

# Can children carry out action research about learning, creating their own learning theory?

Word count 4499

## *The Time is Now!*

‘The time is now, break free and fly..... if you have the courage!’

It’s simple, I love teaching. I am still excited by the possibilities and the children I teach, their way of thinking and expressing themselves. I am writing this as a teacher-researcher who wants to contribute to educational knowledge. I write as someone with a passion for learning and the opportunity to experiment with new ideas. Someone keen to take a risk and share the journey and learning with the wonderful and curious children in my class. I am finding that a form of narrative enquiry in which I generate my own living educational theory of educational influences in learning is appropriate for presenting my account of understanding learners and learning (McNiff, 2007).

My journey of hope and change began with the arrival of ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ (DFES, 2003). For the first time I felt we had the opportunity to take the curriculum and review it with flexibility and enthusiasm. I remember reading the first page and introduction by Charles Clarke and reading it a second time, just to make sure I had understood the meaning correctly.

‘There will be different ways. Children learn better when they are excited and engaged..... different schools go about this in different ways.’ (DFES, 2003, p. 3)

For the first time since the rigidity of the Literacy Hour I felt we had hope to really make changes that would matter and have an impact. To develop creativity, flexible ways of thinking and learning.

Developments have happened at the discretion of individual schools, without a cohesive national or local policy. Leading figures in the fields have toured and shared ideas, for example Guy Claxton, ‘Building Learning Power’, Shirley Clarke, ‘Assessment for Learning’ and Belle Wallace, the ‘TASC Wheel’. I have read everything I can, listened to speakers and visited schools with new and forward thinking ideas. Please see appendix one.

One of the difficulties facing schools is knowing that we want to change, but maintaining levels of value added achievement. How do we balance the risk of change, with not changing and playing it safe, but being criticised for that too?

Many schools have identified one area they think they can introduce safely. For myself looking around, I am excited by the possibilities and want so much more for my children.

I know I want to explore personalised learning in a creative and stimulating learning environment. I want the children to understand what a good learner is like using their Rainbow learning Log and own experiences, the skills involved and that there is progression within those skills. Understanding themselves, the things that make them tick, their worries and strengths, the quirks that make them an individual and influence their emotional learning will all identify the learner they are and the potential learner they could be. Only then can the children begin to form their own learning values and articulate them to others. Art Costa highlights that:

All human beings have the capacity to generate novel, clever or ingenious products, solutions, and techniques – **if that capacity is developed**. (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p. 32)

That is what I want the children to develop, to have the opportunities to work creatively on any task, thinking outside of the box, with freedom and risk taking. To see learning as being flexible and fluid, that requires different skills and responses. To think beyond their immediate learning and begin to generalise and create their own theories of learning. For me personalising learning is enabling a child to react to any learning situation with an understanding of self and the ability to empathise and evaluate, working with the learning skills of others around them.

But this has to be in the context of a learning environment and a creative curriculum where the children are involved in developing their own educational theories. I want to develop a format for the children to explore learning, including theories of others and use this as a platform to create their own knowledge and values. I want to see over time the narrative of their developing thinking in the floorbook they will keep of the journey. Michael fielding in his research states;

‘The intellectual and practical motif which most readily captures both the values and alternative practices exemplified in the *Student as Researchers* initiative is that of mutuality, of education as both a shared responsibility and a shared achievement...’ (Fielding, 2001)

Pupils as researchers of their own learning, clearly being on the inside of the learning process and exploring and challenging their ideas of themselves as learners and the learning theories we impose in the classroom.

I am interested in the writings of Alvin Toffler although I have read little at the moment. I am drawn to quotes of his I have found.

