

Implementing a Critically Quasi-Ethnographic Approach

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This paper provides an account of the methodological approach of a study designed to address some fundamental questions relating to formative assessment. The paper reports on the use of a critically quasi-ethnographic approach and describes the practicalities of adopting such an approach. The validity of the study is also considered, reflecting on Tricoglus' (2001) protocol for practitioner research in education. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Ethnography, Critical Research, Research as Praxis

Introduction

Having co-ordinated assessment across a primary school for two years, I became (and still am) fascinated by the concept of “assessment *for* learning”. Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam (2003) claim that the first priority of assessment for learning is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning. It is usually embedded in all aspects of teaching and learning, conducted by teachers as part of their own diverse and individual teaching styles. Furthermore, it is seen as important by teachers as it is at the core of the teaching and learning processes, serving to identify the next learning steps for individuals (Allal & Ducrey, 2000). In much literature, assessment for learning is perceived as synonymous with formative assessment (see, for example, Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2002). However, Wiliam conceptualises assessment for learning as the *purpose*, and formative assessment as the *function*. In other words, formative assessment is the tool by which assessment for learning can take place.

Formative assessment is of mutual benefit for both learning and teaching. It impacts learning through the provision of feedback to learners by teachers and by students in assessing themselves. In terms of providing a working definition for formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) conclude that it can be described as, “...all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (p. 7).

My fascination with assessment for learning led to a commitment to add to the body of knowledge regarding formative assessment through educational research, and to a heightened interest in methodological approaches. In particular, I was keen to develop my understanding of, and ability to, undertake more extensive qualitative research. My experiences in this field had been limited to personal classroom-based research that largely involved evaluation of my own practice.

This study was conducted to address three main research questions:

- What formative assessment strategies do teachers use in their day-to-day teaching?
- What has been the impact of a top-down approach to the teaching of literacy on teachers' approaches to formative assessment?
- Is there a relationship between teachers' personal and professional biographies and their approaches to formative assessment?

This paper discusses the methodological approach of the study, including practicalities in terms of both study design and validity. The intention of this is to highlight what makes a critically quasi-ethnographic approach unique, and to provide potential help, support, and motivation to other researchers considering adopting such an approach.

A Critically Quasi-Ethnographic Approach

In seeking a description of the methodological approach of the study, I feel that it is appropriate to describe it as “critically quasi-ethnographic”. The principal characteristic that leads me to describe it as such is its ethnographic stance. The term “quasi” is attributed to the timescale of the study and frequency of visits to the sites of data collection, and the term “critical” refers to the notion of adopting strategic and collaborative elements to the study.

Ethnography is the organised study of other groups of people and is commonly associated with anthropological studies of other cultures. Spradley (1979) related the ethnographic approach to the study of particular groups within society and described an ethnographic approach as one which describes a culture, referring to the term culture as, “...the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behaviour” (p. 5). Such an approach,

...involves the ethnographer participating...in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions-in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (p. 1)

Ethnography is a long process, requiring the ethnographer to spend much time with a group of people, and requiring the ethnographer to “live” with the people being studied in order to establish something of importance about a whole human culture. In this study, “establishing something of importance” refers to the extent to which the study sought to understand teachers' approaches to formative assessment.

This study was concerned with observing teachers and pupils in their “natural settings;” gaining a deep understanding of the actions of teachers with regard to formative assessment and about discovery as opposed to testing a theory. Given this, an ethnographic approach as described above seemed the most appropriate means of gathering rich empirical data. A pure ethnographer may argue that the length of time engaged in this study could not be described as extended. Jeffrey and Troman (2004) indicate that ethnographic studies are considered to take the form of a twelve month

“sustained” period of data gathering. The length of time spent gathering data for the study, however, took place over one academic year and was not sustained. Visits to the sites were intermittent throughout the period. In addition, the study involved two teachers from two settings and, pure ethnographic studies tend to involve the researcher being in one setting (Bryman, 2004). I would argue however, that the methodological approach of the study adopted features of an ethnographic approach for the following reasons:

- Prior to collecting the data for the study, I became a member of the staff of each school as a classroom assistant, in each setting, from November 2000 to December 2000.
- I immersed myself in the cultures of the schools and the lives of the teachers for one day a week during the data collection period from January 2001 to April 2001.
- I was able to forge relationships with the staff quickly because of the links with the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course delivered at the university where I am based.
- I observed what happened, listened to what was said, asked questions in fact, collected whatever data were available to throw light on the issues that were the focus of the research. For example, the data included lesson observations, samples of pupils’ marked work, and interviews with teachers and pupils.

Although the data gathering tools as described above are not used solely by ethnographers, and their use does not necessarily indicate an ethnographic approach, the purpose of their use in this study was ethnographic, given that they were used as a means of learning from people as opposed to merely studying them (Spradley, 1979). Indeed, ethnography, Spradley states, starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance. At the outset of this study, I did not know what formative assessment strategies the teachers used or what the teachers understood about formative assessment and their formative behaviour; these remained to be discovered. An ethnographic approach therefore, enabled me to immerse myself in the cultures of the two teachers, to share their experiences, and understand their approaches to formative assessment.

The attributes that lead me to describe the study as “quasi” ethnographic are its timescale and frequency of visits to the settings. In effect, therefore, the claim made here is that this study has some similarities to pure ethnography, but there are also differences. Firstly, as described earlier, it could be argued that the length of time engaged in fieldwork could not be described as extended. Wolcott (1995), for example, describes an ideal fieldwork term to be of two years, and on this basis it could be argued that the study was not purely ethnographic.

Furthermore, ethnographic studies tend to involve the researcher being immersed in one social setting for an extended period of time (Bryman, 2004), and although Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) describe how it is possible to study a small number of settings, generally speaking, the more settings, the less time can be spent in each. In this study, a decision was made to involve two teachers from two settings. Although this had implications in terms of time, this facilitated the opportunity to explore formative assessment from two perspectives and to yield rich data.

