

Exploring how primary school teachers' teaching practices are shaped: A thematic analysis

Sarah Fricker

Supervised by: Dr Helen Stivaros

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Abstract

Although the majority of primary school teachers have to teach a set National Curriculum, there are no prescribed teaching methods. Previous research indicates teaching methods are shaped by previous experiences as a student, the school culture and implicit teaching philosophy among other factors (Deemer, 2004; Mariaye, 2012; Fitzgerald, Dawson & Hackling, 2013). The aim of this research was to further explore how primary school teachers teaching practices are shaped. A qualitative approach to research was adopted from a critical realist epistemology. One-to-one semi structured interviews with a volunteer sample of five primary school teachers was the method of data collection. Thematic analysis of the data allowed five overarching themes to be constructed – The Teaching and Learning Relationship, Wider Educational and Societal Values, School Structure VS Personal Agency, Belonging to a Community, and Choices and Experiences. The analysis found that teaching methods are shaped by an interplay of factors at the mirco and macro level.

KEY WORDS:	PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS	TEACHING AND LEARNING RELATIONSHIP	SOCIETAL VALUES	CONFIDENCE AND CONTROL	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
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Introduction

Cultural Norms of the Education System in England

The concept of teaching and learning has increasingly become a concern in our society (Claxton, 2002). Despite this, the organisational structure of the education system in England has remained largely unchanged for many years. Students are grouped together by age and moved yearly along the predetermined educational path (Roberson, 2014). The statutory school age for children to attend primary school is five years old. However, it has become acceptable in society for a child to begin school at the age of four. In 2011, the schools admissions policy was revised meaning that upon the decision of the child's parents or guardians, schools must provide a place in a reception class the term after their fourth birthday (Rose & Rogers, 2012). These structures have become so pervasive in our society that they are now unquestioned despite research suggesting that age bears no relevance to level of ability (Schweitzer, 2015).

Differences can be seen in educational structures across the world. For example, in Sweden children do not enter formal education until the age of seven (Nordholm & Blossing, 2014). In America, a phonics system is not used to teach children how to read. However, in England it is the prescribed policy despite increasing arguments that it is ineffective (Lyle, 2014; Wyse & Goswami, 2008). Planel (1997) argues that these differences in educational practices stems from the differences in the cultural and social values. Therefore, it can be suggested that the teaching methods available to teachers are constrained by the social and cultural environment in which the teacher inhabits (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological model helps illuminate the different influences on a person's development. He conceptualises the environment as a series of embedded nests termed the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, chrono systems. At the centre is the person who is in possession of their own idiosyncratic biological resources. The microsystem describes the people and objects that are present in the immediate environment whom the person has regular contact with (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The mesosystem is the network of relationships between the microsystems in a person's life whilst the exosystem highlights events that impact the person but they have no say in them, for example, school policies. The most distal influences are represented in the macrosystem including the cultural norms and educational practices. The impact of time is shown through the chronosystem. All these systems operate individually and in relation to each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). This theory provides a tool to understand the dynamic environment the teacher is a part of when making decisions on which teaching methods to use (Lerner, 2005).

Value of Education in Society

Education is highly valued in our society and it has become to be viewed as the pathway for future success. As a result, there is agreement that all children deserve an education that allows them to reach their full potential (Koshy & Pinheiro-Torres, 2013). The perceived value of education in our society is highlighted by the private school system. People are willing to pay a significant amount of money for their child's education despite the fact that they are entitled to free education. Arguably, this decision is made because research suggests that those who attend private school reap the benefits of economic advantages in later life (Green, Machin, Murphy & Zhu, 2012). In recognising and arguably enhancing the perceived value of

education in our society, the Government has tried to raise the standard of the educational provisions available to those who attend state funded or maintained schools. The implementation of policies aiming to create uniformity across schools (Cunningham, 2002) is the way they tried to address this.

National Curriculum

One of the ways in which the Government attempted to create uniformity across state funded or maintained schools is through establishing a National Curriculum (NC). It was introduced in 1989 following the Education Reform Act 1988 but has been subject to change over the years. It comprises of 'programmes of study' which detail what teaching the subject will involve and attainment targets which the children should meet. There are compulsory subjects such as mathematics, English and science and non-statutory subjects which the schools are not obliged to teach (White 2004).

The introduction of a NC allowed the formation of a school performance system which is published nationally. It details the percentage of children that meet the national targets set for their age and this determines the performance of the school (Burgess, Wilson & Worth, 2013). Engebretson (2014) argues that the importance placed on meeting national standards stems from the current culture of accountability and missing the targets leads to blame being placed on the school and teacher. However, it can be argued that the focus on constant assessment of children which is framed as a means to gather information on how to improve children's learning only perpetuates the culture (Elwood, 2006). The idea that everyone should meet the national target has become so pervasive in society. Foster and Kalil (2005) argue that the level attained can determine the perceived worth of the child in the eyes of society. As a consequence of this culture, pressure is put upon teachers. It is expected that 'good' teachers will educate their students sufficiently so that they will meet the targets set (Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Stiggins, 2005). However, the exact way in which they do this is not prescribed in the NC guidelines.

As of September 2014 a new NC has been implemented across primary education. The reform was called for by the current coalition government in the hope of raising England's educational results. Arguably, in an attempt to de-politicise the reform an expert panel and advisory committee were consulted on what the changes should entail. However, they were ultimately chosen by the Department for Education and the Secretary of State for Education. One of the major changes that have been unveiled is the removal of the NC levels as a way of assessment (DfE, 2014). Despite this, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) still demands the tracking of students' progress so schools have been given freedom to design their own assessments under the guidance principals that have been provided (Weeden & Hopkin, 2014). Another change noted in the reform is that teachers are to provide increasingly in-depth coverage of topics with the expectation that this will raise pupil attainment. However, as noted earlier, the NC still does not prescribe the exact teaching methods to be used, therefore it is down to the teacher and school to decide how best to do this.

