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'Co-constructing' changes to classroom practice: Processes developed with early childhood teachers for students at educational risk.

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Chapter 2

Early childhood classrooms: Contexts for qualitative research

‘Learning is a case of going from the known to the unknown. What one knows, and how one knows affect what one can learn.’

(Twomey Fosnot, 1989, p. 39).

Introduction

In this chapter, I consider the potential of teachers as co-researchers in early childhood classrooms. I explain action research as my method of choice for this study and clarify my use of structured narrative to report teachers’ engagement in this action research. The action research method confirms my commitment to developing teachers as active participants in qualitative, socially constructed, classroom research. Our shared task was to develop processes for planning and teaching together. Our belief was that appropriate, explicit teaching would enhance learning outcomes for early childhood students.

I begin with some discussion of the advantages of qualitative research methods within early childhood classrooms. In Chapter 1, I acknowledged that responsive teachers in early childhood classrooms display considerable diversity in their interactions with students, especially those at educational risk. Here, I argue that action research methods capture the particular planned change, actions, observations and reflections (Wadsworth, 1997) of teacher-researcher pairs. Action research accommodates teachers’ individual responses to students and encourages the refinement of research questions and processes, within the complexity of early childhood classrooms.

Holliday (2002) acknowledges, “no matter how extensive the research, different researchers will always pursue and see very different things in the same setting” (p.

77). The critical point is that the research methodology chosen determines the outcomes of the study. Cooperrider & Srivastva (2001a) state that social science should be action-oriented and problem focused. “Through our assumptions and choice of method we largely create the world we later discover” (p. 1). One intended outcome of this research is an understanding of “the mental processes underlying a teacher’s recognition of a situation,” (Batten & Marland, 1993, p. 69).

In this chapter, an overview of qualitative research methods, particularly participant action research, is applied to the planning and implementation of language development practices for students at educational risk. I outline the appropriateness of action research as a way to track changes in teacher participants’ decision-making for students at educational risk, to develop teacher-researcher partnerships and to include the teacher-as-researcher voice. I explain the idea of using teacher stories to report data collated and analysed in response to the three research questions (outlined in Chapter 1).

Structured teacher narratives are presented as a useful and informative way to describe factors influencing change in teachers’ thinking and practice. Specifically, I need to report:

- (a) The extent to which teachers’ personal constructs of language-based educational risk determine their pedagogy for students at risk,
- (b) influential factors shaping teachers’ thoughts and pedagogy for students at educational risk, and
- (c) the implications of the co-construction of classroom language development plans for effecting transitions in teacher thought and pedagogy.

My conviction is that participatory action research, reported through structured narratives, allows researchers to interpret and verify the depth and detail of qualitative data contained in individual teachers’ stories. This examination of early childhood classrooms as contexts for qualitative research sets the scene for the interpretation of teachers’ narratives in later chapters.

Early childhood classrooms and qualitative research

Silverman (2000) details the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative versus quantitative method in educational and other research. He argues that “the whole ‘qualitative / quantitative’ dichotomy is open to question” since “objectivity should be the common aim of all social science” (p. 11). Silverman reviews earlier critiques of research methods to compare and contrast distinguishing features of qualitative and quantitative method. He provides examples of description enriching qualitative data interpretation and statistical data clarifying qualitative research. He recommends that researchers “make pragmatic choices between research methodologies according to the research problem,” choosing a level of data precision appropriate to their task (p. 12).

The need to better understand teachers’ processing and recognition of their actions in response to problems was identified in the late 1980s by Batten and Marland (1993). Contemporary research literature confirms the advantages of qualitative inquiry when actions and problems need to be understood and interpreted in defined contexts (Bassey, 1999; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2001a, 2001b; Hammersley, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Holliday, 2002; Silverman, 2000; Stake, 1995; Wadsworth, 1997; Wellington, 2000). Many authors have examined issues of qualitative inquiry specific to educational contexts (Alrichter, 1993; Bassey, 1999; Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Hammersley, 1993b; Jackson 1990; Kincheloe, 1991; Pitman & Maxwell, 1992; Schratz, 1993a; Wellington, 2000).

Teachers’ accounts of their regular classroom decision-making provide “multiple constructed realities” for interpretation (Barry, 2002, p. 32). Barry acknowledges that individuals are complex human beings who perceive the world and build perceptions of reality in response to their experiences and social interactions in a given context. She discusses multiple constructed realities as a conceptual feature of qualitative research and a contrast to the notion of a single, measurable reality as in quantitative research. Similarly, McAllister (2002) recommends an interpretative research approach to data such as the personal constructs and classroom actions of individual teachers. Such data are not well represented when collated and interpreted as absolute and measurable, as is assumed in quantitative research.

Personal construct theory suggests that each participant has his or her own interpretation of educational risk and consequent classroom decision-making. The qualitative paradigm is sensitive to knowledge, not as fixed, but “created in interaction amongst people” (McAllister, 2002, p. 23). Action research enables researchers to be sensitive to an array of personal constructs, and to represent sharing and changing personal constructs with participant teachers. (This phenomenon is later labeled co-construction). Working within the qualitative paradigm, I sought to “describe, explain, interpret and understand the meaning of the social phenomenon... as experienced by the individuals in their particular context” (McAllister, 2002, p.23).

Qualitative method, particularly action research reported through structured narratives, can provide “deeper understanding of the social phenomenon” of interest here, than could purely quantitative data (Silverman, 2000, p. 8). Regardless of researcher preferences for quantitative or qualitative research paradigms, procedures used to ensure rigorous critical standards and to sort “fact from fancy” (Silverman, 2000, p. 12) are always important. My choice of methods to scrutinize data and researcher reliability and validity are documented and critiqued in later chapters.