This study also necessitated flexible approaches to the frequency of visits to the schools, to conduct interviews and to discuss findings at various stages. Jeffrey and Troman (2004, p. 540) describe such an approach to ethnography, in terms of its timescale, as “selective intermittent time mode” whereby the frequency of visits to sites is determined by decisions as to whether the analytical categories have been “saturated”. The relationship between the extent of fieldwork and analysis is fluid and facilitates, “...the opportunity to decide during the process of research where to focus and the chance to respond to serendipitous events” (p. 542).

In describing the approach of the study, I have adopted the phrase critical; however, it is important to distinguish the use of the term as it is used in this study and as it is used in association with critical theory. In the latter tradition, the ends and means of practice are *rationally* interrogated by the researcher, and thus practice is ultimately answerable to reason and evidence, with the aim of emancipating educators or researchers from the distortion of hegemonic ideology. The assumption of the tradition of critical theory, originating with the Frankfurt School, is that educational researchers can stand apart from their educational values and intentions through the deployment of reason (Tripp, 1992). This is not assumed in my study. The adoption of the term critical in this study is justified more by its resemblance to *praxis*. In praxis there is no division characterised as first *discovering* knowledge and subsequently *applying* it; rather, these are two mutually constitutive elements of one process. The *critical* aspect of this process then, is the intention to raise to consciousness the values or “good” embedded within a practice such that the practice may then be available to question and critical scrutiny, ultimately with a view to improve it. Thus, the characteristics that lead me to describe the study as “critical” are its “strategic research” element and “collaborative nature.” The study aimed not only to add to the “body of knowledge” about assessment, but also to impact on assessment policies and procedures; and unlike a solely traditional ethnographic study, the aim was to, “...(shift) the goal of praxis away from the acquisition of knowledge about the Other...to the form of a dialogical relationship with the Other...The activating agent...is the emerging peerlike partnership between ethnographer and participant” (Brown & Dobrin, 2004, p. 5).

It was anticipated that the main findings of the study would be shared with a broad community interested in formative assessment, to continue to add to the assessment debate, and thus generate interest and development in formative assessment practice. It was also expected that the findings of the study would be shared with the participants and their colleagues, such that they could evaluate their own practice in terms of formative assessment, and that the findings would serve as a focus for discussion regarding school assessment practices.

The notion of adopting a strategic element to the study echoes the sentiments of Spradley (1979) and Lather (1986). Spradley argues that it is difficult to ignore the practical relevance of research, and that ethnographers must ask themselves *why* they are carrying out the research. In many instances, ethnographers can no longer simply collect data about a culture. Spradley suggests instead “strategic research,” which not only serves to describe a culture, but impacts on the needs of the culture, stating, “Ethnography for what? For understanding the human species, but also for serving the needs of humankind. One of the greatest challenges of the ethnographer is to synchronise these two uses of research” (p. 16).

With regard to this study, the “needs” of the culture are two-fold. Firstly, in consideration of the broader needs of teaching and learning, the study sought to add to the body of knowledge regarding assessment in response to, for example, Black and Wiliam’s (1998) claim that there is a need to develop the potential of assessment to support learning. Secondly, as is described in the section “selection of the participants,” those involved in the study perceived that through engaging in the study, they would not only develop an understanding of their own practice with regard to formative assessment, but may develop their skills.

Lather (1986) argues that there is no “neutral research” and in social research methodology there is a need for a form of “critical ethnography,” which she terms “research as praxis”. Research as praxis allows us to understand and to make changes. Lather terms this change through understanding as “emancipatory knowledge”. She argues that for researchers holding “emancipatory aspirations,” research as praxis offers a powerful opportunity for people to change, by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their situation. Thus, Lather suggests that research as praxis requires the researcher to acknowledge that his or her personal values influence the theoretical basis of the research, recognising that research is an active process, in which accounts are produced through selective observation and theoretical interpretation of what is seen. She thus urges for “reciprocity,” which she defines as mutual participation in the exploration of the research. This notion of reciprocity implies a two-way street metaphor, whereby there exists a collaborative approach to critical inquiry (Lather).

In collaborative arrangements, Brown and Dobrin (2004) describe how both parties have a say in the design, implementation, and writing of the ethnography. I would argue, therefore that the methodological approach was collaborative in nature because,

- The teachers were involved from the outset in organising the logistics of the observations and interviews. For example, the timings of observations and interviews were negotiated to suit all parties.
- The teachers were involved in the selection of the pupils involved in the study to ensure that the groups of pupils would engage in discussions with me and work effectively as a group during group discussions.
- Following lesson observations, teachers were invited to read and comment on field notes.
- At each stage of data analysis, findings were fed back to the teachers for their comments.
- Main findings were shared with teachers and their respective colleagues.

In refining the definition of the methodological approach of the study, I have termed it “critically quasi-ethnographic”. In the context of this study, this term implies that an ethnographic stance has been adopted in the sense that the study attempted to describe, understand, and search for meaning in the domain of formative assessment; “quasi” given the timescale and frequency of visits to the settings involved and “critical” given the extent to which there existed collaboration such that, in Lather’s terms, reflection and deeper understanding is achieved.

Approach of the Study

With reference to Spradley (1979) the approach of the study was designed to look at:

- What people did
- What people knew
- The things people made and used

In terms of the main research questions, the study was designed to look at the formative assessment strategies teachers used and what they understood about their practice. Data were, therefore, gathered from a variety of classroom observations, interviews, and documentary evidence throughout an academic year, within two Year 6 classes (10+ years).