Teaching and Learning Philosophies

For a long time in English society, teaching has been thought of as a linear process (Rahman, Scaife & Yahya, 2010). It is accepted within this approach, that the

teacher is the expert in possession of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to the learner so they can acquire it (Roberson, 2014; Çam & Oruç, 2014). Therefore, it is assumed that knowledge is a tangible object that can be passed on (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 2000; Hager & Hodkinson, 2009).). The underpinning assumptions of this teaching philosophy stems from the school of behaviourism. The child is regarded to be a product of their environment and therefore a passive recipient of information made available to them. Arguably, this paints a picture of teaching and learning as a simple, unidirectional transfer of information (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Scheurman, 1998). Within the context of the classroom, this belief is played out as the child undertaking the activities prescribed by the teacher - namely listening to the teacher or reading a text book, and when the activity is finished the knowledge has been transferred (Darling-Hammond,1997). As a result, agency is taken away from the learners as they are positioned as passive recipients in the teaching and learning process.

In recent years however, the learning process has begun to be reconceptualised with the focus shifting from the transmission of information to the construction of information (Shen & Xu, 2015; van den Bergh, Ros & Beijaard, 2013). This has been termed 'active learning'. Despite the term 'active learning' being prevalent in current literature, it lacks an agreed upon definition (Drew & Mackie, 2011). In spite of this, the commonalities in the descriptions of 'active learning' centres around engaging the learner in the learning process through student led activities (Prince, 2004; Stephen, Ellis & Martlew, 2010). This empowers the learner and helps them develop the skills necessary to take control of their own learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Vygotsky suggested a model of learning in which there was a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This model suggests that children can work at a developmental level higher than their level of individual achievement through the collaboration with a more experienced other, namely the teacher within the classroom setting (Vygotsky 1978). The teacher guides the child through the steps of an activity that they are struggling with in what has been called guided participation (Rogoff, 1990). Once the child has been handed the necessary tools to complete the task, the child takes on responsibility for learning by managing their own progress (Tharp and Gallimore, 1998). Over time the skills necessary to complete the task become internalised and learning can be said to have taken place.

Teaching Philosophy and Classroom Practices

There is disagreement in the literature as to whether teaching philosophies determine teaching methods used. Straits and Wilke (2007) argue that 'active learning' is purely a teaching philosophy. However, Shen and Xu (2015) suggest that it is a teaching methodology as well. Markic and Eilks (2013) documented the beliefs held about teaching and learning by pre-service chemistry teachers over the course of their teaching training programme. They found that the expressed beliefs of most of the pre-service chemistry teachers had changed by the end of the study and so had the teaching methods they used. This suggests that teaching philosophy does dictate teaching methods. Through the use of semi-structured interviews Stephen, Cope, Oberski and Shand (2008) explored the perspectives children and teachers hold about promoting engagement in primary and secondary school learners. When describing how the teachers measured the levels of engagement,

they often positioned themselves at the centre of the learning experience. Learners were described to be engaged if they participated when the teacher asked them too, despite the teachers suggesting a belief in active learning. As teaching philosophies do not always appear congruent with the classroom practices it suggests that mediational factors are present.

One mediational factor highlighted in the literature is teacher's confidence. Fitzgerald, Dawson and Hackling (2013) observed and interviewed Australian science teachers and concluded that when the teacher felt unsure of a topic, their teaching method was not consistent with their beliefs. The results gained could be explained by Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. He defines self-efficacy as the "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment" (Bandura 1997, p3). Therefore, if the person does not possess high levels of confidence, they may change their approach. Mariaye (2012) interviewed pre-service teachers and found that their teaching methods were similar to the methods used by teachers when they were a student. This suggests the teachers own schooling experiences may be important. The parent-teacher relationship is also important. Mahmood (2013) interviewed first grade teachers over a year and they suggested that if the parents trusted them they could be more creative in their teaching methods. Deemer (2004) notes that the culture of the school is another mediational factor. Through quantitative analysis of an American pre-service teacher's secondary school classroom, she concluded that teaching methods were strongly determined by the culture of the school. As this study used a quantitative approach the reasons behind this were not explored. However, Mansour (2009) argues that when investigating science teachers teaching methods consideration should always be given to the school culture.

The Present Study

It appears that although there has been research into the factors that influence the teaching methods used in the classroom, there is a paucity of research regarding English primary school teachers. A review of the literature suggests that there are a multitude of factors that influence the chosen teaching methods. As detailed above, much of the research focuses on pre-service teachers mainly training to teach science or mathematics in other countries. As the cultural and social values of the country in which the teacher is part of are central to shaping the educational structures in place, this may influence the factors that shape their teaching practices. The decision to focus on primary school teachers was made in part because previous studies have focused on teachers of a specific subject. Also contributing to this decision is that primary school teachers are arguably an important figure in a child's life as they set the foundations of a child's education. As highlighted, it is an interesting time to explore teaching practices within the English education system due to the recent NC reform. Schools are in the process of adopting a new curriculum with new ideas, new targets but without prescribed teaching methods.

As this study sought to gain in-depth descriptive data in the hope of providing an insight into the experiences of the teachers, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate (Miller & Glassner, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). An inductive approach to research was taken meaning that the data was analysed in its own right before consulting the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach was adopted as it means that the coding process was not influenced by previous ideas found in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One-to-one semi structured interviews were

utilised as the method of data collection. This method was chosen as it allows the interviewee to talk about issues of importance to them which the researcher had not thought about (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It also allows the interviewer to react to the interviewees' responses due to the flexible nature of the method in order to explore matters further to gain more meaningful data (Galletta, 2013). The chosen method of analysis is thematic analysis. This allows themes and patterns in the data to be explored (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which helps to highlight similarities and differences in the understandings and experiences of the teachers (Landridge, 2004). However, it is recognised that the experiences are specific to each teacher. The present research therefore aims to further explore how primary school teachers teaching practices are shaped.