The use of a qualitative research approach assumes that the social phenomenon of teachers’ decision-making (about language-based educational risk in early childhood classrooms) can be interpreted with teacher participants in their classrooms. Hence, I proposed to collect data from early childhood classrooms as a participant observer and participant researcher interpreting classroom practice. Researcher-teacher dialogue and cyclical planning, teaching and reflection, would verify my observations and interpretations of teachers’ pedagogy. Action research encourages the continuous building of “informed understandings” by research participants. Consequently, language development practices for children with language-based educational risk could be regularly planned, implemented, observed and reflected upon with individual teachers.

In this study I chose to conduct a year-long action research project in one rural primary school. I worked with ten early childhood teachers because it could not be anticipated or known from the outset, which teachers would engage in the

development of processes for supporting students at educational risk. Neither could it be known at the outset, which teachers' data would most usefully contribute to an understanding of processes of development (co-construction). I expected that action research with ten teachers would provide sufficient relevant data from which I could select out and report pertinent action research outcomes.

In qualitative research a number of individual participants provide insights and understandings of one phenomenon (Fehring, 1999). In my research the phenomenon is teachers' engagement in the development of useful processes, for their teaching of students at educational risk. The other important feature of qualitative research is that participants are not necessarily selected to demonstrate common responses or outcomes to one research opportunity. The action research cycles used in this study facilitated the tracking and reporting of similar and dissimilar responses to co-construction opportunities.

Action research

Wadsworth (1997) suggests that all research is really about evaluation and action. She distinguishes "action research" as that which explicitly deals with an action component, where "change is understood as inevitably resulting from the research process" (p. 36). Wadsworth's definition applies to the current research. My intent was to track change in teachers' thinking and teaching of students at educational risk, and also to understand how and why teacher-researcher processes influenced change. As recommended by Wadsworth, the expectation of change is built into the conscious plan, act, observe, reflect... stages of each research cycle in this study.

Cooperrider and Shrivasta (2001b) reflect on earlier studies to confirm action research as suitable for solving problems in complex organizations. These writers recognize two strengths of action research. The first is the practical sequence of standardized steps directing data collection: diagnosis, information gathering, feedback and action planning. The second strength is the assumption of constant "interplay between solutions, results, and new solutions" (Cooperrider & Shrivasta, 2001b, p.1). Planned actions provoke problem solving via re-evaluation, further information gathering, feedback and action planning in a cyclic way. Such a method

fits well with the daily practice of classroom teachers who observe, monitor or assess students; intentionally gather further information as required; use this information to plan teaching and learning opportunities; and implement those plans. Tripp (1993) notes how teachers expertly implement practical and reflective judgements. Practical and reflective decision-making is common to classroom practice and action research.

Action research offers a way to interpret factors facilitating teachers' decision-making and to verify interpretations through continuous participant dialogue. Teacher interpretations can be used to regularly validate researcher interpretations. Participant action research allows both the researcher and teacher participants to "get close to the phenomenon of interest and interact with it to maximize opportunities to understand it" (Barry, 2002, p. 32). I needed to be immersed in teachers' usual contexts of language learning and teaching and to dedicate time and effort to developing their trust. This is part of the process of getting "below the surface of what is being observed and discussed" (Davidson & McAllister, 2002, p. 30) to collecting "thick" descriptive data (Holliday, 2002).

Action research facilitates the collection of thick descriptive data. Thick description is an important factor in ensuring that data work appropriately in qualitative research (Holliday, 2002). Holliday insists, "quantity and coverage are not the major, nor sufficient criteria for making data valid" (p. 77). Thick descriptions show "the different and complex facets of particular phenomena" (p. 78). In contrast to factual reporting, thick description is understood as detailing the context, intention, meaning and process of experiences. Thick descriptive data can be recognized by the analysis of the social context within which events or observations are recorded, as well as, by the intentional effort that researchers dedicate to selecting and connecting data items. In this study, I attended to the initial and changing culture of learning within the research school, and the social construction of classroom practices to promote oral and written language development for early childhood students. A significant part of each action research cycle was dedicated to clarifying the personal constructs, attitudes and preferences of participant teachers towards our planned change.

Action research data illustrate (or refute) links between teachers' personal constructs, principles of decision-making and negotiated language development practices for

children at educational risk. Thick, descriptive data facilitate analysis of diversity among teachers. Holliday believes that by moving between thick description and available theory, researchers can validate their qualitative inquiry. With this mindset, I intended to do more than record teachers' "schemes of concepts, developed as a result of actions and interactions with the world, yet ... anchored in the person's beliefs and basic assumptions" (Keiny, 1994, p. 233). I planned to analyse the context, intention, meaning and processes facilitating change in participants' constructs, their classroom decisions and their participation in the negotiation of language development practices. As well, both my self-reflective data and teacher data would be analysed. In turn, each of these tasks would be interpreted against grounding theories, applicable to teacher decision-making (as discussed in Chapter1).

Bassey (1999) recognizes the advantage of participatory action research. He describes participatory action research as a particular type of case study that enables researchers to pursue and value heterogeneity in data. Conversely, Batten and Marland (1993) review participatory action research as a way "to attend to the generalities across teachers" (p. 64). I perceived my participatory action research task to include the interpretation of data from individual teacher participants, the recognition of heterogeneity and commonalities in data, and the rigorous use of data to inform my understanding of teachers' decision-making processes in classrooms.