Selection of the Participants

As discussed in the section, *Adopting a Protocol for Practitioner Research* two teachers, referred to here by the pseudonyms of “Amanda” and “Bethany,” were involved in the study. Approval of the two teachers was granted by the headteachers of their respective schools and by my supervising university tutor, following the submission of an approved research proposal. These teachers were involved in the study for specific reasons.

Firstly, the study was designed to gain a deep understanding of formative assessment and to investigate what aspects of classroom practice may usefully be encouraged in order to support its development. I was interested, therefore, in uncovering the approaches of *experienced* practitioners and working with those who were keen to develop their understanding of formative assessment.

Secondly, I decided to focus specifically on the formative assessment approaches used during the teaching of English within the “literacy hour” (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). The rationale for this was to seek and understand the impact of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment) on teachers’ approaches to formative assessment. In addition, by focussing on one particular subject I could manage the study more easily. For example, I could organise visits to schools, in liaison with class teachers effectively as times for teaching English were “set,” and I could work with experienced teachers with similar interests, the intention being that we would all have a shared dialogue, which would aid the research process.

Finally, as the approach of the study was critically quasi-ethnographic, imperative throughout were relationships between the participants and the author, given the depth of the approach and personal reflections that were required of those involved. I therefore considered matters associated with access and rapport to be imperative, and deemed it vital that those involved in the study were keen to be involved and committed to the research process.

Initially, I approached two head teachers known to me professionally, to discuss with them my area of interest. I was then invited to each school to meet with the Key Stage Two (pupils aged 7-11) teaching staff to discuss this. I explained that I was interested in working collaboratively with teachers to develop a greater understanding of formative assessment within the context of literacy and, from a personal perspective, of developing my experiences of working alongside Key Stage Two pupils and practitioners.

In each setting, the experienced Year Six teachers (pupils aged 11) both voiced a particular interest in the study, in terms of working in collaboration with myself to develop an understanding of their own practice with regard to formative assessment and in its development. Therefore, in negotiation with the author and their respective Key Stage Two colleagues, Amanda and Bethany were elected as the main teacher participants.

Amanda has been a qualified teacher for twenty-eight years and throughout this time she has taught in a range of year groups across Key Stages One, Two, and the Foundation Stage. During the study, Amanda was based in Year Six.

The Year Six classroom in which she was based was streamed by ability. Amanda taught the “more able” children for literacy, worked with the “bottom group” for maths, and taught her own year group class in the afternoons. During the biographical interview, Amanda described how she enjoys teaching in this way, working closely with her colleagues to plan lessons. Amanda is passionate about teaching and during the “incident” interview, she explained,

I don't think the children always know why they are at school. They come to school because they have to come to school, I think what I'm trying to do is say to them “Yes! You've achieved that and the reason why,” so they know there's a purpose.

At the time of data collection, Amanda had responsibility for leading literacy across the school, and attended the literacy training that was put into place within the Local Education Authority (LEA) at the outset of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). As the leader of literacy, Amanda was responsible for the delivery of the in-house training for the NLS and her role also involved the training of other colleagues, and she visited a number of other schools in the LEA to observe practice and provide feedback to staff.

Bethany has been teaching since 1996. Her teaching has been focused on Key Stage Two, she has held responsibility for leading a Key Stage Two team. At the time of the study, Bethany was based in a Year Six, mixed ability class and worked alongside another Year Six teacher in a semi open-planned environment. Both teachers planned lessons together to ensure continuity within the Year Six age range. Bethany is fervent about involving pupils in their own learning and during the “Assessment” interview she stated,

Involving pupils in their own learning is something I really value, spelling out what the objectives are and giving them models is perhaps what I do most. I've been thinking about my daily lessons and when I look back, I

always tell them what the objectives are...The kids need to know what's going to happen in a lesson, it really focuses them and I find it useful for class management.

At the time of the study Bethany was also the literacy co-ordinator. This involved her attending a range of appropriate training sessions within the LEA to impact upon her literacy subject knowledge and working with colleagues to deliver in-house staff training within the school.

Amanda and Bethany were elected as the main participants because both were experienced Year Six teachers, both were responsible for the management of the teaching of literacy across the school, and both had a personal interest in formative assessment.

“Amanda commented that she was looking forward to the study and keen to get better at formative assessment! This is great as it is a good starting point” (Research diary entry, 27th Nov 2000). “Bethany told me that she was looking forward to the study. She is happy to be observed and said that working with someone else is always useful for her own development” (Research diary entry, 27th Nov 2000).

In summary then, both Amanda and Bethany were experienced Key Stage two practitioners, experienced teachers of literacy, and committed to and enthusiastic about the research process.

Observation

Throughout the study the two teachers were observed on a weekly basis during the delivery of literacy lessons within the framework of the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) throughout the Spring Term of 2001.

An unstructured approach to observations had originally seemed the most appropriate means of gathering data. However, I became concerned that I was missing opportunities by not taking some notes of key events *during* the lessons. I was also concerned that my observation notes tended to lack focus and, despite the many advantages associated with unstructured observations (Coolican, 1994), I also realised that I was being selective in my recordings. Crabtree and Miller (1999) describe how, although most field notes during participant observation are written outside the field, it is possible for the researcher to carry out “jottings”. I liaised with the teachers about the possibility of note-taking during sessions, and both teachers were comfortable with this. During observations I made brief notes of “key events” in relation to formative assessment strategies and added detail to the notes following the lessons. However, in making such notes, it could be argued that I was still being selective, and I therefore shared the observations with the participating teachers during informal meetings following the lessons to clarify the accuracy of my observations.