The adopted epistemological position is critical realist. This means a belief that there is no single reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Individuals do not experience and understand things in the same way due to their perception being shaped by their previous experiences and the context in which they find themselves. Therefore context, both immediate and wider, is integral to understanding individuals experiences (Roberts, 2014). Despite never being able to fully access the truth, knowledge will be 'true' in the time and place it is created (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000).

Methodology

Participants

Participants consisted of five primary school teachers recruited using volunteer sampling by contacting two primary schools. This criterion was essential as the study looked at the experiences and understandings of primary school teachers. Initially, four participants were recruited, however due to the need to gain a minimum of three hours of interview material (Gough, Lawton, Madill & Stratton, 2003) in order to carry out our thematic analysis, another participant was recruited. Four participants were in their first two years of teaching and interviews varied in length from 10 minutes to fifty three minutes (Appendix B).

Design

A qualitative approach was adopted with one-to-one interviews conducted as the chosen method of data collection, followed by thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. The type of thematic analysis chosen is experiential as this study seeks to explore teacher's experiences and understandings. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest the defining part of experiential thematic analysis is the focus on the participants' understandings. In order to address the research aim, it is assumed that by asking teachers about their subjective experiences, an insight can be gained into them. However, it is also recognised that individual's perspectives are dependent on interpretation and context (Wood, Giles & Percy, 2012).

Materials

A letter was sent to the head teachers of the schools (Appendix C) which asked for their consent. Head teachers have the authority to allow or deny access to potential participants; therefore they have been defined as 'gate keepers' (King & Horrocks, 2010). Participant research information sheets were circulated (Appendix D) outlining the aims of the study. Participants were provided with a consent form (Appendix E) outlining what the research process will entail. An interview topic schedule (Appendix F) was made available to participants and an interview schedule (Appendix G) was used by the researcher. Both were devised by the researcher's own subjective experiences, consideration of the aim of the study as well as the reading of relevant literature in order to gather further understanding of the topics. Participants were provided with a debrief (Appendix H) following the conclusion of the interview. All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone to enable the researcher to be able to transcribe and analyse them at a later date (Southall, 2009).

Procedure

Prior to beginning the study, preliminary ethical approval was gained (Appendix A). Letters were sent to the head teacher of each school stating the aims of the study and asking their consent for the research to take place within their school (Appendix C). The head teachers were then asked to circulate a participant research information sheet to the staff (Appendix D). Willing participants were asked to make contact with the researcher and then a time, date and venue was arranged to conduct the interview. Interviews took place in venues which were relatively public, such as the teachers own classroom ensuring the safety of the researcher and participant (King & Horrocks, 2010). A copy of the proposed interview topic schedule was given to participants a week before the interview (Appendix F) so participants could reflect on their experiences in relation to the topic areas, hopefully leading to the collection of richer data (Morse, 2000). A consent form was provided to each

participant before the interview commenced (Appendix E). Clarification was sought by participants if needed, before signing the consent form and commencing the interview.

Due to the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, there were no set questions (Galletta, 2013). However, the researcher did have an interview schedule (Appendix F) to be used as a prompt. All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and at the conclusion of the interview, participants received a verbal and written debrief (Appendix H). Following each interview, the researcher reflected on the experience and any new topics of interest mentioned were noted on the interview schedule for the next interview. Completed transcripts were returned to participants to make any omissions. No omissions were made.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing the interviews participants received a detailed explanation of the research process and what was expected from them before giving their informed consent (Appendix E). Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time during the interview process or withdraw their data up until 05/01/2015 without consequence. Participants were ensured that their identity, along with any other parties mentioned, would be protected by the use of pseudonyms. Although steps to ensure anonymity and confidentiality had been taken, participants were made aware that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as parts of the interview would be integrated into the dissertation write up. All participants received a written and verbal debrief (Appendix H). To ensure the safety of the researcher, a third party was informed of the date, time and location of each interview.

The interviewer had previously volunteered in one of the schools. Although having never formally worked with the participants, it may have caused anxiety over anonymity. To address this, the steps taken to address confidentiality and anonymity were reiterated.

Analytical Strategy

Interviews were transcribed verbatim with the transcription notation system informed by Braun and Clarkes (2013) guidelines (Appendix I). Although it has been suggested that thematic analysis does not require verbatim transcription, it helps in capturing the context of the participants words (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). The coding process was informed by King and Horrocks (2010) thematic analysis guidelines with a within-case approach to coding adopted initially. To ensure the context of what participants said was not lost, the coding process began with each transcript coded inclusively regardless of the research question (King & Horrocks, 2010). Parts of the transcript relating to the research question were coded semantically then latently. The interpretative codes for each participant were written up (Appendix J,K,L,M,N). Following this, cross-case analysis looking for similarities and differences between participant's interpretative codes allowed the construction of the overarching themes and sub themes (Appendix O). Analysis was focused at the latent level as this helps to identify the underlying assumptions held by participants that may shape the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Although presented as phases followed, coding was not a linear process, it would be better explained as an iterative process (Appendix P). Latent codes were added and redefined throughout as was the organisation of the sub-themes and overarching themes.

Analysis

This study sought to gain further insight into the factors that shape the teaching practices of primary school teachers, through exploring their own understanding and experiences. Thematic analysis of the data set enabled the construction of five overarching themes: The Teaching and Learning Relationship, Wider Educational and Societal Values, School Structure VS Personal Agency, Belonging to a Community, and Choices and Experiences (Appendix O). Due to word constraints, this section will focus on two themes: The Teaching and Learning Process and Wider Educational and Societal Values. The decision to focus on the theme of The Teaching and Learning Relationship was made as it demonstrates how teaching practices are shaped by both the teacher and the learner at the micro level of the classroom. Wider Educational and Societal Values was chosen as my philosophical position as a critical realist seeks to understand the influence of context in shaping experiences. It highlights how the structures and values of society filter through and influence educational practices and teaching methods. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn along with the sub-themes.

