research just like my supervisor had guided me. As I read back through my journal from last year, I find that I wrote:

“In hindsight as I look back at this research I am amazed to find that the most powerful learning came from the process of implementing the research, rather than how the different groups answered my questions. I hope that I can keep these strong feelings alive in me as I enter the real world of teaching.”

Now a year on, I am still listening to what my research taught me: to genuinely listen to your community and find ways so that each part of the community can achieve ways to tell others what is important to them and to advocate for all to be heard.

## **A Review of Research**

I had been told by my research supervisor to think of my literature review as being like building a bridge. What elements would I need to make my research strong and connect my readers to my research question? This imagery helped my literature review to consider the following four themes:

**The benefits of excursions** – play a role in physical, sensory, cognitive and social development. They also connect children to nature (Baille, 2010; Gambino, Davis & Rowntree, 2009; Oliver & McLachlan, 2006; Torquati, Gabriel, Jones-Branch & Leeper- Miller, 2010; Woyke, 2004).

**Successful planning of excursions** – requires thoughtful and meaningful planning (Taylor, Morris & Cordeau-Young, 1997). Benefits of positive attitudes to risk and frequent experiences for teachers (Bullard, 2010; Chettleburgh, 2009).

**Benefits of styles of excursions** – when parents are involved they can be closer to their child’s learning. Helm and Katz (2011) discuss the benefits of small-group outings particularly as they can focus children on connecting to nature.

**Collaboration** – requires an equal playing field (Alasuutari, 2010). Brink (2002) suggests results are strengthened relationships. Wenger (1998): “...what makes information knowledge – what makes it empowering – is the way in which it can be integrated within an identity of participation (p. 220).

## **Methodology and Design**

The year of my research we were set the task of carrying out action research, thinking from the stance of a need for change (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). For the purposes of this article, I will focus my attention on my learning and reflections from my journal rather than the findings from my data. When I talk about the findings, it is only to help the reader fill in the gaps of my journey.

### **Data collection.**

My research was designed to have three methods of data collection running consecutively within each phase. The three methods reflected the different ways needed to collect the data from the three different parties in my research question: the teachers, the parents and the children. Method one was to collect the views of the teachers at the centre. It consisted of an anonymous questionnaire given to every member of the teaching team, which they could return to me through a sealed box which I would only open on a set date.

Method two focused on collecting data from the parents at the centre. As collaboration was important to the research design, it was crucial that all parents were given the opportunity to be involved. However, this had the potential to create huge amounts of data if all 52 families participated. Therefore, I decided to randomly select only 10 of the parent questionnaires for the data analysis, and parents were told that at the end of the data collection only 10 questionnaires would be analysed. I placed a sealed box by the parent sign-in sheet in which the parents could return their completed questionnaires. I explained the randomisation process that would be used to each of the thirty-seven parents who agreed to participate in this research,<sup>1</sup> and twenty-eight completed the questionnaire. As I went through the process of gaining consent, I was hit by a thunderbolt of discovery about who had the power to have a voice at my own centre.

The third focus of my study was to explore the children's views about outings. Employing a questionnaire with children involved some issues around literacy as the children involved were only four years old (Mutch, 2005), and so I had to use a different method from that used with the adults. The four year olds in the centre were chosen as it was thought that they would have the most experience and knowledge about outings. At the same time, those with English as a second language were more likely to have bilingual abilities by age four. The adapted questionnaire came to be called "child talk", and as I took the children through the questions, they completed a "smiley face" answer sheet. Eleven children took part in the child-talk questionnaires. Only one child was unable to be involved due to language barriers.

This questionnaire contained the symbols for "like", "don't like" and "not sure". In addition, there was a photo that represented each question. I talked to the children about outings and found the word they wanted to use (all children understood "trip"). An additional element was added to clarify the smiley faces. The children suggested "thumbs up" and "thumbs down", and we also used a wavy "unsure" hand; these symbols were clarified again with each child when they had their turn. This last technique was invaluable as it meant that even the quietest child could take part because they did not need to talk to me.

### **Learning from the Research Design**

Before I started this journey, it never occurred to me that this research would be so powerful to my own learning and that I would gain so much from the process rather than the results. But as I have highlighted, my research journal was a valuable research method as I journeyed through my discoveries. To be honest, I thought at the time that the journal was a waste of time and I was only writing in it to satisfy my supervisor. My supervisor had advised that I should write when I felt passionate, as my memories would fade over time, and looking back a year later, I am amazed at the raw emotions running through my words.

I am so glad that my research design was devised as it was. I would not have had the powerful learning if it had been simpler and smaller.

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<sup>1</sup> The process meant 10 questionnaires were chosen by a neutral person and given to the researcher. The others were placed in a sealed envelope, held separately, and destroyed after the research project was concluded.