I had originally decided to observe the entire literacy lesson. Literacy lessons that follow the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) format consist of thirty minutes of whole class teaching, followed by twenty minutes of group tasks, and finally a ten minute whole class plenary. However, as the study progressed this became increasingly difficult because during group activities I felt that my presence as an observer was uncomfortable for the participants. I decided to keep my research role during the whole class aspects of the lesson as “observer as participant”

(Gold as cited in Bryman, 2004), but implemented a subtle change to my role during independent and guided work whereby my research role shifted to that of “participant as observer” (Gold as cited in Bryman). This enabled me to observe alongside the teacher and pupils in the role of “classroom assistant,” and allowed me to participate in activities and note down key events at the end of the lessons.

Interviews with Teachers

The interviews with the teachers took two forms:

1. Informal interviews following each lesson
2. Recorded interviews:
 - Interview 1, “Incident Interview” designed to discuss specific formative assessment strategies that had occurred during lessons
 - Interview 2, “Assessment Interview” designed to discuss teachers’ views and understanding of formative assessment
 - Interview 3, “Biographical Interview” designed to discuss teachers’ biographies; their teaching experiences, contexts, and personal backgrounds
 - Interview 4, “Participatory Interview” designed to engage teachers in a practical activity to discuss formative assessment

The informal interviews took the form of a conversation following the lessons. Following these conversations, I took notes which served to add further detail to observations and clarify events that occurred during the lessons.

For the audio-recorded interviews (Interviews 1-4), I had originally decided that the most appropriate type for the purposes of the study would be unstructured (Coolican, 1994). However, I began to feel that such a dialogue would lack focus, particularly as this issue had arisen with my observation techniques and I decided to re-evaluate this. Despite being aware that less structured interviews can provide rich data, I had to take the pragmatic view that I had a limited time in which to conduct the interviews. I therefore devised a list of prompts for the interviews. During the incident interviews, these prompts were useful: However I did allow the interviews to “stray” a little at times and although using the prompts had focused the interviews, I still felt a need to ensure that they remained “on task”. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) questionnaires (Neesom, 2000) were therefore given to the teachers several weeks before the assessment interview as a guide to the topics I would be covering (Coolican).

The QCA (Neesom, 2000) reported teachers’ perceptions of formative assessment through the use of lengthy questionnaires designed to establish what teachers rate as valuable, how much formative assessment happens in the classroom, how far school managers encourage and support formative assessment, perceptions and factors that hinder school and class based developments, collect and record good practice, and finally, to explore how to best define teacher assessment principles and practice in order to encourage a better understanding for future developments.

The participatory interview was based on the work of George Kelly (as cited in Stewart, 1997). Kelly, the original proponent of personal construct theory, devised a means of an interviewer gaining a mental map of how interviewees view their world

through “construct elicitation exercises.” Stewart explains how this can be conducted. In the exercise, the interviewer takes three cards and writes a word on each card. The interviewee is then asked to consider ways in which two of the words are like each other, different from the third, and to think of something that two of them have in common where the third is different.

The interviewee produces as many bi-polar distinctions as possible. This process is known, Stewart states (1997), as construct elicitation and she highlights one of its main strengths as being its lack of observer bias, because the interviewer plays no part in suggesting the actual nature of the constructs, as they are a very personal reflection of how the interviewee sees his/her world. I therefore conducted such an exercise with the teachers that involved them discussing three learning and assessment contexts to gain an understanding of their ideas and beliefs about teaching, learning, and formative assessment. For example, the teachers were asked to conduct such an exercise with the following scenarios that I chose from observed lessons on the basis that they were different examples of teaching techniques and formative assessment.

Scenario 1. At the beginning of the lesson the teacher says “today we are going to learn how to use powerful language in persuasive writing.”

Scenario 2. A teacher provides written feedback on a piece of work that says “Well done, Kelly! You have used some powerful language in this letter. Next time, try adding more adjectives to make your language even stronger.”

Scenario 3. A child has written a story, it meets the Learning Objectives of the lesson, but it has a number of spelling errors in it. The teacher reads it to the class, highlighting where it is good and how it meets the objectives.

During this activity, Bethany, for example, discussed how she felt that scenarios 2 and 3 had a number of similarities and during the activity, produced the following bi-polar statements when discussing scenarios 1 and

2 and 3 are Very clear to the children, 1 not as clear. 2 and 3 are modelling good practice, but 1 has no modelling, merely a statement. 2 and 3 Children able to move forward, with 1, unsure as to how far children can move forward? 2 and 3 are positive experiences for the children and good for self-esteem. 1...I’m unsure as to how positive this is for the children, sometimes they need more than simply being “told” the LO. 2 and 3 are good for motivation. 1 may not motivate all of them (the children).

2 and 3 are about providing feedback to pupils using the objectives but 1 is only about the objective. Yet, pupils need to be aware of the objectives in advance if they are to get appropriate feedback...it seems they are all similar in that I’m using objectives.

As can be seen, when scrutinising the above, the use of the construct elicitation exercise facilitated the opportunity for Bethany to begin to be clear about her practice in a straightforward yet enlightening manner.

Throughout almost all of the interviews with the teachers (except for the final two interviews), I experienced a catalogue of disasters with the recording equipment. I therefore negotiated with the teachers that I would also note down key points that were made throughout the interviews.

Interviews with Pupils

Interviews with pupils took place during the spring and summer terms of 2001. These were designed to draw out the pupils' perceptions of assessment practices, both in terms of what the teacher did during whole class sessions, group sessions, and with them as individuals. I also wanted to establish how individual pupils perceived their own learning style and their perceptions of assessment in relation to this. I had originally planned to record all of the interviews with the children. However, given the technical issues that arose during almost all of the teacher interviews, I treated the group and individual interviews in a similar manner to the observations, and my role became that of observer as participant (Gold as cited in Bryman, 2004)

For the purposes of the group discussions I devised a diamond ranking activity for the pupils, as during this type of activity children can focus on real-life, concrete events and be involved in "handling things" as opposed to "just talking" (Christensen & James, 2000). Christensen and James discuss the value of diamond ranking activities, whereby children are involved in deciding which, of a series of nine statements are the most or least important, and organise the statements in a diamond shape. The activity for this study therefore involved the pupils discussing and diamond ranking a series of nine assessment phrases that had been drawn out from the lesson observations. I selected these particular statements as they were examples of formative assessment that I had observed during lessons.