The Teaching and Learning Relationship

This theme captures the bi-directional nature of the teaching and learning process. Teachers hold implicit personal philosophies about how children learn best. Contingent upon these beliefs is whether the teacher feels that they share the responsibility for learning with the child or place the responsibility solely upon themselves as the teacher. As a consequence, the learner can be positioned as a passive or active agent in the learning process. Beliefs about the way children learn best appear to be mediated in practice by teacher's confidence in their own or the children's ability. As a result, the teaching and learning relationship is constantly changing and being renegotiated due to the ongoing development of both the teacher and the learner. This therefore, impacts the teaching methods chosen.

Active Learning

A prevalent sub theme constructed in the data focused on the teachers' beliefs about the way children learn best and this was through active learning. All definitions focused upon the idea of the child being engaged in the learning process and actively undertaking activities. The term 'active learning' is used in the literature to describe a model of learning placed in opposition to 'passive learning' (van den Bergh, Ros & Beijaard, 2013). It can be suggested that at the crux of the concept is the idea that active learning focuses on transforming the learner from a passive recipient of information into a more active role. This is done by equipping the student with the skills necessary for them to take control of their learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). The lack of agreed upon definition (Drew & Mackie, 2011) means that the term is open to differing interpretations. It can be argued that this is why each teacher understood the term slightly differently and therefore utilised teaching methods; some of which arguably are not consistent with the principles of active learning.

I teach the skills but in the funniest way I can and if I (.) if I plan I'm doing this but they turn round and say we'd rather do it with Buzz Lightyear I'm like fine as long as we end up with that learning intention taught I don't care how we teach it ((pause)) so last year my class were obsessed with Frozen so everything was Frozen based

(Rachel, Page 113, Line 4461- 4470)

It can be suggested that Rachel's belief about active learning, centres around the use of resources. Stephen, Ellis and Martlew (2010) suggest that in primary schools active learning is often understood as the need to utilise physical resources as opposed to the use of worksheets. Rachel has a desire to make learning fun and she believes that in order to do this, the resource must be chosen carefully. Utilising a resource that is personally relevant to the child is a means to engage them and also sustains their interest in the activity. Rogoff (2003) explains that knowledge is developed through engagement with resources that are culturally meaningful. Children's interests and personal likes can be influenced by things popular in society at the time. This shows that for Rachel, teaching and learning is inextricably linked to the culture in which it exists. It also highlights the influence of the child in the learning process as the resource is chosen based on the relevance it holds for the child.

Erm I think it depends on what you're teaching because in English you might be teaching drama which can be quite similar to if you're looking at something art quite a practical approach erm

(Isabelle, Page 34, Line 1348- 1353)

Isabelle believes that active learning is dependent on the nature of the topic being taught. It occurs in subjects which demand a practical approach. Priestly (2010) points out that a common misconception held about active learning is that it solely requires the use of a practical activity. As a consequence of her beliefs about active learning, Isabelle's teaching methods are driven by the nature of the topic. It can be argued that this can cause confusion for the learner as their role in the teaching and learning process is constantly changing. In drama for example, the learner is required to take an active role assuming more responsibility for their learning. In mathematics however, they may be required to assume a more passive position in the learning process leaving the responsibility for learning with the teacher. Being in this state of flux can affect the dynamic of the teaching and learning relationship.

Arguably the differing teaching methods employed by Rachel and Isabelle are the result of their interpretations of the concept of active learning. The lack of a definition can also be argued to hinder the philosophy of active learning being incorporated into educational policy. This is despite it being noted that currently the education system is failing to equip students with the tools for lifelong learning (Carpenter & Pease, 2013) which is something active learning can address. If guidelines were written for teachers on employing active learning in the classroom, it would give them a way of reflecting on their teaching methods. It could be suggested that this would benefit the learner as their role in the teaching and learning process would be more consistent. Until this happens it is not surprising that teachers do not fully understand the skills necessary to facilitate active learning (Niemi, 2002).

Awareness of Learning Styles

All interviewees discussed the belief that children learn in different ways. The learning preference depends on the individual child suggesting that using just one teaching method will not benefit all the children in the class. The strength of the belief influenced the teaching methods used. The strength of the belief also had implications for where the teacher attributes the responsibility for learning and therefore the perceived role of the teacher and learner.

If I was teaching them a CVC word of say sat I would write that and I would write that a few times below and cover it and check it for those children I would be doing SSS-AAA-TTT for the ones that do it the other way and then I'm not going to sing now but I will sing it in a different way or tap it out S-A-T S-A-T for the ones that are trying to learn in that way and I really try to do all three (.) every time I do something

(Rachel, Page 103, Line 4068- 4080)

Rachel holds a very strong belief in learning styles so much so that she teaches everything in a variety of ways. Her passion for teaching in this way can be said to lead her to think that she is providing better learning opportunities for her students (Lawrence, 2009). However, it can be argued that this concept of congruent teaching and learning styles places the responsibility for learning solely on the teacher. The teacher would be responsible for identifying the learning preference of every child in the class and then adapting their teaching methods to suit the child. As a result, the agency is taken away from the child (Bishka, 2010). This appears to work in opposition to the idea of the child as an active learner and potentially clashes with the notion of active learning. However, this does depend on how the teacher defines active learning.

I personally like a much more practical approach to the curriculum but I know not every child likes that so it's important to ensure you don't just focus on what you're interested in as a teacher you ensure you have all different approaches to the curriculum

(Isabelle, Page 48, Line 1923- 1931)

Isabelle acknowledges that her personal preference for learning can influence her teaching style. McPeck et al (2011) notes that it is common for teachers to teach in ways that are consistent with their own preference for learning. Davis (2010) argues that teaching in your preferred way is not necessarily a bad thing. She suggests that as part of the progression into becoming a teacher, teachers must first become comfortable teaching in their preferred way. However, Isabelle also acknowledges that not everyone holds the same learning preference as she does. It can be inferred that by approaching the curriculum in a number of ways in order to suit different learning styles, Isabelle assumes the responsibility for learning. It implies a belief that she must match her teaching style to the child's preferred learning style in order for learning to take place. This positions the learner as a passive recipient in the teaching and learning relationship.