Bassey (1999) values in-depth qualitative studies, believing that the interpretation of differences between participants' research outcomes cases can contribute to both educational policy and practice. He recognizes a need for rigorous research that "addresses the complexity of the various aspects of schools and schooling... for research that explores and takes account of the different objective experiences and subjective perspectives, and which acknowledges that qualitative information is essential" (p. x). From this perspective, Bassey expects that "research questions will be modified or replaced as the enquiry develops" (p. 67). The need for in-depth study, attention to the complexity of teaching in classrooms, and recognition of the objective and subjective influences on classroom-based research outcomes, are pertinent to the current study.

This research in early childhood classrooms is well-served by an action research design and the reporting of data interpretations through structured narrative. Pitman and Maxwell (1992) believe that “a continual process of researcher decisions and choices” (p. 753) guides qualitative research. This point is relevant when specifying participant teacher and researcher roles in this study. The next task was to understand and plan how qualitative inquiry could be aligned to teachers’ roles in the development of oral and written language in early childhood education, and to my intent to socially construct this research in classroom contexts.

Oral and written language development in early childhood education

Early childhood teachers play a critical role in developing the oral and written language of each child in their care. Here, I review literature that describes and interprets teachers’ roles in early childhood language development within early childhood classrooms. An understanding of the teacher’s actual and potential roles is critical to the subsequent overlaying of socially constructed action research in classrooms.

Students begin attending Western Australian primary schools from three and a half years of age. Early childhood educators value the years prior to school as they set the stage for the child’s continuous learning (Comber, 1998). Many children experience continuity between the language used at school and the language structures, patterns of use and expectations of language use in their homes (Kavanagh, 1991). Early childhood teachers know that each child beginning kindergarten has already acquired extensive speech, language and listening behaviours from his or her home language and culture (Fisher, 1999; Westby, 1994). Yet for some children, and for various reasons, the speech-language-listening skills they bring to school are unlike those expected by their teachers (McMahon, Carrigg, Kelso & O’Neill, 1998) or displayed by their peers (Bishop, 1997).

Early childhood teachers readily acknowledge oral language as a tool for learning. They assist children to develop forms of questioning, answering, commenting, contradicting, wondering, observing, naming, rehearsing, and organizing their mental representations through oral language interactions. As the children’s oral language

becomes more complex, it takes on some features of written language. More formal oral language genres used in classrooms have been described as literate-like oral language (Westby, 1994). Characteristics of literate-like oral language such as subject-specific vocabulary, lengthier sentences with more complex syntactic structures, and rehearsed language routines, can be elicited and encouraged as part of classroom language learning and teaching.

Research confirms that language learning is linked to academic, social and personal success. Fisher (1999) provides a summary of why language learning or “linguistic intelligence” is so important. “Most of human thinking relies on words. Words help us to express our thoughts and ideas (or concepts), and enable us to communicate them to others. Without the words we are unable to say what we mean” (p. 45). Early language learning is crucial to educational outcomes. “Linguistic intelligence... develops from an early age. (The) child’s ability to use words and to communicate what he knows through speaking and listening, reading and writing will be one of the keys to success in learning and in life” (ibid). Simon (1991a) regards early language learning as an important tool for all other learning in early childhood education contexts and later years. Early language learning is known to predispose the child to later use language to learn and to maintain language as an effective learning tool throughout life (Simon, 1991a; Westby, 1991; Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1995).

The research literature examining language learning, language teaching, early childhood pedagogy and students with language-based educational risk, is extensive. However, relatively little is written about how individual teachers conceptualize, reference and use their judgements of language learning to plan language development opportunities for children at educational risk in the early childhood years. Related aspects of this topic are addressed in contemporary research. For example, Elkins (2002) discusses school-based teaching for students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities in literacy in Australian schools. Rohl and Rivalland (2002) provide six case studies of children experiencing literacy learning difficulties and examine the support each student is offered in their school.

Greaves, Fitzgerald, Miller and Pillay (2002) discuss the role of diagnostic information in planning and monitoring the teaching of students experiencing

difficulty with literacy learning. Wyatt-Smith, Castleton, Freebody and Cooksey (2003) as well as, Castleton, Wyatt-Smith, Cooksey and Freebody (2003) discuss the nature of teachers' qualitative judgements specific to primary students' writing development. Wyatt-Smith (2000) examines teachers' perceptions of relationships between national literacy and numeracy testing and their own classroom-based assessments.

Hammond and Macken-Horarik (2001) report on teachers' views about "what is actually going on in primary schools in the teaching of English literacy" (p. 112). Mackin and McNaught (2001) provide information on literacy practices in seventy-nine early childhood classrooms and specifically consider the "lack of congruence in the perspectives of parents and teachers and implications for early childhood educators" (p. 133). Clearly, teachers' decisions influence the language learning outcomes of individual children. "High quality teaching is most important in children's literacy learning" since "a relatively small amount of the variance in early school achievement is accounted for by pre-existing child factors" (Rohl & Rivalland, 2002, p. 36-7).

Despite current principles of assessment, teaching and learning (Curriculum Council, 1998) teachers may possibly perceive language planning for students at educational risk as beyond their classroom teaching responsibility. Although whole school staff planning is recommended as a way to support teachers to plan appropriate literacy practices, less than one third of school staffs surveyed by Rohl and Milton (2002) reported the use of whole school programs for students at educational risk. Current theories of literacy teaching and learning support a range of literacy teaching practices. Allington (2002), Bomer (1998), Edwards-Groves (2002) and Wilhelm (2001) examine exemplary and explicit whole class literacy instruction. Flexible or mixed ability grouping, to encourage learning through social interaction, is supported by many educationalists (Cambourne, 2001; Flood, Lapp, Flood & Nagel, 1992; Raison, 2001; Wasik, 2001).