Individual pupil interviews were also conducted and I felt that it was highly important that these were kept as comfortable as possible. Therefore, using the interviews with the teachers as a model, I used prompts with children and added further detail following the interviews. I also asked the pupils to bring a recently completed and marked piece of work to the individual interviews to provide them with a context in which to discuss assessment and learning (Weeden et al., 1999).

Documentation

Clearly, in an educational setting there is a vast amount of documentary evidence and it was deemed appropriate to consider the use of documentation in the study.

Documents can be divided into primary and inadvertent sources (Bell, 1993). Primary sources are those that come into existence in the period of research and consist of deliberate sources produced specifically for the attention of future researchers, and inadvertent sources are those that are used by the researcher for some purpose other than that for which they were originally intended. The collection of both primary and

inadvertent sources such as observational data (primary) and lesson plans (inadvertent) was considered appropriate for this study to contribute to the “rich” data to be gathered.

Throughout the study, a range of documentary evidence was collected from each school that provided sources of assessment and contextual information. Assessment policies and recent Office for Standards in Education reports, together with the lesson plans from the two participant teachers were collected, as were samples of pupils’ literacy work. The assessment policies were used to provide information regarding the assessment practices within each school together with the OFSTED reports. Lesson plans and samples of pupils’ work were used to elicit formative assessment practices that were used by the individual teachers.

Adopting a Protocol for Practitioner Research

From a personal perspective, I feel that it is imperative to ensure that a qualitative study is both credible and trustworthy, despite the difficulties associated with this. At the outset of the study, I therefore reflected on Tricoglus’ (2001) protocol for practitioner research as a starting point for considering the validity of the study. Furthermore, the following provides an overview of the steps that I took in order to ensure an authentic representation of the findings.

Lather (1986) suggests how reflexivity can be put into practice through adherence to five principles. Grounded in Lather’s five principles and reflecting on her own experiences, Tricoglus (2001) puts forward a tentative protocol for practitioner research in education. The protocol provides researchers with a model for considering the process of study design, data gathering and analysis, and a means by which researchers can establish the validity of findings. The methodology of this study is considered here in relation to Tricoglus’ protocol.

Establish the Purpose

The formulation of research questions or a desire to investigate a particular problem is fuelled by experiences prior to entering the field and perceived as significant (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Tricoglus, 2001).

As a primary teacher, I have always been interested in assessment practices and following an introduction to the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) my interest in assessment was stimulated, as was my longing to carry out a study, to gain a greater understanding of what teachers do in terms of formative assessment and why. It was anticipated that through mutual reciprocity and a collaborative approach to research, that a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action (Lather, 1986) would occur, whereby both myself and those involved in the study would be able to understand formative assessment more clearly. From a personal perspective, I feel that I am now beginning to understand the complexities of formative assessment, and I am continuing to develop my skills in this area in my daily lessons with and feedback to students. In the latter stages of the study, such was the interest of the participant teachers that the main findings of the study were shared with their respective colleagues, as it was deemed by myself, Amanda, and Bethany useful to disseminate the findings to form the basis of a discussion regarding the formative assessment practices within their school. It was also

anticipated that the findings from the study would be shared with a broader community interested in formative assessment through publication of the findings. The purpose of this was to add to the ongoing debate regarding assessment and its purposes given that Black and Wiliam and Tunstall and Gipps (1996) highlight a need for further empirical research into assessment for learning.

In addition to being interested in formative assessment, I also felt that the study could serve the purpose of developing my understanding of teaching and learning in a different Key Stage. As a classroom based practitioner, I had been based in Key Stage One, teaching pupils aged 5-7 for my entire teaching career. I believed that the study would enhance my understanding of Key Stage Two teaching and contribute towards my own professional development.

Establish the Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis of a study must be grounded in literature (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Tricoglus, 2001) and this study was based on a detailed review of the literature. The review involved a trawl of texts pertaining to the notion of formative assessment. Following this review, a gap in current knowledge was identified that formed the basis of this study. This gap can be identified as a lack of empirical knowledge about the link between the nature of primary teaching and formative assessment. Thus, the main thrust of the study was to gain an understanding of why teachers use particular formative strategies in their daily teaching. The investigation of this phenomenon was addressed in this study by considering the following questions:

- What formative assessment strategies do teachers use in their day-to-day teaching?
- What has been the impact of a top-down approach to the teaching of literacy on teachers' approaches to formative assessment?
- Is there a relationship between teachers' personal and professional biographies and their approaches to formative assessment?

Know the Context

In order to deconstruct practice, to understand the value systems that are at work within a context, a major decision to consider in the design of a study is the identification of "key informants" (Ball, 1990; Spradley, 1979; Tricoglus, 2001).

Study design involves gaining official permission to undertake the research through communication with a "gatekeeper" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Gatekeepers are those people within the organisation who are influential in deciding whether or not access will be granted. As was discussed earlier in the section entitled *Selection of the Participants*, approval to conduct the study was gained by the headteachers of the two schools involved. In the study, these headteachers were the "gatekeepers". I discussed with them the possibility of carrying out the study within their schools and shortly after this discussion I contacted the head teachers, responsible for the management of the schools, who advised me that their Year Six colleagues, the key informants of the study, were keen to be involved. Undoubtedly, there is the potential

threat to the study that these teachers could have felt under duress to participate; however, I believe that both teachers participated freely and enthusiastically due to their own interest in formative assessment as was illustrated earlier. I also seized opportunities to enter the settings prior to the commencement of the study to forge relationships with the teachers and to begin to “know the contexts” such as the organisation of the schools and classes, the pupils, and other colleagues.