It can be suggested that both Rachel and Isabelle fail to recognise that learning preferences are not abilities. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) argue that learning preferences are little more than a disposition and so teaching in a way that is not consistent with the child's preference can help the development of the child. Arguably, it would be more beneficial for teachers to equip children with the knowledge of learning styles. This would mean that when they face a situation where the teaching style is not suited to their learning preference they have the ability to know how they can make learning more accessible for themselves (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). This would not only empower the learner and

position them within a more active role in the teaching and learning relationship, it is a skill that would help them throughout their educational journey.

Providing Children with a Toolkit for Life

School does not just teach children the curriculum necessary to pass government exams. All interviewees felt that a part of their job is to facilitate children's social and emotional skill set. Part of this involved teaching them the skills deemed necessary for a successful life which can be argued to be driven by the values held in the surrounding society.

it is really important to praise them and show that you actually have noticed them trying hard because I think they try harder the next time and it's an ongoing cycle

(Isabelle, Page 44, Line 1777- 1782)

Praising a child for their efforts can be seen as an important mediational factor in increasing the child's motivation to undertake a future activity that they are finding challenging (van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2013). Isabelle recognizes the cyclical effect increasing a child's self- efficacy has on their future performance. Bandura (1984) suggests that there are four sources of self-efficacy beliefs and it can be argued that the child's cognitive processing of the source impacts the extent to which it develops their personal self-efficacy beliefs. This is because the child actively attributes importance to the source (Bandura, 1995). Although not explicitly in the data, it can be argued that for some children praise from a teacher can have a big impact on their self-efficacy beliefs. This is because the teacher is a person whom the child recognises and potentially values and so assigns importance to this source. This suggests that the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the child can be important in building a child's confidence. It should also be noted that throughout the child's educational journey it is in primary school where the child has the most sustained contact with one particular teacher. This provides the environment for a meaningful relationship to be forged and therefore the conditions to increase the child's self-efficacy beliefs. As self-efficacy beliefs can influence motivation, feelings, thoughts and most importantly the actions (Bandura, 1995) of the child, it highlights the active role of the learner in the learning process.

they should also they should know how to sit at a desk and learn and listen and to (.) to learn that way (.) I think that it's very important that you do both because otherwise (.) it doesn't set a good precedent for if they go to (.) upper school and it can't sit and learn and they can't sit quietly at a desk and learn that way

(Jessica, Page 5, Line 162- 171)

Jessica suggests that part of her role as a primary school teacher includes setting out the expectations of the behaviour of the child. The expectations of the role of the learner are determined by the behavioural norms of the formal education system in the society in which it exists. In England, this commonly means assuming a passive role as a learner, sitting and listening to the teacher at the front of the class. However, in nursery it is the norm to encourage children to learn through play based learning, assuming a more active role. Research suggests that play helps children to develop the social skills necessary for a school environment (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). However, despite the necessity of play based learning, it requires the teacher at primary school to have to redefine the child's role as a learner (Bodrova & Leong,

2007). It also means that the child has to learn two different but both acceptable ways to behave, albeit in certain situations. This is not confined to the transition between nursery and primary school. It can also occur between each individual year group as each teacher holds a differing teaching philosophy meaning that the child may need to adopt a different role as a learner. Therefore, the teaching and learning relationship is constantly being renegotiated.

Erm to educate but to teach values and behaviour (.) erm (.) and make them make people well rounded adults

(Georgia, Page 52, Line 2097- 2100)

Georgia highlights how education is rooted in a social and cultural context. She believes that part of her job is to teach children the values and behaviour in order to give them the skills necessary to become successful in adulthood. The values instilled in the children are those relevant to the society in which they are educated. Myung-sook and Sunwoo (2014) compared the behaviour management values employed in American and Korean primary schools and found them to be different as the two cultures valued different behaviours. This shows how as the cultural and social values change, so will the teaching and behaviour management methods utilised in our primary classrooms. This ripple effect demonstrates how the teaching and learning relationship can be shaped across time and culture.

Teachers' Confidence and Control

The teachers' feeling of confidence in their own ability is closely linked to the need to be in control. For the teacher, feeling as though they are control of the lesson is important as it not only helps them to fulfil their perceived role as a teacher but also helps them to feel in control of the child's progress. The teachers' feeling of confidence in their own ability appears to be a mediational factor in the level of control they deem necessary in their lessons. This effects the extent to which they engage in student centered activities where the teachers' control is typically reduced as it is shared between the teacher and learner.

Funny you should mention maths ((laughs)) they quite different for me maths is where I feel I am the weakest (.) when we do numeracy I feel I need to be fully prepared in my lesson and don't particularly like to deviate from it (.) it's so crucial for the children to learn numeracy and sometimes I feel like I can't deliver

(Jessica, Page 11, Line 419- 428)

For Jessica, her level of confidence depends on the subject domain. It has been suggested that self- confidence is context dependent as it reflects the teacher's perception of their ability to reach a specific goal in a particular situation (Pintrich & McKeachie, 2000; Bandura, 1997). Jessica's confidence is lowest in mathematics. In the English education system mathematics is a core subject and it forms part of the SATs exams taken at the end of year 2 and 6. Grades achieved in these subjects determine in part the success of the child, the teacher and the school in the eyes of society. It can be suggested that for Jessica knowing the importance of the subject she feels weakest in lowers her confidence further. As a way of increasing her level

of confidence Jessica likes to be fully prepared in her lesson plan. This appears to give her a sense of control which helps boost her confidence.