The quantitative study by Rohl and Milton (2002) provides findings from an Australian national survey about how schools cater for students with literacy learning difficulties. This study raises a number of issues about the expectations and direction

of literacy-learning support as provided by classroom teachers. For example, Rohl and Milton found that most schools assess “reading comprehension, spelling, word recognition and numeracy” (p. 25) but “around one third of schools’ assess oral language and IQ” (p. 32). This is despite the significance of oral language development to learning, particularly literacy learning. Rohl and Rivalland (2002) reiterate the importance of identifying speech, language and hearing problems in the early years since these are predisposing factors in literacy difficulty. These authors also comment on the difficulty teachers have determining the nature of students’ difficulties, unless they are able to access specialist services.

The Rohl and Milton (2002) survey detailed the assessment of students with literacy difficulties in Australian schools. Figures indicate that speech pathologists or classroom teachers were nominated as being involved in eighty percent of assessments of students with literacy difficulties. However, speech-language-listening tasks did not feature in the list of programs used to support students at educational risk. Rohl and Milton note that thirty three percent of schools report ‘other’ support programs being used with students at educational risk (2002, p. 36). The make-up of this ‘other’ group is not specified. Speech pathologists were reported to deliver support programs in eleven percent of nominated schools, but the type of programs they offer to students at educational risk, is not specified. Classroom teachers are reported to deliver support programs in eighty seven percent of study schools although only forty four percent of classroom teachers were said to have had some specialist training to teach students with literacy difficulties.

Recent studies reiterate my perception of the mismatch between students’ needs and the provision of appropriate literacy practices in Australian schools. Elkins (2002) notes, “students who need the most help may be being assigned to those least qualified to teach them” (p. 16). In the Rohl and Milton (2002) survey approximately eighty one percent of schools reported their use of individual withdrawal programs and small group withdrawal programs for students with literacy learning difficulties. In some schools, children with language-based educational risk are withdrawn from their classrooms to be supported with individual or small group language activities, conducted by Teacher Assistants (or Educational Assistants), who do not necessarily have specialist language skills. Furthermore, Elkins (2002) noted that “a substantial

proportion of support teachers have no specific training in collaborative planning and teaching” (p. 17). Just twenty eight percent of schools reported their use of whole class programs to meet the needs of students with literacy learning difficulty (Rohl & Milton, 2002). These figures are important in an early education context that expects all classroom teachers to be able to cater for the language learning needs of all students within socially constructed classrooms.

Socially constructed learning comes from Vygotskian theory (Wilhelm, 2001) and refers to the benefits of children working together to learn from one another, as opposed to teachers teaching content or processes without social interaction with or between students (Wilhelm 2001; Wilhelm, Baker & Dube, 2001). Child language literature recognizes the potential of meaningful social interaction, as available in classrooms, to facilitate language growth (Halliday, 1975; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Westby, 1998a, 1998b;).

Since children in early childhood classrooms come from diverse language backgrounds (Comber, 1998) and display a range of language strengths and needs (Simon, 1991a, 1991b; Simpson & Willson, 1994), early childhood teachers are required to plan and implement language learning programs with appropriate outcomes for all students. Intended learning outcomes define skills, abilities and learning strategies that children will display at a pre-determined time. For example, a Pre-primary child might be expected to use oral language to respond to peer conflict. Appropriate oral language forms would be explained, modeled and rehearsed within the pre-primary classroom as part of small group or whole class teaching. Early childhood teachers are required to select and implement language development practices to facilitate individual, small group and whole class language learning.

Children whose speech-language-hearing is different from that of peers are expected to benefit from language-learning opportunities provided through peer interaction and dialogue with supportive adults in developmentally appropriate early childhood programs (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997). Indeed, opportunities to learn through meaningful peer interactions or scaffolded interactions with adults (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000) are regarded as potentially more effective than learning through teacher-centered dialogue (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997). As children confront

problems or situations of interest together rather than alone, they are able to construct, review, challenge and build their understandings of topics through shared experiences and language interaction. A need exists to investigate how teachers make decisions about speech-language-hearing impaired students within this context.

Rohl and Milton (2002) raise the issue of equity of access to appropriate educational services for students with learning difficulties. These authors make eight recommendations for change in the way school staffs respond to students with oral language, literacy and numeracy difficulties. The third recommendation is of particular interest to the current study. It states:

All schools need to have in place systematic procedures for assessing oral language, literacy and numeracy in order to identify students with learning difficulties as early as possible in their school careers so that appropriate intervention can be implemented for children who need it (Rohl & Milton, 2002, pp. 45-46).

This recommendation draws attention to the importance of questions asked in the current study. Rather than recommending systematic procedures for assessing literacy, in this study, I am concerned with how teachers' make appropriate judgements. Teachers' accurate identification of the particular strengths and needs of students at educational risk within each class facilitates the planning and implementation of appropriate teaching and learning activities, "to ensure that all students achieve agreed outcomes" (Curriculum Council, 1998, p. 6). Hence, I asked: How do judgements about who is at educational risk influence classroom practice? What factors effect changes in teacher thought and pedagogy for these students? How can I find out?