### Collaborating with the parents

I never thought for one moment that the gaining of parental consent would be so prominent in my developing philosophy. I was very strict with myself that I would talk to each parent and give them all the time that they needed from me to answer their questions and talk about my research. What became increasingly evident was that parents wanted to help me in my research; indeed, they appeared to feel honoured that I had asked them to help with the questionnaire. It was with great sadness and frustration that I had to give up with two families where English was their second language. I had worked hard at developing relationships with them, but our shared language had only got as far as greetings and farewells and body and sign language. They so wanted to be involved in the process. One mother even tried to decipher the words on the consent form with her Cambodian dictionary; sadly, she came back a couple of days later saying, “Donna, can’t... too hard.” The other mother made me feel so humble: even though she could not personally take part in the research, as we could not get through the consent process; she still turned up at my parents meeting to support me. But the cold fact was the English language in the introduction letter and consent form was too much to allow her to be involved and her voice to be heard. The dominant language excluded her.

I spoke to my research supervisor about what I could do. We threw around options of asking other parents to translate, but in the end the crux was that this method would take away the anonymity for the parents involved, which was a crucial element in the research design.

Today, as I reread my notes I found this passage:

“Really emotional time. Lots of hugs from parents and wishing me well with research and really want to help me and give their viewpoints. Struggling today that not all parents have the option to be involved. I want to make this research genuine and something that I can give back to my centre.”

*“This was the most frustrating part of the research; parents that wanted to be involved but a shared language preventing it. I’d never really experienced before the power held in the English language.”*

The words in my mind that whirl around when, as a newly qualified teacher, I reread my thoughts are making the research **real and genuine**.

There were others whom I talked to and nods of agreement and consent forms taken home but never returned. My feelings and assumptions here were that a lot of these parents were not from my culture and I had not developed a relationship with them. I do not know how much they understood me or in fact how much written English language they understood. At these moments I again felt sad and frustrated; initially because it showed me that I had not built a relationship with them, but then I realised the issue was bigger than that: the effect of not having a relationship was that I did not have the strength in our connection or a shared language to find out how I could help. But it did make me question how in future I could include everyone. My research supervisor had seen my passion in collaboration in the early stages, but it wasn’t until this moment that I realised how important it was to my teaching. So, where to now? My initial thoughts are that I need to find ways to ask parents what they want and maybe, as I continue my journey as a teacher, I can hold these thoughts strong as I learn with those around me when they share their thoughts with me.

### *The randomisation process and collaboration*

Randomisation was scary. I felt uncomfortable giving out the questionnaires then taking a step back and letting randomisation dictate which 10 views I would listen to. What would I do and feel if the parents' views were different to mine? I felt vulnerable: I had given my power in my research to the parents and my finding would be defined by what they had written. I was also experiencing what it was like to share power, something that is needed in collaboration. Was it easy? No. Was I nervous? Yes. But is it something that I am passionate about? Absolutely!

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that as a leader it takes tremendous courage to collaborate with all parties,

and the process needs clear, honest communication and a core

philosophy about developing trusting relationships with parents and colleagues. I still reflect as I continue to journey as a teacher on the following: Do I want to listen if people's views are different to my own? But if I do not listen, how can I ever offer genuine learning to my community. Do I/ teachers always know best?

*"For the first time I had a window into what collaboration really felt like. Yes I'd talked about it in class before but in real life was it easy?  
No*

*Was I nervous? Yes and very vulnerable.*

*Is it something I would do again?  
Absolutely!*

As it was, when I completed the randomisation process, I remember sitting in my research supervisor's office holding the 10 questionnaires. I felt sick with a mixture of nerves and excitement. I turned to her and said, "Before I open them, I predict the parents want whole-centre outings." Then as I read one questionnaire after another, to my amazement I found out that all the parents wanted small-group outings with parent support. I remember shaking, laughing and stating, "They want the same as me." The best piece of advice my supervisor gave me was to go home and write about my emotions that night; they won't be as strong in the morning. That is exactly what I did and, for me, the power of my learning fell in the raw emotions that I felt that night.

## **Learning from the Centre's Community**

### **Concerns of teachers.**

In looking at the responses from the teachers, what I read between the lines was that if something is not happening at your centre, ask why. I worked with great teachers and through the anonymity the research provided, they were able to voice their individual reasons and concerns that outings were not happening, without being individually named. The concerns basically came down to safety and ratios. My research has taught me to ask basic questions and to tune into your team. Sometimes we get so bogged down with the day-to-day stuff that we lose sight of simple things that are blocking our visions and goals for the teams we are in. In this case, the barrier was the structure of the centre. Through highlighting the concerns of teachers to the parents, the parents immediately responded by offering their help and understanding to the teachers. All parties wanted the same thing, but what was needed was a method to understand each other.