‘Teachers become coaches – encouraging the children to open up questions for research for themselves.’ (Quotes, Dec 2006, [www.nswppa.org.au/pwinspire.html](http://www.nswppa.org.au/pwinspire.html))

‘We need to cultivate qualities of mind and spirit that seem most relevant to life in the 21st century.’ (Quotes, Dec 2006, [www.nswppa.org.au/pwinspire.html](http://www.nswppa.org.au/pwinspire.html))

Will a child in the future look back on school and value the 'pace and challenge' they constantly experienced in all 'good' lessons? I worry whether children have time to rest, to experience, to reflect or to explore learning as a skill. Will they only take away the knowledge context of lessons or have the skills to articulate their own learning experiences in a reflective, emotional responsive way, talking about the moments that were significant to them and the impact that had/ has on them? Will they have the vision to see forward, or be caught in the cycle of maintaining the well trodden path because we know it is successful? How do we know it is successful?

Well SAT results at KS1 and KS2 are higher than they have ever been aren't they?

Does this link in anyway to the rise in teenage pregnancies or the suicide rates of young people? The number of young people finishing university and school with no idea of a path or excitement for the future and their possibilities for change. Do I see too much that isn't there or has my box collapsed and the light is blinding to the reality that I don't want to hold on too, but can't let go of !!

I want this to be part of a whole picture and not a one off initiative that feels safe. Often we feel overloaded with new strategies even though we can see the benefit of them as they rush towards us. I want more. The whole package, ideas, but also practical ways to introduce it into my classroom and across our school. I want this now, not in several years time when things may come together. I do not want to keep exploring new ideas and finding out the hard way which ones are more successful than others. But at present I can find no package which delivers or guides my thinking in the way I want to explore.

The answer for me is to do it myself, plough through all that I have read and experienced, explore different paths, trial aspects with my class, then share what I have found with others. The children and I will be learners together, action researchers into learners and learning.

The exciting thing is in sharing the journey with my class, they are exciting companions and look at the world through very different eyes. We talked about the research I am carrying out about learning. They were surprised and challenged me immediately, if I was writing about learning, didn't I need their help! From the tone of the comment child C couldn't even comprehend that I could write about learning without the classes help. It made me take a step back and look at learning in my classroom from a different perspective. Their ideas are thought provoking, challenge my thinking and help me to see as a learner through their eyes.

I am interested in the work of Branko Bogner who works with children in a class in Croatia focusing on the action research process, on creativity and on validity. I am interested whether this process has been combined with an exploration of themselves as individuals, as part of a learning community, as 'receivers' of learning in traditional roles and curriculum's. But perhaps the worrying part will be later in the process. Will this open the children to dissatisfaction for the system they find themselves? Will they have a 'student voice' to articulate their ideas and theories? Will tradition and results allow that voice to be heard?

We talk about what we believed about learning or how we learn and it was fascinating the perceptions of the children. I have recently found the work of Dweck (1999), and have been interested in the theories of gifts and talents and how we perceive intelligence. And the effect this has on our ability to approach learning opportunities.

Z said that we all have little factories in our brain with little people that work in them and store all the things we learn for us. It transpired that her Mum had bought her a series of books called 'My Body', that came out monthly for children to collect. It tried to explain the workings of the brain in pictures as little people storing the information and Z had just taken it literally. Another child T started thinking about why we forget things when we have learned them. He spoke in a tone that implied the answer was obvious, we all keep things we have learned in a special wardrobe in our brain. But sometimes things fall out of the wardrobe and slide down our neck, down through the body into our feet and then into the ground so we lose it. This discussion started our thoughts about learning and what we would like to find out or explore together. We decided, and it was the children's idea that we would make a floor book together with pockets to store film discs or extras. That we would both write about our thoughts and ideas. We are going to try and use the format of the 'TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) Wheel' by Belle Wallace (Wallace, 1993) as a framework for our journey together. Her work fascinated me a couple of years ago when I introduced the concept of a TASC Wheel into my classroom, but I feel now with my growing awareness of my own living theories, that I am looking for Belle to be moving her ideas on. I need the next book and will sigh with relief that perhaps someone else sees the possibilities the same way as I do.

Guy Claxton (2002) explores skills he identifies to be a good learner, Belle Wallace (Wallace, 1993) gives a framework for children to plan, do and evaluate their own learning, but I feel that neither go far enough. My children are confident exploring learning skills and using the TASC Wheel, but are dissatisfied as well. There is more, 'P' described the wheel as too 2d, flat, whereas his thinking spirals around flows through the middle of the wheel and explodes, sometimes showering others with sparks from your learning. This is a photograph of the wheel the children developed from their experiences and reflections as learners.