Seek to Understand the World from the View of the Participant

Maxwell (1992) claims that qualitative researchers should be concerned with the factual accuracy of their accounts. The description of things seen and heard in qualitative research is fundamental (Tricoglus, 2001).

Although factual accuracy is difficult to achieve, given that all human observation is partial, the study sought to understand the world from the views of the participants in a number of ways. Prior to commencing the study, I worked alongside both class teachers to gain a greater understanding of them and their pupils, and I actively involved the participants in the study by, for example, involving the teachers in selecting pupils to undertake the group tasks and interviews, regularly discussing observations of lessons, and engaging the teachers in discussions of the findings of the study at intermittent intervals.

Know the Data

In order to be able to make sense of the data, it is imperative that the researcher is familiar with it. Knowing the data is a key feature of qualitative research and, “the gathering of interrelated data from different sources...also serves to heighten the researcher’s critical awareness of the data as they relate to each other” (Tricoglus, 2001, p. 144).

The study involved the gathering of data from a range of sources, and to begin to understand the data, interviews and observations were transcribed as soon as possible and an initial data analysis took place to begin to establish “gross categories” (Atkins, 1984) using grounded theory’s coding technique (Bryman, 2004). As the study progressed, I began to “think with the data” more critically and make links with the literature, for example, when establishing initial gross categories, I used Tunstall and Gipps’ (1996) typology for formative assessment types and coded the data as either “evaluative” or “descriptive.” Evaluative feedback is described as that which is “judgemental” and descriptive feedback is associated with formative assessment. This served as a starting point for further analysis.

Know Yourself

Ball (1990) urges researchers to be reflexive such that they can monitor their involvement and reflect throughout the research process (Tricoglus, 2001). Reflecting on my own values was therefore essential, and I engaged in several discussions with my supervisor to discuss my motives for conducting such a study and throughout the study I maintained a research diary.

The diary served many purposes. For example, as a new researcher, I was aware of my lack of confidence in both conducting research and my need to be secure in the choice and use of data collection tools, and maintaining the diary ensured that I remained focused on my role and frequently became a “sounding board” for ideas and thoughts. The following extracts from my research diary provide illustrations of how it was used to air my concerns and worries, and how I was aware that my own needs were impacting upon the study design. “Am a little concerned that an unstructured interview won’t work for me-I think I need more structure to feel more confident, especially after the observations and problems with an unstructured technique here” (Research diary entry, 21st Jan 2001). “These questions are too tight. This means I can’t discuss observations. Need to think about best way of managing this-I want some structure-for me-but want it fairly open” (Research diary entry, 10th Feb, 2001).

Being aware of and noting that my own needs were impacting upon the study was useful in several ways. Firstly, this provided me with the opportunity to remain focused on the study and as a consequence I had several discussions with my supervisor to ensure that the study, and its approach, remained appropriate. Secondly, through monitoring and tracking my role, I became aware that I was being critical of my approach. I believe that this served to ensure that I was conducting a valid and credible study.

Make the Process Dialogical

Tricoglus (2001) states that for the process to be dialogical, it is necessary at all stages to invite critical reaction to one’s accounts. She suggests that this occurs internally and through the use of independent judges.

In order for the study to be dialogical it involved providing feedback to the teachers. Following observations, informal dialogues occurred that included the teachers discussing aspects of the lesson with myself and brief overviews of initial findings. On a more formalised level, I fed data back to the teachers following transcriptions and analysis of the raw data. This allowed the teachers to respond to the data and to the research process itself. For example, they read the findings as they emerged and read the observations of their lessons. This allowed both the teachers and me the opportunity to clarify any points and make comments regarding formative assessment, and this data was included in the analysis of the study. Furthermore, throughout the study, I sought the reactions of independent judges (Atkins, 1984) including my supervisor, colleagues, and friends. Inevitably, it is difficult to ensure complete independence, particularly given the nature of the personal relationships I have with friends and colleagues, nevertheless, I feel that the input from three different parties served to minimise bias and valuable discussion of the findings allowed me the opportunity to discuss the findings as they emerged and ensured that I justified my reasoning. For example, when sorting the data into categories, I provided oral rationales as to why data were placed into particular categories, and following discussions some data were moved or added to categories. For example, Tunstall and Gipps (1996) identify a typology for categorising feedback. This is represented visually (Figure 1) and demonstrates that “evaluative feedback” and “descriptive feedback” take a variety of forms. Evaluative feedback is described as feedback that is judgmental, and descriptive feedback is described as that which is competence related and is associated with formative assessment (Tunstall & Gipps). The

following snapshot of a lesson was difficult to categorise independently using the typology.

During the whole class shared work, the teacher asked for individuals to give examples of asides in the story. Katy gave an incorrect example. The teacher used the example as a teaching point for the rest of the class, illustrating why the example was not an aside. (Ref. Observation of Bethany)

I originally believed that this example fell into the category of “specifying improvement” as Bethany was correcting Katy's errors. However, following a discussion with a friend, we acknowledged that this could also be classified as “constructing achievement” given that Bethany was using emerging criteria to move Katy and the rest of the class into a position of success. On the basis of this discussion, we agreed that it provided evidence of both types.

Remain Focused on the Contradictions

Tricoglus (2001) refers to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) who stress the need to consider alternative interpretations of the data and follow through the implications of particular interpretations to establish if they are confirmed. She also refers to Lather (1986, p. 488) who emphasised the need for concern with “...contradictory voices, counter narratives, and competing understandings”. The point being that by considering contradictions the researcher becomes increasingly involved in the problematisation of practice, thus leading to raised consciousness and changed understandings for both the researcher and participants. “Ethnographic research should have a characteristic ‘funnel’ structure, being progressively focused over its course. Over time the research problem needs to be developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited, and its internal structure explored” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 206).