Maintaining control is also important when teaching the lesson so she does not like to deviate from the lesson plan. It can be argued that this need for control means that there is no room for student centered activities as they create a level of unpredictability. Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi (2007) note that student centred learning is often accompanied by higher levels of self-efficacy on behalf of the teacher due to the responsibility for learning being shared between the learner and the teacher. Jessica's need for control positions her as solely responsible for learning. As a consequence she positions the children as passive learners in mathematics. However, the teaching method utilised in mathematics appears to be in opposition not only to Jessica's opinion that children learn best when doing things themselves but also to the way she conducts other lessons. As the role of the learner is constantly changing between subjects it can create a sense of confusion for the child. The perceived self-efficacy of the teacher constantly influences the nature of the teaching and learning relationship.

we maybe don't feel like (.) we're teaching a good lesson erm and (.) we don't feel like we're teaching them a lot (.) the children almost just like plodding on on their own and then we're helping them when we need to so it's more like guiding them rather than preaching at the front

(Lucy, Page 66, Lines 2627 – 2635)

Lucy suggests that the new scheme brought in by the school which consists of the children working through booklets suited to their ability, lowers her feelings of control during the lessons. Although it can be argued that working through booklets is not a form of active learning, the responsibility for learning is still shared between the teacher and the child. This seems to make Lucy feel as though the lesson is not her own. Alexander (2008) suggests that this shift of control conflicts with the teacher's identity. This is because the teacher is traditionally positioned as the expert being responsible for the transmission of knowledge (Çam & Oruç, 2014). By positioning the learner in a more active role the teacher has to allow them to take some of the responsibility for learning.

As noted earlier, Vygotsky incorporated a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in his model of learning. It suggests that children can work at a developmental level higher than their level of individual achievement through the collaboration with a more experienced other, namely the teacher within the classroom setting (Vygotsky, 1978). This model can be used to explain Lucy's new found role as a teacher. The children work through their booklets individually and Lucy only guides them through the parts of the activities that they are finding hard. However, it could be argued that as the teacher is the more capable other, the onus is on them to recognize when the child needs assistance (Chak, 2001) and not wait for the child to ask for help which is something not explained by Lucy. This would mean that the teacher still ultimately assumes more responsibility for learning but the learner is beginning to be positioned in a more active role.

Some of the children that have been asked about it especially the high ability children (.) they really like it because they say we don't have to wait for everyone

else to finish or we can just move on at their own pace and I think erm even the lower ability children (.) it's a bit more of a confidence boost for them to get things right and be able to see progress as opposed to always being the one to finish last or not to get it right

(Lucy, Page 73-74, Lines 2929 - 2941)

Lucy suggests that this shared responsibility for learning is beneficial for children of all abilities. She explains that by allowing the children to control their learning pace they develop a sense of achievement when they complete the work. This sense of achievement for the child arguably increases their feelings of self-efficacy which then helps to motivate them in the face of further obstacles (Zimmerman, 1995). It can be argued that by the teacher sharing the control for learning it allows the child to grow as a learner. This then enriches the child's resources for future educational success.

Addressing issues with teachers' confidence is a matter that could be addressed at a higher level. If schools were to dedicate an inset day to equipping teachers with strategies that could help to increase their confidence and educating them on the philosophy of active learning it could dramatically affect the teaching methods utilised in the classroom. It could be argued that this would make it more likely for teachers to engage in active learning meaning the role of the learner would be less in a state of flux as it is today. However, without the support of the structures that surround teachers, these changes are less likely to take place.

Wider Educational and Societal Values

This theme demonstrates how teaching methods are influenced by culture, history and society. Although there may not always be conscious awareness of their role in shaping education, they exert a large influence over the day to day running of a primary classroom. These factors help shape the accepted teaching practices, the structure of the education system and determining the success of the child.

Pressure to perform

Pressure was a feeling reported by most of the interviewees. The pressure felt was perceived to be a due to having to provide evidence of progress to the senior leadership team. Pressure was greater in core subjects as arguably the grades achieved in these subjects determine the worth of the child and teacher in the eyes of society.

and even now every couple of months I have to do something on paper to prove it to her

(Rachel, Page 123, Line 4867 – 4870)

Rachel notes that because she refuses to use worksheets when she is teaching, the head teacher asks her to produce a piece of conventional work in order to provide evidence that the children are making progress. Rose and Rogers (2012) suggests that this 'top-down' pressure is a result of the pressure placed on head teachers to lead their school to meet government targets. Accountability and measurement are important in the English culture and so this creates a fear that the head teacher will be blamed if the child does not perform on the written SATs tests. Arguably, the head teacher feels comforted by the use of the more traditional pen and paper

activities as they provide a feeling of control and have been used for many years in the English education system.

obviously there's more expectation on attainment with the core subjects nobody will probably really care what level your children are at in year four in history or science or

(Lucy, Page 73, Line 2898 - 2902)

Lucy suggests that the pressure is greater in the core subjects. Arguably, this is because these subjects are held in higher esteem in society than foundation subjects. It can be suggested that this partly stems from the fact that in the past the government has placed high importance on stamping out illiteracy in England. Consequently, a child's worth in society is measured partly through their ability to read and write meaning that teachers are under greater pressure to facilitate progress in these areas. Foster and Kalil (2005) support this idea and propose that the values held in society can determine the development of the child. This demonstrates how the values of society permeate through into the education system and become a source of pressure influencing the teaching methods used by the teachers.

Accepted Teaching Methods in England

In England, certain teaching methods are more accepted than others. Some are seen as the only possible method to use but that does not mean that they are the only method available.