Photograph of wheel



I think often we get caught at the end of the wheel and it is easy to just share our learning in a topic through an assembly and think about how many facts we have learned. The

wheel needs to encourage us to self reflect, evaluate skills we have used and need to develop within the topic as well as as a learner. It is the knowing of 'self' that moves our thinking forward and the emotional aspects of myself that reflect in my learning.

I have read research of the benefits of action research on clarifying our own ontological values (Hutchinson, 1998) but I am interested in research into the impact on the child researcher and on the 'teacher', pupil relationship.

*Hutchinson (1998) writes about the: '...empowering nature of research which takes the form of action research. ....valuable role in effecting school change'.*

**We feel as a group of learners that we have something to say, something to share, and something new to learn.**

The children I had in my class last year consider themselves expert learners, beyond their age, they are confident to lead others and share their thoughts. We have called them 'Learning Coaches'. The children and I were invited to share our experiences at a days training on TASC run by Belle Wallace. The children weren't worried, rather pleased and excited to be sharing their 'learning'. Photographs were taken and even a video recording made of their thoughts of the TASC Wheel. This is an incredible short extract of the children developing their thinking, expressing their reflections and clarifying their ideas to develop an adults 'learning theory'. (Please see appendices two) By expressing their thoughts and feelings to adults, the children felt a sense of value as having something important to say. They received an e mail from her thanking them and asking for photographs and more details of their work. They glowed.

Following this we are having visitors in to watch Creative Literacy from our Primary Learning Network. This again the children met with enthusiasm and are becoming more confident that the world outside of our school is listening , really listening to their message. And recognising that it is important.

Where do we go from here? I feel the children need the opportunity to record the moment, each step forward in their thinking in any way they feel will express it appropriately.

Could they write a book about learning for children?

But if they are the learning experts could we put a book together for adults, a learning journey recorded from both perspectives? 'Children are our future', their learning experiences are critical for themselves, relationships and for communities they will live, work and relax in. Why currently are all educational writings that theorise about teaching and learning, written by adults.

Have we explored the ability of a child to consider their world and their place in it, to reflect, ask questions that they explore as they develop as a learner?

To talk about their feelings and beliefs to theorise about learning in a meaningful way.

One morning four learning coaches worked with my class and shared some of the poetry and pictures they had made. They encouraged the children to reflect on their learning journey so far and also the journey to come. The children were then asked to make a picture of their learning journey, a map. We thought of things that we could use to show the times when learning is tricky and when it feels right. Ideas such as swamps, mountains, tunnels, traps were suggested. Things that catch you or suck you in. When you feel positive as a learner flying free, flowers blooming, downward slope, an open path to follow were suggested.

The maps are all different and what was so special was the explanations the children gave behind the symbolism they chose. Genuine reflection and understanding of themselves as learners was demonstrated. This was the first of a series of sessions, that were planned in a free way to follow the ideas of the children as researchers/ learners.

The second session was very different. Picture maps were finished quickly and the conversation returned to Belle Wallace and her TASC Wheel. The children were curious as to whether lots of schools used the TASC Wheel, and for a while that thread of conversation lay quiet. I introduced the vocabulary of having a learning theory. This was a difficult concept for the children to comprehend and we struggled together for a while, some still cannot explain back our discussion. From it though came the idea that the children wanted to have a learning theory of their own. As experts they felt that people should listen to them and not adults as it is children who are the learners all day, for years as they grow. Then the quiet thread rose in a new way.

‘Will they listen to us like Belle Wallace is? Asked child T.

A question I cannot answer. Even if others listen will it be understood for the incredible thinking that it is, evidence of a journey and not a moment, or listened to and forgotten.

My children will not forget, not for a moment. Never!

They want a conversation. A platform to talk and share ideas, thoughts, questions, to challenge, encourage and support. A Tuesday group in fact. How can I create that enriching flow in my classroom?