I planned to listen to and probe beneath teachers' personal constructs of educational risk, their perspectives about language teaching and language learning, and their perceived needs for supporting students. Barry (2002) recommends that qualitative researchers listen, to be "prepared to be led where (participants) want to take you rather than you leading them to where you think they need to be taken" (p. 33). My intent was to build a working relationship with early childhood teachers, first as a

participant observer in classrooms and later by negotiating language development plans as a participant researcher. Barry's "listening" was a way of understanding teachers' views of oral and written language development in early childhood classrooms. It was a way of learning how to proceed with particular teachers in their classrooms.

Social construction of classroom research

In this context, the need is "to think of reality as being a dynamic concept that is reconstructed in negotiation with each of the informants to represent their own construction of reality" (Barry, 2002, p. 32). From a Vygotskian perspective (Wilhelm, 2001) this research could be constructed through purposeful interaction with participant teachers. Through sharing thinking and pedagogy in early childhood classrooms, exchanging examples of language teaching and language learning, and responding to individual students at educational risk in different ways, research participants create a context of learning. Research questions and research design could be reviewed within this context of reciprocal learning. Understanding what one knows and how one knows it, refines respective roles and effects qualitative research outcomes.

In the words of Twomey Fosnot (1989), "Learning is a case of going from the known to the unknown" (p. 39). Sharing the classroom teaching of children with language-based educational risk is a way for research participants to move from what they know about teaching and learning to what others know. Before this research project, personal theory and prior experiences (rather than intentional empirical inquiry) informed my understandings of how teachers undertook oral and written language development in early childhood classrooms. This research was an attempt to facilitate evidence-based learning, with classroom teachers, about how they might co-construct theory and classroom practice, with language specialists, for students at educational risk.

Early childhood teachers provide environments that facilitate learning through individual discovery, peer and adult interactions (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). Their responsibility includes helping all children develop their intelligences (Fisher

1999; Gardner, 1997). Research specifies teachers' roles and actions to facilitate language learning in early childhood classrooms (Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001). I share a view that early childhood classroom teachers and language specialists need to recognize and facilitate opportunities for socially constructed language learning within their programs (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). I needed to know how teachers would respond to this possibility and which factors would facilitate their engagement in shared learning.

I needed a research method (or methods) that could capture how teachers thought about and practiced developing oral and written language in early childhood classrooms. Potentially, teachers' words and insights (Davidson & McAllister, 2002) about their selection and implementation of language learning opportunities, as part of their teaching role, could provide necessary research data within school contexts. I expected to understand factors facilitating teachers' decision-making about language development in the "experiential... sustained and intensive" (Broadley et al., 2000, p. 138) realities of early childhood classrooms. I planned to elicit thick descriptions, based on interactions with teacher participants, and then conduct context-specific data analyses and interpretation. Numerical data alone were unlikely to facilitate such understandings (Silverman, 2000).

Matching research method to research questions

Cooperrider and Srivastva (2001a, 2001b) highlight the importance of matching research method to research questions because method is significant in determining research outcomes. Since this study focuses on how individual teachers construct classroom language development planning for students at educational risk, I acknowledge current child language theory and guidelines for best practice (Rice, Shortland-Jones & Meney, 2001) and hypothesize about factors encouraging change in teacher thought and pedagogy. My task was not to judge the relative merit of language practices displayed by individual teachers. Instead I chose to interrogate influential factors on teachers' decision-making about classroom language planning.

Qualitative research methods, particularly participatory action research, offered a way to collect thick, descriptive data; form analytical statements, interpret research data, recognize links between analytical statements and research data, and finally present fuzzy propositions or fuzzy generalizations based on research data (Bassey, 1999). From the research design stage, I regarded the sampling of classroom language development practices and teachers' personal constructs of their pedagogy, as essential data. My plan was to begin this study as a participant observer in early childhood classrooms and to conduct individual teacher interviews early in the data collection process, as a way to "build a relationship of trust, where the other person feels free to speak" (Wadsworth, 1997, p.39). I planned ways to respond to each of the three research questions.

Participant observation and individual teacher interviews

The first research question asked, *To what extent do teachers' personal constructs of language-based educational risk determine their pedagogy for students at risk?* I planned to respond to this question in two ways:

1. To document observations and examples of teachers' apparent thinking and pedagogy, beginning with four weeks as a participant observer in early childhood classrooms.
2. To collect data about teachers' thoughts and pedagogy specific to students at educational risk through individual teacher interviews.

Participant observation provides a basis for framing questions during subsequent individual interviews. Participant observation is also a way to begin to interpret the uniqueness of each teacher and his/her classroom within the broader context of the study school. In this study, the initial interviews were to be arranged within the four weeks of participant observation. In this way, teacher interview comments could be used to check the reliability and validity of my interpretations of teachers' words and actions during our shared classroom time.

Teacher interviews were proposed for other reasons also. Wadsworth (1979) comments that the individual interview is "certainly *always* a reciprocal interaction in terms of the interviewer inevitably communicating some of his or her own self" (p.

39). Wadsworth believes, “reciprocity not only can’t be avoided but is actually necessary to any human interaction.” She cautions that reciprocity should be “consciously thought about... as bias is inevitable. Reciprocity also includes shared values and purposes and the communication of these goes way beyond dress and manners” (ibid). Individual interviews are a way to engage the interviewee in a “particular kind of conversation... to get answers to particular questions, to hear the other person’s views and ideas, and about that person’s position and life” (Wadsworth, 1997, p. 38). Although some such information could be obtained from questionnaires or group discussions, individual interviews were selected to focus on individuals in a personable way and to establish professional dialogue as a means of ideas exchange during the course of this research. From the outset, reciprocal interaction with participant teachers was encouraged. (The details of individual interview questions, permission to use the data, data presentation and discussion are given in later chapters and Appendixes.)

