

# Encouraging reflection and empowering educators: promoting confidence, risk taking and the articulation of practice of workers in Early Years settings through participation in a collaborative research project.

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## Introduction

For those of us working in higher education wishing to do research with children in educational settings there is always the need to involve (at some level) the educators of those children; our 'laboratory' is someone else's domain. The influence of that person on their domain cannot help but affect how we view it and our presence in turn will impact on their behaviour. This paper explores how a research project on independent learning in very young children became a journey of discovery for all those involved and how ideas about young children as learners and the practice of the educators changed as a result. By way of illustration we will look at the effectiveness of the methods employed to encourage reflection and dialogue amongst the project participants: the use of 'home groups', educator/research meetings and the use of video to reflect on practice (Reflective Dialogue). The paper will also explore the inherent tensions, often implicit, that exist when parties with different agendas and motivations, work together on a 'collaborative' project.

The Cambridgeshire Independent Learning in the Foundation Stage (CINDLE) project was funded by a local education authority (LEA) in order to produce training materials for all their Early Years settings and ran for two years from 2002-4. In the UK children between the ages of 3 and 5 follow the Foundation Stage curriculum in whichever setting they attend and the local authority has responsibility for ensuring the practice in each setting, state funded or otherwise, is of a high standard.

An earlier study carried out across the Foundation Stage and Key Stage One (Hendy and Whitebread 2000) had explored the degree to which children in the Early Years of schooling, their parents and teachers, shared common understandings of independence. One main finding was that as children moved through the schooling system the opportunities for independent learning diminished. Educators in the Early Years seemed more likely to nurture independence. The LEA wished to build on this study and focus on the Foundation Stage practice, unpicking what practitioners were already doing to nurture independent learning and exploring what methods and strategies could be employed to further develop independence.

A collaborative venture was therefore forged between the Cambridgeshire Care and Education Partnership and the Faculty of Education: C.IND.LE (**C**ambridgeshire **I**ndependent **L**earning). From the outset, it was anticipated that the project would serve two main purposes: the researchers wanted the opportunity to explore ways in which young children learn independently and the LEA wanted to have a training pack to use with its educators. The dual nature of the project was not unproblematic and the academic freedom of the researchers had to be negotiated in order that the project could serve both purposes.

After considerable discussion between both parties, the project's aims were established to:

- develop a model of the development of children's independent learning and design an audit/assessment tool for independent learning in the 3-5 age range;
- identify the kinds of experiences and interventions that seem to be most effective in encouraging young children's independent learning abilities;
- devise practical classroom activities and teaching strategies that have a demonstrable impact on the development of young children's independence.

What was not originally anticipated was how valuable the project would be as a vehicle for innovation and change amongst the educators working alongside us on the project. This paper will focus on the process that helped transform educators' ideas and practice. It will explore the mechanisms that allowed for transformation as well as highlight some problems the practitioners faced when working on the project.

## **Constructing the Project**

Action Research has been used for several decades within the teaching profession as a way to bring about change (Stenhouse (1975), Elliott (1991)). Our own project, which required teachers and other early years professionals to identify, bring about and reflect on innovations in their settings, drew, to some extent, on the practical field of action research (Zuber-Skerritt 1996). As such it gave participants opportunities to develop aspects of their practice. However, it did not begin as a piece of action research and was not initiated by the participants in order to bring about change and identify an aspect of practice as a focus for study (Elliott 1991). It was only as the project evolved that the potential for growth and change become more central.