A first step is setting up an e mail link with Marie Huxtable. I will open it up on the Interactive Whiteboard so that they can receive and send messages and wait and see what develops. Other ideas may follow. The other schools locally have not gone as far along the road of self learning as we have and the learning coaches spend time explaining and telling others about their self awareness and reflection. But we need something more. We need others thinking along similar paths to challenge and question, not only to listen and say what amazing thinkers they are. To critically challenge us. It is strange how the relationship changes and writing this it was naturally ‘we’ , we are learning and exploring our relationship and roles as this research progresses.

‘Perhaps learning is a journey we undertake our whole lives, by realising the quality of the experiences on the journey and not the results, we learn more about ourselves and our values grow and change’. (Wallace, 2004)

The children thought about this quote for a long time, trying to understand the message she was sharing. They felt strongly that achieving the end result you want is important as well as the journey to sustain you to want to go on. But felt deffinately that through the process of research and the reflecting necessary they had learned a lot about themselves and how they had changed even in the last year, as learners and their self belief.

Our discussions often tend to wander from the path that we set out on. What follows is one such occassion. The talk about theories had awakened a keen need to begin planning and articulating their ideas to form a learning theory of our own. Following the idea that TASC meant something when you looked at each letter, the children talked in pairs for a special word of their own to summarise the learning theory. I was amazed as ‘A’ suggested the word ‘Quiff’, quite quickly. The children liked the sound of the word and began thinking what the individual letters could stand for, just like in TASC. They didn’t have to argue or even debate ideas, they quickly agreed and all ideas seemed to come from the group almost as a collective mind.

**Q** ‘questions we all have to ask to learn’

**U** ‘understand – making sense of things around us and ourselves which is harder’

**I** ‘I am important’

**F** ‘feelings’ so important as a learner

**F** ‘focus’ to be able to concentrate and persevere

**QUIFF**, ‘I’ as in I am important is in the centre, just as we are the centre of our learning and self.’ I’ is surrounded by our understanding of ‘things’ and ourselves, feelings which often control our learning. Focus applying ourselves as a learner.

The class then decided that as TASC is represented by a circle, they needed a visual image for **QUIFF**. Paper to draw out ideas was quickly given out, and thoughts turned to the shape **Quiff** would be. The pictures are all so different and thoughtfull. Below is ‘A’s’ picture. She has used a triangle with I at the point, represented by an eye, the most important point. An eye to the wolrd and into ourseves. Questions are at the bottom, the start and widest part of the shape. Focus is almost like an egg floating in between our questions and feelings that control us, our thoughts and learning. Kellett (2005) highlights the opportunities for pupils to engage with a subject in great depth and work with primary, self-generated data (Kellett). The depth of the children’s thinking shocks anyone





2. Believe in ourselves (Child M) ('I am important' in Quiff)
3. Think about ourselves as a learner (Child A) ('Focus' in Quiff)
4. Are curious (Child TH) ('Question' in Quiff)
5. Are happy and calm ('Feelings' in Quiff)

These are the 5 key points or rules for QUIFF that we agreed upon. Behind these are values that the children feel are important but come under the headings or rules above. Child 'E' felt not worrying if things go wrong is a very important skill, because even when things are wrong you are learning, just don't worry and keep trying (Linked to 2). Child 'Z' felt it is vital to do the right thing. I was unsure what she meant and asked her to explain, she said that you have to decide to be a good learner and feel right, no one can make you do it, they can try but only you can make it your best. I just thought Wow! (Links to number 1!) Child 'A' wanted included the phrase 'Don't let your dreams float away' linking to Child 'Z' s analysis of self. Bullet pointed below are the other points the children felt important to list:

- Mixture of learning ways for all of us (Coach DC's group). Links to 1
- Belief came up again and again. Links to 2
- Fun learning. Links to number 5
- You must take learning seriously. Links to number 3
- Tricky is exciting (Coach N's group). Links to number 4
- Be interested it is then easier ( Coach P's group). Links to number 4
- Use what you already know.
- Concentration, only you can do it (Coach A's crew). Links to number 1
- Don't copy, better to get it wrong and believe in yourself and just try again calmly. Links to number 5
- Help other people but also help yourself (know when to ask for help, know yourself to help yourself). Links to number 3

We had our learning coaches with us and they helped to encourage and lead thinking in groups then feed back to the rest of the class, whilst I scribed. The session only took half an hour and I am amazed at the depth of understanding and reflection and their ability to articulate their thoughts.