They don't do any phonics and they don't do those word groupings and I don't know ((pause)) I just can't explain it ((laughs)) I don't know how they do it ((pause)) but I also say now if we've got children in year three that can't get their phonics maybe they're not phonic readers so lets try the American style and see how they do it

(Rachel, Page 117, Line 4606 - 4616)

But I always hit negativity coz in England we think that children learn

(Rachel, Page 117, Line 4618 - 4620)

Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological model conceptualises the environment as a series of embedded nests. The most distal influences are represented in the macrosystem and they include the cultural norms and educational practices. The ideologies represented in this system manifest themselves in the lower systems of the model, for example, the resources the teachers use day to day. In England, the phonics reading scheme is the prescribed teaching method outlined in the National Curriculum and has therefore become the accepted method of teaching.

The differences between the educational practices used in the American and English education systems can be argued to stem from the differences in the cultural and social values (Planel, 1997). It can be suggested that this highlights how influential the wider structures in society are on the education system and the day to day teaching methods used in the classroom. Arguably, it is extremely hard to go against the accepted practices in society and still be respected as a teacher which is why teachers continue on with methods even when they are not working. The bioecological model helps to explain how the teacher's teaching methods and

therefore the child's learning practices are constrained and facilitated by the society in which it exists.

Educating the Future as We Did the Past

Many educational practices were established years ago. They have become so pervasive in society they are not questioned, just merely accepted despite teachers expressing concerns about them. However, the new National Curriculum appears to bring a hope that the education system is recognising that it is not meeting children's needs at this moment in time.

the main bulk of the class are working towards those milestones at the end of those phases rather than individual years which I think the new curriculum is more tailored to now erm (.) spreading them across (.) erm the phases rather than just the year groups

(Isabelle, Page 31, Line 1217 - 1225)

I think it makes more sense because children develop at different rates erm and it might just be one particular topic in maths that they don't get and by the time they revisited it they get it and they're a lot more erm aware of the understanding

(Isabelle, Page 31, Line 1229 -1236)

Isabelle suggests that the age of a child does not dictate their ability. She notes that children develop at different rates and so their understanding of a topic is dependent on when and how it is presented to them. Understanding is contingent upon developmental level. Schweitzer (2015) agrees that a child's age bears no relevance to their level of ability. Despite this the structure of the education system is still organised by age. However, Isabelle feels that as the new National Curriculum focuses on development across phases of education rather than individual years it is starting to address some of its shortcomings. Allowing the teacher greater flexibility to revisit topics multiple times across the phase when they deem it beneficial arguably gives children the maximum opportunity to further their understanding of the topic.

The National Curriculum reflects the values of the government in power at the time of when it was commissioned. As society changes, new governments come to power, it is only natural that the National Curriculum can be subject to change. However, there is no guarantee that the change will be beneficial, but it will always be adopted, first of all because it has to be. Then it will become the norm and so permeates society and becomes unquestioned. This highlights how teaching methods can change over time as they are influenced by the National Curriculum in place at the time.

In conclusion, the bi-directional nature of the teaching and learning relationship shapes teaching methods at the micro level. This relationship influences whether the learner is positioned as an active or passive agent. This positioning is constantly changing due to the ongoing development of the teacher and the learner. The nature of the relationship between the teacher and learner is also influenced by the social norms of the education system. This shows how at a macro level, teaching methods are shaped by the structures of society and cultural beliefs held. As the values of society change, they begin to permeate through into the education system and so educational practices change. These changes become not only accepted over time

but unquestioned. Therefore, teaching methods can be shaped through an interplay of factors at the micro and macro level.

Conclusion

Gaining an insight into the factors that shape the teaching practices of primary school teachers was the aim of this study. This was achieved through exploring the teachers own understandings and experiences. Thematic analysis of the data allowed the construction of five overarching themes: The Teaching and Learning Relationship, Wider Educational and Societal Values, School Structure VS Personal Agency, Belonging to a Community, and Choices and Experiences. The themes identified demonstrate how teaching practices can be shaped by proximal and distal factors.

Wider Educational and Societal Values was one of the focal themes addressed in the analysis. This theme suggests that teaching practices are shaped by culture, history and society. It shows the influence of the structures in society in dictating the accepted teaching methods in England and how these change as society changes. It highlights that the pressure placed on teachers to meet the national standards stems partly from the culture of accountability and measuring in our society (Engebretson, 2014).

The other focal theme selected for analysis was The Teaching and Learning Relationship. This theme demonstrates the bi-directional influence of the teacher and the learner on the teaching methods chosen. It shows how this relationship influences the positioning of the learner as an active or passive agent and demonstrates how this positioning is constantly changing. It highlights how mediational factors such as the teacher's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) influence the teaching methods chosen. It also recognises the role the teacher has in shaping the child's educational journey by providing them with appropriate social and emotional skills.

The theme School Structure VS Personal Agency demonstrates the interaction between the teaching and behavioural schemes established in the school and the teachers own teaching methods. Teaching methods are constrained and facilitated by the available resources however; teachers can be creative and make resources as well. It shows how the school can dictate certain ways of teaching children which leaves little room for the teachers own imagination. This theme highlights the importance of the school culture when exploring teaching methods used (Mansour, 2009; Deemer, 2004).

The theme Belonging to a Community shows how important the relationships between the teachers in the school are. They bounce ideas off one another which help to develop their teaching methods. The relationship between the teacher and the parents of the children is also important. Parents can constrain or facilitate teaching methods by removing their child from certain experiences in school (Mahmood, 2013).

The unique experiences the teacher has had that shapes their teaching methods is highlighted by the theme Choices and Experiences. The teachers own personal experiences of school influences the teaching methods used (Mariaye, 2012). The location of their chosen university and choice of university course determines the type of schools their teaching training will occur in. This influences the teachers they get to observe and the school cultures they get to experience before being placed in charge of their own class.

I acknowledge that the data gained in this study only provides a snap shot of how primary school teachers teaching practices are shaped. The findings and conclusions presented are context- specific. As a result, if this study was to be

conducted in a different context or time the analysis may have produced different findings. The interpretations given are underpinned by my philosophical position as a critical realist. Therefore, the findings may only represent one interpretation. However, the themes discussed appear to fit with the previous research into the area.