In this study, data collected as a participant researcher in classrooms provide a sample of early childhood language development practices. Time, numbers and the labor-intensive nature of classroom language development data collection prevented surveying of an entire population of early childhood teachers in one rural locality. Wadsworth (1997) recommends sampling as part of action research. She believes that sampling can “ensure that the results of techniques such as interviews... will be useful as valid representations of the thoughts and actions of the general ‘populations’ being studied” (p. 36). She regards sampling as a practical alternative to surveying.

Here, I sampled the classroom language development practices of nine early childhood classroom teachers, and one language support teacher, in one rural, double-stream primary school. I anticipated that classroom data, collected as a participant observer, could provide useful examples of language activities, the language learning opportunities presented to students; the decisions teachers make about whole class, small group, individual or withdrawal learning situations, and the use of explicitly oral, written or oral and written language learning tasks. I recognized that classroom participant observations could include the documentation of classroom teaching and learning, as well as, the researcher’s part in classroom

interaction. In this study, I participated as a supportive adult who was “visibly useful” (Nash, 1973, p. 9) in early childhood classrooms. In this way, I could build relationships with the teachers and students, and sample classroom language development practices for students at educational risk.

The critical feature of participant observation is that the researcher is “highly aware and very reflective about the social situation being examined” and keeps records for later use (Wadsworth, 1997, p. 54). As a classroom participant observer, I could collate data about how oral and written language samples were elicited in classroom contexts, how parent information about students’ language strengths and needs was used, and how available language support resources or personnel were integrated to whole class planning. Initial participant observation data were used to begin language development planning with participant teachers as opportunities arose. That said, the interpretation and confirmed trustworthiness of such data is what determines whether or not a study is representative beyond the context of data collection. This proviso guided research method throughout this study.

Examination of the demographics of study participants is another way to consider how representative a study sample is of broader populations (Wadsworth, 1997). Hence, my sampling included classroom teachers’ language development practices, implemented with Kindergarten to Year 2 students. (In 2000, these students ranged from three to seven years of age¹). I considered that one school year would provide sufficient opportunities to document teachers’ identification of the language learning strengths and needs of new students, their planning and implementation of short and long term language development activities, as well as, to observe teacher-parent-language specialist relationships and the influence of school policies on classroom language development practices.

Extended data collection through participatory action research

Extended data collection was also important in addressing research question two, *Which influential factors shape early childhood teachers’ thoughts and pedagogy for students at educational risk?* I recognized that data collection would need to continue for sufficient time to document changes. One school year is a reasonable time to observe, document, facilitate, interpret and check the trustworthiness of data

suggesting change in teacher thought and pedagogy. I intended to use initial interviews and classroom participant observations, elicited from teachers in the first four weeks of the new school year, as baseline data for planning change through subsequent action research cycles. I planned to verify or amend my initial interpretations as I continued to collate data from each teacher in each classroom.

Through dialogue, shared classroom experiences and understandings of our respective personal constructs I anticipated the participant observer role to become one of participant researcher. In the participant researcher role I expected to facilitate the negotiation of classroom language planning with willing teachers, as well as, continue to support existing classroom practices. I intended to document regular professional dialogue with teachers throughout the research year and to use data recorded in the participant researcher role to substantiate apparent changes in teachers' thought and pedagogy. Most importantly, factors perceived to facilitate change in participant thought and pedagogy would be continuously interpreted, analysed and verified with teacher participants, through action research cycles.

The conducting of final teacher interviews was another way to test cumulative data and interpretations of data. The elicitation of teachers' reflections through final teacher interviews would supplement verification procedures built into action research cycles during the school year. During initial and final interviews, I planned to probe teachers' points of view about the type of support they required to address the language development needs of students at educational risk in their classes. I had three reasons for such probing:

1. To prompt teachers' reflection on their classroom thinking and pedagogy.
2. To sample teachers' self-reflections on their confidence and competence to identify students' language characteristics and to plan and implement language activities. Teachers' reflections could be compared and contrasted to my interpretations of their self-reflections on classroom practice.
3. The sharing of reflections on classroom planning and language development practices could stimulate further negotiations about potential changes in language pedagogy.

Since this study was about tracking changes in ordinary teachers' thoughts and pedagogy in an ordinary school, I needed to represent a range of teacher experiences, competencies, and personal constructs of early childhood language development. This research was conducted in a double-stream primary school so that I could access teachers with a range of experiences, constructs and competencies. My existing professional association with the school, allowed me to build on established working relationships with each of the early childhood teachers. This prior association had provided opportunities to informally sample the range of experiences, competencies and constructs displayed by early childhood teachers. I knew that the participant teachers ranged in experience from new graduates to those with more than twenty years of teaching experience. This action research enabled me to collect extensive data from Kindergarten to Year 2 classes with ten teachers over one school year.

Since the school had two classes of students at each year level, I hoped to work with at least one teacher at each year level. As stated earlier, ten teachers opted to be involved in this research project over one school year. One teacher taught the two Kindergarten classes on different days, eight teachers taught the other six classes of Pre-primary, Year One and Year Two students. The tenth teacher participant was a Learning Support teacher who worked with children in Years One and Two. As shown in Appendix A, these teachers represented a range of teaching experience specific to early childhood students.