Kellett (2005) talks about the possibilities and rewards for young researchers, describing working with children aged 10 – 14, where as mine are only aged 6, 7, 8. But she does describe the benefits of teaching research processes to children to create knowledge. Learning in schools is often about acquiring, understanding and applying knowledge and skills, but she talks about the lack of opportunities to create knowledge ( Kellett, 2005, p 2). The children in my class asked a simple question to which I really didn't have the answer:

Why is it only adults that find out and write about learning? Why haven't we been asked? Kellett examines this point asking a similar question, concluding that knowledge and theories about research have been done exclusively by adults. With children's rights and awareness of self, central to legislation it should be no surprise that this question from my children would be asked sooner or later. It is just worrying that no answer has been thought of, or processes of change towards the answer the children would like before the

question has been asked. It now hangs in limbo, the children feeling more thoughtful and reflective than adults are giving them credit for. Shouldn't questioning of this level be celebrated and shared rather than left hanging out there?

Perhaps the core thread that will come from this research is the need for some central link for learners to challenge, ask and question the 'knowledge base' we currently hold as truth. A forum for challenging thinking and a space to air our questions. Not necessarily for a definitive answer but a place to say this is what we are thinking, this is the place our learning is at present, we challenge and want to be challenged. With the World Wide Web so readily accessible this could be an easier task than first imagined, but it would need some forward thinking individual to coordinate.

*'Children are acknowledged as experts on their own lives (Alderson, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Christensen and Prout 2002) and if adults genuinely want to understand children and childhood, better ways to seek out child perspective and unlock child voice must be sought.'*

She has made me think and reflect, as she questions the validity of children truly carrying out their own research within schools, as it is an environment controlled by adults. Their dress, time, eating. She questions that adults rarely hand over the reins to children to initiate and drive their own learning, this is something I have tried hard to do. To step back and allow the session to run freely.

Bassey (1992) wrote:

*'In the past there has been too much slavish repetition in education following the historic model; today there is too much blind playing of hunches. For tomorrow we need more recognition of the power of research in creating worthwhile education.'*

Bassey doesn't mention the power of research for the child, but this we believe applies as much to the child's perspective and opinion for change as it does to adults that Bassey implies.

The ending ties to the beginning as again I am drawn to the research and writings of Dweck (1999). Incremental theorists, "are interested in learning and mastering challenges. Following failure, they remain confident that they can succeed by revising their strategies and increasing their efforts. Unlike entity theorists, they believe that effort, through increased learning and strategy development, will actually increase their intelligence. She writes:

*people with an incremental view of intelligence believe intelligence or ability to be malleable and changeable. Students with this view cultivate their intelligence through effort, task involvement, and strategy development. (Dweck, 1999, p, 74)*

Child O's comment recorded in his maths book., smiling he said:

*'I got lots wrong, but I learned lots too.'*

This cannot be the end, but the beginning. The beginning of a new range of voices with a powerful message, a message they are excited and keen to share. My inner most fear is that people will listen, but not hear what the children are saying.

## **Listen and we will learn!**

### **Appendix One**

**Books, schools visited, articles and details of what learned**

**Appendix submitted with the original work to the University.**

### **Appendix Two**

**Mini disc recording of the children talking about their developments for the TASC Wheel**

**The video-clip has been separated into a clip of the children responding to a question about the usefulness of the TASC Wheel and a clip of them responding to a question about what they think of the TASC Wheel.**

**You can access the clip:**

**‘What use is the TASC Wheel?’**





at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hH2-5xexbAQ>

and you can access the clips:

**‘What do you think of the TASC Wheel?’**



at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ti4syOrIDdY>



and at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSqg1phEEaM>

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