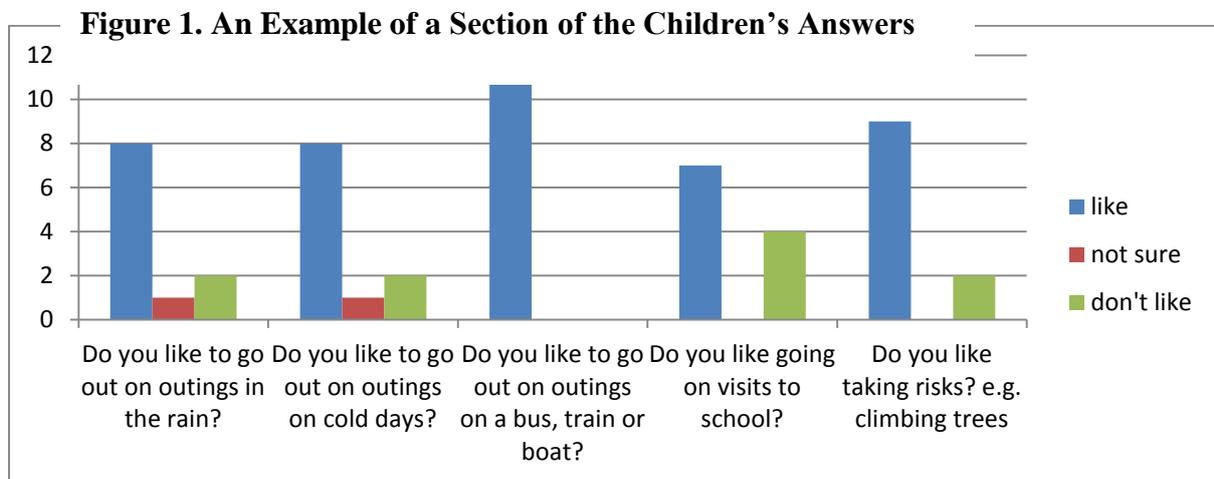
### **The parents' wishes.**

As noted earlier, all the parents' wanted small-group outings with parent support.

### **The children's views.**

When I reflect on what I learnt through the research process, it was the collaboration with the children that affected me the most. I truly believed that I had high esteem for the children

before I started my research, but even I was blown away by how competent each child was as they answered my questions. Every child, whether quiet or loud, had very clear views when they answered me. They knew their own minds, what they liked and disliked, and justified their answers by statements that they made as they circled or filled in their own answer sheets.



**Figure 1. An Example of a Section of the Children's Answers**

The findings highlighted that the children wanted to go on outings, but their differing opinions led me to believe that they wanted to be consulted before being placed in a group going out. This made me think: How many times have I asked children what they want from an outing? Yes, I make my observations of interests and learning, and I ask their parents – but **NO**, I have never directly asked the children if they wanted to come out on cold or wet days or where they wanted to go! Every child who took part had very clear ideas on all aspects about outings and this astonished me. When I started looking at the results in more depth, what the children were telling me was to trust them, to believe that they were competent. The most passionate thing that I now advocate for as a teacher is to listen to children and to give them a voice.

When it came to presenting my findings as part of debriefing my centre community about the research, the parents were happy to listen to the teachers' points of view and the teachers to the parents', but both parties struggled to acknowledge that the children might have a viewpoint equal to their own – a point that I still find interesting to reflect on.

### **Meeting the Needs of All Parties**

As I move into the world of work, I have begun to understand that what was right for my old centre may not be right for my new centre or for other centres. Each community is unique, just as we advocate for the beauty in the uniqueness of each child on their individual learning journey. In this instance, all parties wanted the same thing and, through sharing the whole community's thoughts, by negotiation it was achieved.

## **Implications For Me Now, As A Practising Teacher**

As a newly qualified teacher I have been challenged by these findings in my first teaching role. I teach in a new centre and the owner has allowed me to implement my findings in our excursion procedures.

I was quickly challenged in my thinking by one of our first children transitioning to school: she did not want to visit her new school. This could have been an inconvenience to us as we had already arranged the visit, but as a team we listened to her and allowed her time to work through her fears and to make the choice when she was ready. Which the little girl did, just as we were walking out the door with another transitioning child. This experience started to form our centre philosophy of listening to children, valuing them as competent, and not rushing them with decisions before they are ready.

In term 2 of this year I was flummoxed as eight children, one after the other, advised me that today they would prefer to play in the sun with their friends, rather than go to our weekly library story time: "I want to play in the sun today, Whaea Donna." Although this challenge to my original plan created more organisation for me, and after I had been reminded of my own research by a colleague, I found eight other children who were willing to go – I just needed to ask around to find them. At that moment, I was once again reminded to trust the children.

## **Conclusion**

As I try to sum up this journey, my one regret is that I did not write more. I remember there was more genuine learning that this research taught me, but when I trawl through my research journal I have left areas out, not believing at the time how influential they would be at a later date. I am honoured that I had the privilege to be taught by all the people, big and small, involved in this research. For me, I let go of my power in my research in order that I could genuinely listen to people – and that is where I believe the powerful learning and truth lies.

I believe what I experienced in this small research project is something close to what is involved in the self-review process: to be prepared to change one's thinking for the benefit of the children and the communities that we teach within. For this, we need to start with a research question we are passionate about. However, it is also of critical importance that we are asking that question because we want the teaching to be better for children, not because we want to affirm ourselves as being right. As teachers we need to be focused on genuinely involving everyone and not to be afraid where this will take us. When you set your question, it should be because of your love of the children and the community that you work in, the need to make early childhood better for children and those around them. My research supervisor left me with this quote from Wenger (1998): at the end of the day, shouldn't we be about building "communities [that] hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people's lives".

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