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ACTION RESEARCH - A VALUABLE TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGY

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This article is a follow-up to "Utilizing a Research Project as a Teaching/Learning Strategy : The Joys and Fears of Childhood" which appeared in Vol.15 No.3, 1987. In both projects the students contributed significantly.

In Semester II, 1987, a group of Aboriginal and Islander students in their second year of the Diploma of Teaching (ECE) at James Cook University conducted an action research project entitled "Cross-cultural Perspectives on Children's Friendships in Middle Childhood".

Some of the objectives of the action research project were:-

- to determine the significance of cultural, sex or age differences in the development of children's friendships in middle childhood.
- to compare the research findings with 'conventional' knowledge in texts and journals in relation to the development of children's friendships.
- to utilise knowledge and skills gained in the subject Development and Learning in action research.

THE TOPIC

The topic "Cross-cultural Perspectives on Children's Friendships" was selected by the lecturer in consultation with students, because of its interest, and because it encapsulates some significant behavioural and developmental features of the child (5-8 years). Also, as a substantial amount of research has already been conducted in the area, the topic acted to reinforce some knowledge, whilst giving the opportunity to challenge and test information in popular literature and texts.

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assisted by 2nd Yr Dip Teach (ECE) Students - Violet Dargan,
Tracey Geia, Selena Johnson, Sarah Klotz, Annie Mairu-Kaczmarek,
Karen Muckan, Selon Namok, Yvette Salam, Caroline Savage, Andrea
Shepherd, Kassandra Sorrenson, Fiona Tass, Wilma Togo.

THE PROCESS

1. The students discussed the objectives and devised a list of nine questions designed to encourage the children to talk about their friends.
2. The questions were then trialled with ten children.
3. These results were discussed and the order and wording of the questions were rearranged to match the cognitive and language patterns of the children in the trial.
4. The information was collected from one hundred and thirty children by twelve Aboriginal and Islander students over a period of four weeks. Some students taped the responses, others wrote them word for word.
5. The children's responses were transcribed and collated in terms of sex, age and descent groups.
6. A research assistant was appointed, financed by a 1987 SRG minor grant, to collate and process all the information onto computer. Printouts were made of sex, age, descent group responses to the nine questions.
7. Whilst the data were being processed, the students searched the library for information relating to the development of friendships of children (5-8 years). Each student compiled an annotated bibliography. In total 54 references were found on the topic.
8. The students analysed the data noting differences and similarities in the grouping.
9. Findings were compared with the information provided in the annotated bibliographies.
10. The final stage was to write up a report on the project and to evaluate the benefits and problems that students experienced with this type of teaching/learning strategy.

The students interviewed 130 children in a variety of places, considered urban, on the east coast of North Queensland including Cairns, Thursday Island, Upper Murray, Cardwell, Mackay, Townsville. Interviews took place in a range of situations including homes, churches, shops, parks, holiday programs, kindergartens, preschools and schools. The children were selected on the basis of age (5, 6, 7 or 8 years old), descent group (Islander, Aboriginal or European - this was decided by the student and confirmed by the child) and sex. The findings of the project have been written up in a fuller article which is forthcoming.

The action research project was primarily a teaching/learning strategy for Aboriginal and Islander students in the subject - Development and Learning. The final stage of the project was to evaluate the process. Comments were made by students about the three main stages of the project.

1. INTERVIEWING AND QUESTIONING

Summary

A summary of the students' evaluations is:-

Good points -

- Enjoyed interviewing the children
- Enjoyed collecting the data
- Interesting to see similarities and differences
- Data is new and relevant to teachers
- Flexibility of the lecture assessment.

Not so good points -

- Not all children understood the questions
- Parents affected the spontaneity of child responses
- Interviewing was time consuming
- Hard to get all the interviews required (10 each)
- Scribing and transcribing was hectic and tedious.

The students enjoyed collecting the data and interviewing the children.

"At university we talk a lot about children in theory. This research gave us a chance to talk to children as thinking, feeling people."

"Their responses were so simple and sweet. I thought that was good because when you get older you tend to give a theoretical response, instead of something simple and down to earth which means more."

" I found it very challenging to actually have to go up to parents/mere strangers, and ask permission to interview children. The fact that we went in pairs made it less frightening though. As the interviews were being carried out and recorded, we could already begin to see differences and similarities in sex, age and cultural groups in their responses to questions."

"The actual interviews and recording the children's viewpoints was fun. Though I must admit frightening also. Frightening in the sense of approaching the parents (especially European descent) and seeing their initial reaction to me as a 'black' interviewer. Also seeing the child's response to me as a stranger."

The students were interested by the similarities and differences, and felt proud that they had created information which was new and relevant to their future careers in teaching.

"It showed to us and may prove to others that there are cultural differences within children at school. What I felt is even more valuable is the fact that we discovered such differences ourselves and found other evidence that supports our findings."

"...acquiring a greater understanding of how important it is to know that, although children may have similar answers to the set questions, not one approached the questions, and the situation of having to think about the concept, friendship, in exactly the same way. This made me realize, even more, how unique each child is."

Some students enjoyed the flexibility of changing the questions following the responses that were recorded in the trials. However, it was difficult for some students to access children due to transport and the location of the university. A few students commented that the presence of parents affected the children's freedom to respond, whilst others found that the questions were difficult to ask to unfamiliar children.

"I was particularly interested in the response I received from parents concerning their expectations of their child's ability. Some parents tend to demonstrate negative body language and gestures, and actually say that their child would not be able to answer the questions. I found, however, that children who were asked without interference spoke freely."

The questioning resulted in a total of 130 sets of responses, but six were not used because they were inaudible or children outside our categories.