There are several senses in which contradictions that were evident in the data may be considered as having facilitated a starting point for the critical inquiry of the study. Firstly, there was a contradiction between some of the perceptions of the teachers and the pupils with regard to the purpose of some elements of formative assessment. For example,

I provide time for pupils to reflect and talk about their learning, and I encourage this in pairs and in the shared part of the literacy hour. It gives them the opportunity to talk with each other about answers and find things out. In independent and guided time I get them to work together, because they feed off each other. Adults do, don't they? They bounce off each other, the quality of their work can be so much better, and they can make improvements, and then when they are working independently, really independently, they are going to remember the processes. (Ref. Assessment Interview with Amanda)

Working with friends, I'm not sure about this, it's good for comparing, but your friend might be wrong, and the teacher won't (be wrong). She (the teacher) can help you. A friend isn't that important. They don't know as much as the teacher. (Ref. Group interview, Amanda's class)

Secondly, what began to emerge from the data was that the descriptive dimension of formative assessment was more strongly represented than I had anticipated. Evaluative feedback is described as feedback that is judgmental, and descriptive feedback is described as that which is competence related and is associated with formative assessment (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Tunstall and Gipps' study, overall, found that the evaluative dimension was strongly represented, with a majority of the children in the sample being told by the teacher that their work was "good" or "not good enough". I had anticipated a similar finding with my study, but found that there was much evidence of descriptive feedback. For example,

When you analyse their work at the end it is obvious to me where there are problems. But it's more valuable if I show them before their work is actually completed. If I can do it with them, they can then go back and continue. They know there and then how to improve their work and are then more likely to succeed. They need to know how to improve work and if I can actually show them, then that's great. Sometimes, though I have to write in their books, but I try to give them suggestions and model answers for them to refer to. (Ref. Assessment Interview with Bethany)

It's important when she (the teacher) tells you what to improve and it tells you how to improve, like when she says, 'Good, but you need to improve this or that.' We need to know these things. We need to know where to put commas and things. (Ref. Group interview, Bethany's class)

These contradictions problematised the practice and provided me with a focus for critical inquiry. The focus being on understanding the purpose of formative assessment and why teachers involved in the study appeared to be using descriptive feedback to an extent that I had not anticipated.

Stimulate a Process of Continuing Critical Analysis and Enlightened Action

Tricoglus (2001) cites Lather (1986) to describe the goal of emancipatory research as being to encourage self reflection and deeper understanding for both the researcher and the participants. Lather argues that for researchers holding "emancipatory aspirations," an empirical research approach offers a powerful opportunity for people to change.

Throughout the study, both teachers, Amanda and Bethany, were at all times willing to engage in critical discussion of their practice. As respondent validators (Bryman, 2004), both of the teachers were invited to discuss the main findings of the study and to confirm, or indeed disconfirm, that the data were true accounts of the processes within their contexts.

In January 2002, I returned to the participant schools to conduct a further interview with Amanda and Bethany. Since the outset of the study the teaching contexts of both Amanda and Bethany had changed and neither had engaged in further critical inquiry regarding their formative assessment practice, thus the extent to which the study stimulated a process of continuing critical analysis, through critical inquiry into their practice, was limited. As this had been a desire of the study, I was keen to understand why they had not continued with critical inquiry.

For both teachers, the demands of new roles and time implications were the major factors that impacted upon their inability to continue with critical inquiry. Amanda had moved to teach in Year 2 (pupils aged 7) and she explained that her main objective was to re-familiarise herself with the teaching of a different age group. Bethany's role in her school had also changed and she was based part-time in a Year 5 class as a result of her commitments as an Advanced Skills Teacher. In hindsight, although frustrating, this was perhaps inevitable given that both teachers, understandably, were more concerned with their teaching commitments and the various demands on their time than with the continued progress of research despite their initial enthusiasm.

Despite this, they both related to me a number of changes that had occurred in their individual practices as a consequence of being involved in the study. Amanda, for example, described how she was now using explicit learning intentions for all lessons, as opposed to just literacy lessons, and Bethany had introduced individual pupil target cards across the school. Thus, each teacher could be described as constructing her own practice in light of the study.

The Validity of the Study

The exact nature of validity, with particular regard to qualitative research, is a much-debated topic as the traditional criteria for validity is grounded in the roots of positivism (Maxwell, 1992). Qualitative researchers have argued that, on this basis, the term "validity" is therefore not applicable to qualitative research. However, Winter (2000) recognises that, despite this, qualitative researchers require some means of qualifying and checking their own work. Through adopting the above protocol I have provided evidence that relates to aspects of the validity of the study, and in any research, this is imperative. One stance is to assimilate reliability and validity into qualitative research, with little change in meaning other than down-playing the role of "measurement" issues. Others suggest that qualitative studies should be judged or evaluated according to different criteria and propose the criteria of "trustworthiness" and "authenticity". However as Bryman (2004) points out, to a certain extent, quantitative research criteria have made something of a come-back since the late 1990s. To reject notions of reliability and validity could be taken by some parties as indicative of a lack of concern with rigour, which is not a desirable impression to create. It is with this in mind, therefore that I have chosen to adopt the above protocol. I have provided evidence that relates to aspects of the validity of the study and I believe that whether we consider reliability and validity or trustworthiness and authenticity to be the important criterion by which we judge or evaluate work, it is the spirit in which it has been carried out that is important. Therefore, I have used the term "validity" to serve what one could describe as a "political" purpose, in that I was passionate that the study was deemed rigorous.

In the context of the study, I also considered a number of other means of ensuring validity.