Action research methods were used to understand how teachers thought about language-based educational risk and to track change during this study. I planned to observe and document teachers' use of oral and written language sampling in classrooms, to collect data about how teachers judged students' oral and written language status and to observe the extent to which assessment and monitoring of language risk informed teaching. Participant observation in the first school term of the year was an opportune time to collect language assessment data from incoming students with classroom teachers. Terms two and three would provide sufficient amounts of time to engage with teachers in planning language development activities as required. I anticipated that school Term Four data would include participants' reflections on language planning outcomes, changes in teacher thinking and

pedagogy during the research year, and teachers' clarifications of influential factors in co-constructed processes.

Each action research cycle was expected to coincide with one school term. However, the specifics of the content, process and schedule of each cycle could not be pre-determined. Instead, details of classroom-based language planning would need to be constructed with, rather than for, classroom teachers. In addition, school Term Four data were to verify researcher and teacher reflections and interpretations. I intended to include data triangulation processes in Term Four and to document my learning as a qualitative researcher using action research with classroom teachers.

Generalizations from action research

This overview of my use of action research method in classrooms also applies to research question three: *What are the implications of the co-construction of classroom language development plans for effecting transitions in teacher thought and pedagogy?* The reference to co-construction and the implications for effecting transitions in teacher thought and pedagogy, go beyond solving the problems of the classroom teachers in this study. This question is intended to examine the potential of co-construction beyond the research classrooms to theory development.

Although data collected in any one study are constant, those data can be used in various ways. Action research data collected in this study could be interpreted in terms of teacher, student or researcher learning outcomes in one school context. However, this study was extended in the fourth action research cycle to include teachers' broader reflections on change processes. At another level, the interpretation and reporting of these empirical beginnings of co-construction could be used to discuss the theory and practice of school-level change.

Bassey (1999) recommends that research can be written up in various forms dependent on the desired outcome of the written product. In this study, the linear sequence of structured reporting describes overlapping action research cycles. The narrative includes the "essence of the claim to knowledge... how it was substantiated... (and) fuzzy generalizations" (Bassey, 1999, p. 84). Individual

teacher narratives provide thick descriptions of classroom realities and teachers' responses to change (Sabar, 1994; Hammond, 1996).

Here, the use of action research, reported as selected and structured narratives, highlights teachers' contributions to interpretive qualitative inquiry. Data are used to explain the limitations of existing theory and to explore the potential of a theory of co-construction. Data demonstrating both the content and processes of co-constructed language planning are referenced and analysed. The dual focus on the content and processes of co-construction addresses the complexity of classroom language planning for students at risk and illustrates research potential within early childhood classrooms.

Selective reporting and structured narratives

In this action research, the phenomenon of interest is teachers' judgements about the usefulness, or otherwise, of planning processes supporting their teaching of students at educational risk. Fehring (1999) examined teachers' judgements about students' literacy achievement in three Victorian schools. In both of these studies, researchers needed to determine when sufficient data had been collected to adequately understand the phenomenon of interest. Fehring reported on three teachers' judgements. I selected important data from four of the ten participant teachers and integrated these to one structured narrative.

This research thesis is written in a narrative style to reiterate the importance of particular individuals, contexts and teacher-researcher interactions, to the eventual research conclusions. Although each of the ten teacher participants in this study could be reported as separate detailed narratives, I do not believe that each of these teachers' stories would equally enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Selection is necessary in qualitative thesis reporting.

In later chapters, I explain how the action research cycles used in this study facilitated the tracking and reporting of teachers' dissimilar responses to co-construction opportunities. Teacher data, selected for translation to the final narrative, were not selected to demonstrate teachers' common responses to this

research opportunity. Instead, data from four of the teachers (Penny, Jacqui, Toni and Maree) were very deliberately chosen, to demonstrate the greatest diversity in teachers' responses to the year-long action research process. Data from the six other teachers are included where doing so enhances the reporting of research outcomes.

From the action research data on which this structured narrative is based, I could report common outcomes for the ten participant teachers. For example, all teachers evidenced some change in their thinking and practice during the research year. However, the establishment of common outcomes for ten teachers was not the point of this research. Alternatively, I revisited teacher data and modified the content of this structured narrative to report the different responses of particular teachers to this action research. This point is important because two of the four focus teacher stories (Toni and Maree) would have been deleted as 'atypical' if I was seeking to show common research outcomes, or to strengthen my case for the potential of co-construction processes for all teachers.

Teachers as participant researchers

Effective action research in classrooms depends on voluntary participation by early childhood teachers. Grant and Walsh (2003) document the benefits of teacher research, from their perspective as school-based researchers in South Australia. Perceived benefits include teachers' opportunities to "tell their own stories", opportunity "to reach out to the wider community", developing their sense of "professional identity and competency" and "being empowered to 'push the boundaries' of literacy teaching, to invent new ways to engage students and to experiment and trial 'new ways of learning'... for teachers and students alike" (pp. 5-6).

Grant and Walsh (2003) recognize that questions from conversations about teaching practice can be incorporated into research. They reiterate how teachers' questions, "can direct teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding around the theory that learning takes place within a particular socio-cultural context and setting" (p. 4). Hence, I used participant observation and individual teacher interviews as a way to introduce research practice to the school. Next, through interactions with me as a

school-based participant researcher, teachers were encouraged to select areas of interest to explore in ways that might improve our learning and practice.