Transcribing the interview tapes was tedious, as expected, but it ensured accurate recording of the children's ideas.

The next stage of the project was to search the books and literature for information about children's friendships in middle childhood. A total of 52 books and articles were reviewed in this process. The students' comments are summarised:

Good points -

- students were able to compare their findings with the theorists.
- some of the literature backed up their work.
- the literature gave added meaning to their findings and gave insights into the development of friendships.

Not so good points -

- many of the books in the library were out-of-date (more than 10 years old).
- some books contradicted others.
- most books were very general in their statements and lacked the detail about 5-8 year olds.
- the information centred on America or Europe and was not relevant to Australia.
- very limited information on Aboriginal and Islander children.
- no information on urban cultural differences.
- careful liaison between students was needed to make sure that a wide variety of books were reviewed.

Students' comments were:-

"It was interesting to see what the different theories were. It was a good way of learning what and how other people researched."

"It's amazing how each theorist has a different idea and how they interpret the child's way of thinking."

The final major stage was the analysis of the data. This took three (three hour) lecture sessions and also required work outside lectures.

The good points were -

- it was great to work together as a group.
- the analysis made the project make sense.

- it made each student's attendance at lectures important and useful to all.
- much better than taking notes.
- broadened students' ideas.
- students were able to see how spontaneous children are.
- sharing each other's interviewing results.
- an SRG minor research grant enabled us to support a research assistant to type up responses and to arrange multiple printouts.

Not so good points were -

- up until the analysis the project seemed disjointed.
- poor referencing in earlier sections meant that some students had a lot of tedious backtracking to do.
- the students wanted to follow up some children to ask what they meant by some responses.
- not being able to see the actual expressions of the children - just having to look at what they said.

The students found the analysis of the data most interesting as the trends started to emerge.

"We worked in groups breaking up to different areas to get it done quicker. We gained a lot of valuable knowledge about children by going through the data, picking out differences and similarities in children's development. Finding actual written information to support our findings also made it interesting and surprising."

"As we gathered in groups we found more information. We looked at a number of different theories and discussed why we agreed or disagreed. We also came up with some interesting theories of our own. There was also the feeling that we all contributed to the study, and each person added their own bit."

"This research has helped me to begin to understand that there are many areas to study and learn about the ways children learn and develop."

"In future I will be able to do my own research to begin the transformation of the information gathered into a more formal presentation."

"We learnt from the comments and findings of other students and the lecturer, thus broadening our ideas and understandings."

"It is a different way of learning which has been interesting and enjoyable rather than note-taking from lecturers."

These major steps were followed by the writing up and editing stages. Each student took a section, wrote it up and the final article was assembled and edited by students and the lecturer.

The lecturer's comments -

Obviously this teaching/learning strategy has to be a successful way of covering some of the course content. I believe it is. There are several problems that had to be worked through before the start of the project, relating to assessment, timing, attendance and resources.

Assessment of students with a project such as this is always more difficult than worksheets or exams, because factors like enthusiasm and genuine delight at discovery are hard to quantify. A peer assessment component was built in to help assess group work also.

Time is always a problem. Firstly for the students because they also have the assessments of six other subjects to juggle. Secondly for the lecturer because, if the project is to flow smoothly and fit into a 13 week semester, a lot of clerical work and collation of data must be done between each stage. Fortunately a research assistant was appointed to help with transcriptions, collation and sorting.

Attendance is crucial. Several students missed a few weeks because of ill health and a family crisis which severely affected their input into the ongoing discussion. Fortunately the staged structure allowed them to put extra effort into the later stages.

Resources must be checked before a project begins to ensure quantity, quality and variety. Despite ideals, the reality of under-funding meant that the "hot off the press" books and articles were not available and the students had to search through a lot of older material. However, this turned out to be a great learning experience because it clearly demonstrated how "conventional wisdom" about children changes over time.

Overall I believe there is no greater asset for a teacher than to be able to talk with children, to learn from what they say, and to be able to build their own body of knowledge with that of others. This project clearly demonstrates that action research is a useful way to help student teachers to grow in knowledge and professional competence.

The students' conclusions:

"I would recommend that these types of research assignments be continued because it is a chance for students to use the theory they have learnt - awareness of children's abilities, being able to understand a situation, then relating experiences to your teaching."

"Being the first time ever that I've been involved with a research project, I found it new and at first confusing. But now I know what is involved with a research project and find it very challenging and exciting."

"A great way to learn."

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Mrs Jenny Farmer, 21 Trinder Rd. Ashgrove Qld. Australia

** Input on adult Aboriginal literacy
would be welcomed.

STOP PRESS

The South Australian Education Department and the South Australian Aboriginal community are developing a complete course of Aboriginal Studies from primary to secondary school.

Primary school children will be introduced to stories of the Aboriginal culture and lifetime before 1788, and the high school course will include social and political issues concerning Aborigines in the 1980s.

A book of curriculum guidelines for teachers provides formats for teaching about Aborigines -

- Young primary children can study aspects of the Pitjantjatjara people and Dreaming stories.
- Years 5 to 7 can study Aboriginal lifestyles before European settlement, family relationships in traditional communities, and the relationship between land forms and the Dreaming, and Aboriginal communities in the 1980s.
- Secondary school students could do a case study of a South Australian Aboriginal group and learn about Aboriginal land rights, personalities, politics, women, law, and self-determination.

Mr Paul Hughes, the Education Department's co-ordinator of Aboriginal education has said that the curriculum will be taught to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and the aim of the curriculum is "to make it a proper course of study that has legitimate academic rigour, no matter what level you do it at".

It is expected that the curriculum would be marketed in the other States as well as in South Australia.