Maxwell (1992, p. 291) describes how the theoretical constructions that a researcher brings to or develops during a study need to be grounded in “a broad, comparative perspective on the literature”. The theoretical validity of the study (Maxwell) was grounded in the detailed review of the literature that began before commencing and continued throughout the period of the study. I also conducted a construct elicitation exercise (Kelly as cited in Stewart, 1997) with the teachers. This exercise served to impact on the study’s validity, because, as Stewart states, one of its main strengths is its lack of observer bias, because the interviewer plays no part in suggesting the actual nature of the constructs, as they are a very personal reflection of how the interviewee sees their world.

However, I was also concerned with the descriptive nature of the data and its factual accuracy, particularly as there were a number of issues that I had identified as threats to its descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992).

- Delay in feedback
- Technical issues
- Absence of two pupils from individual interviews

Transcribing the data was time consuming and this meant that the feedback given to the teachers was not always immediate. Although I was able to discuss lessons informally immediately following them, and these discussions produced quality data, time elapsed between interviews (interviews 1-4) and the ability of the teachers to comment on the detailed field notes that were written following the observations over such long periods of time could be regarded, therefore, as an issue for validity.

When interviewing the teachers there were a number of technical issues. Tape recorders would not operate during the first interviews, and the teachers, in both contexts had to then spend time looking for a suitable recording machine for the interviews. I felt concerned that this issue reduced my professional standing in the eyes of the teacher, as I appeared ill-prepared. Although I have no specific evidence, it is possible to intuit that my access to their thinking therefore could have been jeopardised.

As it was the summer term, children were involved in visits to their proposed secondary schools. This impacted on the collection of data, as several children were absent from some of the activities. This therefore impacted upon the amount of data that were collected and could be an issue in terms of validity.

Given the threats to the descriptive validity of the study, and to ensure factual accuracy of accounts, I shared data with the participant teachers through all stages of the data collection period and triangulated my methods as advocated by Atkins (1984) through the use of observations, interviews, and documentation. For example, I had observed the teachers specifying learning intentions at the beginning of lessons, and cross checked this during the interviews with pupils. “The teacher started the lesson by re-capping the previous lesson, asking pupils whether or not they could remember the learning objective from the previous day and how, as a class, they had met it” (Ref. Observation of Amanda). “We always know what we’re doing and she’ll (Amanda) tell

us that we are learning something and that it is a bit like what we did yesterday” (Ref. Group interview, Amanda’s class).

Throughout the study I did, as Atkins (1984) suggests, use independent judges. During the data analysis period, a friend sorted the data with me and ensured that I justified my actions through questioning my choices and throughout the study colleagues engaged in discussion with me regarding the data and findings. In doing so, I was also ensuring interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992), as at these times, it was possible to discuss the words and actions of the teachers such that they, and others, could confirm and recognise the findings of the study.

I was also concerned with the catalytic validity of the study (Lather, 1986). Lather describes catalytic validity as the degree to which the research process, “reorients, focuses and energises participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (p. 272). In the study, this was evident in the extent to which participants were involved through mutual reciprocity, reflection, and deeper understanding was achieved. For example, in the latter stages of the study I shared the main findings with both of the participant teachers and their respective colleagues, and when discussing formative Carol, Bethany’s colleague, stated,

It would be really interesting to look at plenaries and what works best, what impacts most on improvement. Is it better to sow the seeds in the plenary and come back to it the next day, making the link, or is it more useful in a plenary to reflect on prior learning? That would be interesting.

Furthermore, through maintaining a research diary throughout the study, I ensured that I was being reflexive and the critical inquiry approach that was adopted took this into account. Ball (1990) calls for rigour in qualitative research and considers such rigour to be grounded in the researcher’s reflexivity. Tricoglus (2001) states that “The ‘reflexivity’ of the researcher, in other words, the ability to monitor his or her own role in the gathering and analysis of data, is seen as essential to establishing the rigour of qualitative data” (p. 6).

Conclusions

Through the methodological rigour as described in this paper, I endeavoured to produce a credible and trustworthy study. The paper has provided an account of the practicalities involved in adopting a critically quasi-ethnographic approach in terms of study design, data collection, and validity.

Having been engaged in a critically quasi-ethnographic study, I have developed my understanding of the processes involved in educational research. A key aspect of conducting such a study rests on the notion of, in Lather’s terms, “mutual reciprocity” and it is this notion that I believe served to maintain my interest and enthusiasm in a long term project.

Furthermore, I have also come to understand the importance of validity in qualitative research and throughout the study I feel that I developed as a reflexive researcher. For example, I have become increasingly aware of my own role during the research process, and indeed my own research image. I have come to a clearer

recognition that research is an active process, where accounts are by their very nature selective, and as a consequence of being aware of this, I have developed my understanding of the need to minimise observer bias and to this end, valued the opportunities to involve participants in the study in a mutually reciprocal capacity, together with the input of external judges such as friends and colleagues, particularly during the data sorting stages. In addition, I believe that as a reflexive researcher I have developed my data collection strategies to minimise observer bias, such as developing my skills in using participatory techniques with pupils and teachers. Engaging in a critically quasi-ethnographic study where time spent in the field researching in a mutually reciprocal capacity with particular case studies is more fluid, has allowed me to respond to the needs of the research and those being researched in a more flexible capacity, and this has served to impact upon my research role, given that it allowed time for relationships to develop; time to reflect on and interpret the data and crucially allowed opportunities to be open to the events of the research process.

In conclusion, I hope that through reflecting on my own experiences, identifying the problems that I encountered and how I overcame them, and providing the reader with an understanding of how I endeavoured to ensure that I produced a credible and valid study, that this paper has demonstrated how a critically quasi-ethnographic approach can offer a way forward in qualitative research.

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