A limitation of this study is that participants were recruited from two different schools. Whilst they were both primary schools, they appeared to have very different teaching philosophies. As a result, the data collected may reflect the differing philosophies held by the schools rather than the personal choices of teaching methods held by the teachers recruited. However, as noted previously the role of the culture of the school is recognised in shaping teaching practices (Mansour, 2009; Deemer, 2004) so despite this limitation the aim of the study was still met.

A further criticism of this study is that due to the nature of volunteer sampling, the majority of participants that were recruited were NQTs or teachers in their second year of teaching. Haggarty (2011) notes how teachers at the beginning of their career are still developing and refining their teaching practices. This suggests that teaching practices are potentially influenced by the amount of experience of teaching. The role that experience plays in shaping teaching practices was constructed as a theme. However, had this study explored the experiences of teachers at various stages of their careers, it may have uncovered different experiences of teaching. This therefore, could be a potential direction for future research. Another direction for future research would be to look into the interplay between teacher's personal characteristics and the school context. In the literature and the sample of teachers recruited for this study, it was suggested that the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs influenced their classroom practices (Fitzgerald, Dawson & Hackling, 2013; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007).

Overall, this study highlights that there are multiple factors that shape a teacher's chosen teaching method. The influence of the children and their personal experiences were recognised by the teachers as being a big influence on their teaching methods. However, the influences of more distal factors were sometimes not explicitly recognised by the teachers. It should be noted that the amount of influence each factor exerts is individual to the teacher and is subject to change over time. However, the data gained from the teachers recruited suggested their teaching methods are shaped by an interplay of factors at the micro and macro level.

Reflexive Analysis

The beliefs and assumptions held by researcher are recognised as influencing all parts of a qualitative study (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999). Therefore, it is essential that the researcher explores and makes these clear to the reader and reflexivity offers a way in which to do this (Morrow, 2005; Darawsheh, 2014). Willig (2008) notes that there are two types of reflexivity – epistemological and personal reflexivity. Epistemological reflexivity refers to how the assumptions the researcher has about the world shapes the research and the research process (King & Horrocks, 2010). Personal reflexivity recognises the impact of the researcher's beliefs, experiences and interests on the research (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Epistemological Reflexivity

My ontological and epistemological position (See Appendix Q) necessarily influenced my decisions about my methodology and method (Grix, 2010; Carter & Little, 2007). I locate myself within the critical realist epistemology which amongst other things means a belief that the context, both immediate and wider, is integral to understanding individuals experiences (Roberts, 2014). As a consequence, when designing my interview schedule thought was given to certain contextual features that may influence the teaching methods primary school teachers use. If questions about factors such as the National Curriculum and school governors were not asked, then these wider contextual features may not have been mentioned in the interview and would not have formed part of the data. When it came to analysing the data, the first time I began to code it, I coded all the data inclusively regardless of the research question. This was so the context of what participants said was not lost. When constructing my themes, I looked out for elements of the data that highlighted the role of the social structures in society. This led to the construction of the theme Wider Educational and Societal Values. Had a different researcher with a different epistemological position looked at the data, this theme may not have held such importance and may not have been one of the focal topics in the write up.

The decision to adopt a qualitative approach was also determined by my epistemological beliefs. I hold the belief that individuals do not experience and understand things in the same way due to their perception being shaped by their previous experiences. As a result of this, I felt the most appropriate way to explore how primary school teachers teaching practices are shaped would be through semi-structured interviews as they allow the participant to talk about things important to them which I had not thought about. This also influenced my decision to choose experiential thematic analysis as my method of data analysis as thematic analysis is not wedded to a particular epistemological position. This flexibility meant it allowed me to conduct thematic analysis from a critical realist perspective.

Personal Reflexivity

The idea for this research derived from my personal interest in teaching and learning. My experience of undertaking a module in the second year of university about the psychology of education made me realise how interested I was in the topic. I began to volunteer in a primary school which allowed me the opportunity to work with two different teachers in different year groups. During this time I became fascinated by the different ways the teachers conducted their lessons. Initially I thought the differences between teaching methods used were simply down to different teaching styles. However, I also got to see the differences in the teaching

methods used by the same teacher when they were being observed and when they were not. This led me to believe that the choice of teaching method is more complex and can be dependent on the situation the teacher finds themselves in. These experiences made me want to explore this area further.

Although I did have some experience of interviewing before undertaking this research it was limited to a work environment. I felt nervous before conducting the first interview but having an interview schedule to be used as a prompt gave me some comfort. I think I relied upon my interview schedule too much during my first interview especially, instead of letting the interviewee expand on topics when there was a pause I moved onto my next question. There were also times when the interviewee mentioned something and I did not ask further questions on it. For example when Jessica mentioned that she would rather praise children than punish them (Jessica, Page 9, lines 333-337) it would have been beneficial to ask why. Had I been more experienced at conducting interviews, I may have picked up on this. However, as the interviews went on my confidence increased and I allowed the interviewee's time to think and express themselves without me moving the topic of conversation on.

Having experienced the benefit of reflective practice during my time at university, I kept a reflexive diary during the entirety of the research process. I endeavoured to write reflective notes after each interview. One of things I learnt through keeping this diary is how the relationship and interactions between the interviewee and myself during the interview, significantly impact the data gained (See Appendix Q). For example, I had previously volunteered in one of the schools that I conducted the research in. Although I had not formally met any of the participants prior to the interview, I was aware of who they were. This made me wonder whether they would be truthful in their interviews as they may not have wanted to paint their school in a negative light as they knew I volunteered there. It also made me reiterate their right to withdraw during the interview and their data after the interview as I did not want them to feel pressured to participate. I actually felt that the data I gained from the participants at the school I volunteered at was richer as I had an insider perspective on things such as the school policies and schemes in place. This allowed greater understanding on my behalf of what the interviewees were saying. However, on reflection it could have led me to make assumptions about what the interviewees meant.

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