Teachers value taking control of their professional lives and were willing participants in the current research. Teachers were introduced to the experience of research learning through the development of our teacher-researcher partnerships. As we shared the first four weeks of a new school year, we began to “consciously start analysing” what was happening in the classrooms and to identify issues, concerns and questions (Grant & Walsh, 2003, p. 5). Hence, a pattern of collaborative sharing with participant teachers was established early in the research year. Processes for consciously analysing events, students’ language strengths and needs, and the selection of language development activities were pivotal in my transition from participant observer to participant researcher.

Relationships built with teachers, in shared classrooms, facilitated the exchange of questions, interpretations and issues as we affirmed the focus of our action research. My design demonstrated that participants must own participatory action research:

Not only does it explicitly require an inquiry group to ask the questions and follow through the process, but any ‘findings’ and new recommended actions cannot be imposed.... They must be accepted by ‘the researched’ and ‘the researched for.’ Hence all relevant participants must be involved every inch of the way... it must be their research, in their interests and something they can affect so it works better for them (Wadsworth, 1997, pp. 61-62).

Reporting research findings

Perry (1995) outlines important differences between conducting action research and reporting action research outcomes. He believes that “the philosophy and processes of action research are broader and more complex” than those reported (p. 7). Perry argues that the action research project is “relatively unfocused, emphasizes practice and has outcomes of reflections which include propositional, practical and experimental (group and personal) knowledge” (ibid). In contrast, he perceives the

reporting of action research projects (as in Ph. D. theses) as emphasizing the researcher's additions to propositional knowledge published in the literature. The qualitative researcher needs to defend data selected and reported from the extensive data collected. Similarly, Bassey (1999) recommends systematic and selective data reporting.

One of my research tasks was to make a judgement about which data should be reported to adequately understand the phenomenon of interest. In later chapters I describe how working with ten participant teachers enabled me to represent the most important research outcomes by highlighting four of the ten teacher narratives. Data from the ten teacher participants were examined in detail to further my understandings and rationalize selective data reporting. In later chapters, I explain how data from focus teachers shaped my participant researcher learning.

Research question 1 required that I document and understand teachers' personal constructs of language-based educational risk, their judgements and expectations of educational outcomes for students at educational risk, and their particular teaching and curriculum decisions. Research question two required the analysis and interpretation of factors influencing change in teacher thought and pedagogy for students at educational risk. Research question three necessitated the making of generalizations about the potential of co-constructed processes for facilitating change in teachers' thoughts and pedagogy. The structured reporting of teachers' narratives, based on our shared experiences of four action research cycles, is an effective way to clearly represent research outcomes.

In Chapter 3, I extend this research design overview. I detail how my research processes ensured my accurate representation of individual teachers' interpretations of language teaching and learning decisions. As I detail the planned review of action, observation and reflection for each school term, I make links to data collection, use, interpretation and verification. Generalization processes are also described.

Scientific rigour in early childhood classrooms

Fehring (1999) measured trustworthiness in qualitative research in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. She acknowledged how easily teachers' conversations, observations and interviews can be "influenced by the researcher's own personal prejudices" (p. 40). She recommends constructivist research method (as in the current study) to check and minimize researcher bias. Fehring acknowledges the alternative terms, internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity as indicators of scientific rigour in quantitative and earlier qualitative works. In the current study, processes used to scrutinize the accuracy and usefulness of research data and researcher interpretations, are embedded in the selection and telling of teacher stories.

The establishment of trustworthiness is "the hallmark of scientific rigour in qualitative studies" (McAllister, 2002, p. 23). McAllister's recommendations for establishing trustworthiness are similar to those given by other researchers (Bassey, 1999; Fehring, 1999; Davidson & McAllister, 2002). Processes emphasized include engaging with research participants over a long period of time; providing opportunities for participants to comment on data emerging; collecting data from multiple sources; setting up triangulation processes; documenting methods of data collection and analysis in sufficient detail for others to replicate the study or critique links between prevailing theory, research method and research outcomes. The specific application of such processes in this study is outlined in the next chapter and expanded in teacher narratives in chapters four through seven.

Davidson & McAllister (2002) explain how processes of trustworthiness contribute to rigour in research design. They promote prolonged immersion in the context of inquiry as a way for researchers to build trust with research participants and to understand issues, context and data at more than a superficial level. Triangulation is regarded as a way to check that data are comprehensive, as sources are checked against one another. Multiple data sources build confirmability when similar interpretations are drawn from various data. Dependability is demonstrated with an audit trail of researcher actions and decisions.

Davison and McAllister (2002) also discuss the notion of authenticity, and relate it to credibility. They describe authenticity as “the degree to which participants’ meanings and understandings of their world, ‘voices’, feelings and ideas have been represented” (p. 30). Credibility is indicated when research findings can be believed by those they are written about. These ideas were considered in the writing of this structured narrative.

Summary

This discussion of early childhood classrooms as contexts for qualitative research clarifies the importance and potential of teachers as participant action researchers. This chapter serves as an overview of action research, including participant observation, individual teacher interviews and extended data collection. In early childhood classroom research, teachers need to validate researcher interpretations of the processes and outcomes of reported change.

Here, my intention was to prepare the reader for the subsequent reporting of this action research using a structured narrative format, focusing on the development and interpretation of co-constructed change. I acknowledge that researcher interpretations alone cannot ensure that changes in teachers’ thinking and practice are well represented. In the next chapter I specify how reciprocal teacher and researcher learning in this study were determined by the research processes used, and by the thickness and trustworthiness of shared data.

¹ The year 2000, when these data were collected, was the last year that West Australian school children could enter Kindergarten at three years of age. From 2001 children began Kindergarten from three years and seven months of age.