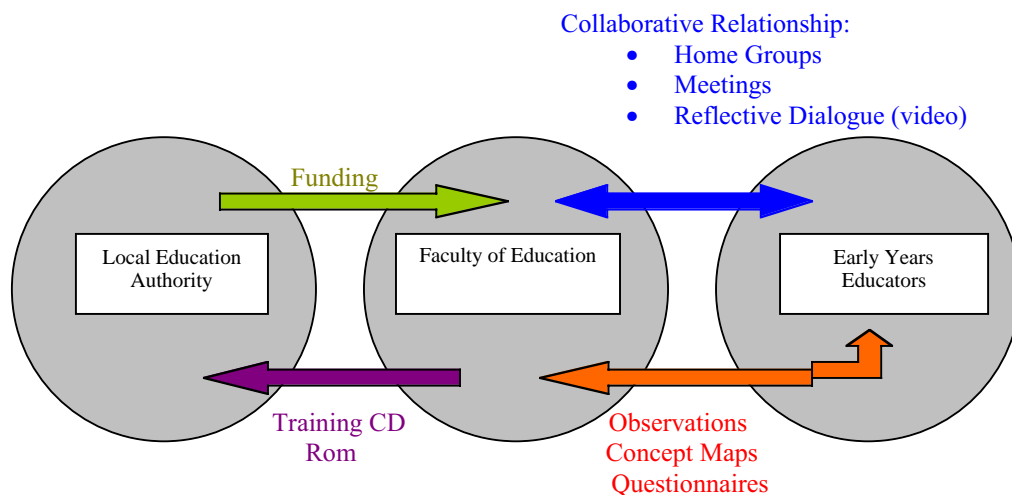
Early on it was decided that the training pack would have greatest impact if in CD form, enabling flexibility of use and comprising text and discussion alongside video clips and stills of children in their settings. To achieve this, a number of decisions had to be taken when constructing the project: the types of settings to use, the number of educators to work with and the selection of them. The materials had to reflect the range of settings and so it was decided to use an equal number of Reception classes (with children aged 4-5) and Nursery settings (ranging from state funded nursery schools to private daycare centres, with a focus on children aged 3-4). Capturing children on camera would be both time consuming to execute and evaluate; we therefore wanted to work with a small number of educators. The LEA however wanted as many people as possible to directly benefit from working on the project so a compromise was reached. It was agreed that we would work with 16 educators in the first year and extend it to a further 16 the following year. This meant that we could establish a close knit group to pursue the aims of the project, to devise ways and means of achieving them. The second cohort, joining a year later, would bring fresh eyes to the project, thus helping to refine and extend the work.

Central to the success of the project was recruiting the educators from schools. It was decided to invite people who had already been identified as 'good practitioners' so that children could be observed showing what they can achieve when conditions are favourable. This was not, therefore, a random sampling from settings across the authority but a selected group who, it was anticipated, would have the expertise and confidence to share their ideas and practice with others; people who were also willing to experiment and contribute to developing the enquiry. Our work in initial teacher training enabled us to identify people from schools (both Reception and Nursery teachers) but we relied on the knowledge of the LEA staff to suggest those from private day-care settings. This was a factor that might affect the behaviour of individuals within the group as we would be working with people with whom we had already established strong relationships but others would be new to us.

It was not until the project was underway, after the project framework had been set, that the educators were able to make decisions about what they wanted to explore within the project and given considerable scope about how to do this. They therefore gained some sense of ownership. The vehicle for this ownership was embedded in the collaborative relationship between the Faculty and educators through the use of home groups, educator/research team meeting and the reflective dialogue (see the model below). We will explore how successful this aspect of the CINDLE project was but to highlight educator empowerment without giving the context in which this succeeded would be to negate important issues inherent in research/educator projects. The point being made is not that this method of creating a project was in some way lacking. Indeed, a framework has to be set, funding has to be secured before any educator/researcher action can take place. It is important, however, that the relationships between the parties in the project are

made explicit, what their intentions are, what they want to achieve and what they need from each other. Often the relations are unequal as in the case of setting the project aims. But being clear about each other intentions and motivations allows for a greater understanding of the whole project framework and the important part each participant plays. Part of the success of the CINDLE project was that motivations between parties were declared and that there became a 'mutual responsiveness' (Stronach and McNamara 2002) between the parties, that is that each party responded to the intentions and actions of the others, even when these differed from their own (see diagram below).

### The C.IND.LE Model



### Nurturing Collaboration

The desire to establish a strong partnership between the Faculty of Education and Early Years educators that gave voice to individuals from the outset was an important part of the project's construction. However, we did not start with a clean slate and those in HE brought many ideas to the project, having been influenced by a number of models on which to construct initial theories about children's learning (for example Tharpe and Gallimore (1988) and Bronson (2000)). How much ought these to influence the project from the outset and how much freedom could individual educators be given? We wanted to find ways to construct the project so that all those participating had ownership of it as well as meeting the requirements of those funding the research. As researchers we wanted to be open to ideas, to adapt the project in light of research findings, drawing on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to shape the evolution of the project.

McNiff and Whitehead (2002) talk about shifting from E (external) theories to I (internal) theories, enabling people to 'produce their own account of practices to show how they are living in the direction of their values' (p53). What would bring this about? How could we balance the requirements of the project with individual needs? Working with educators of young children from a variety of setting types (state, private and voluntary) who were either trained teachers or had an Early Childhood studies qualification, meant that the group was made up of people from a wealth of different backgrounds and experiences. This had been a conscious decision so that children's behaviours could be observed across many differing situations and was a real strength of the project, but had the potential to throw up other difficulties about perceptions of hierarchical positions based on the participants' own background and education. Might different perceptions of each other's academic background be intimidating or restricting to other participants? What effect would working with university staff (and a prestigious university at that) have on people's

ability to voice ideas and share practices? Where did the ultimate power lie? How much should HE partners direct and shape the project?

Conversely, might school partners be looking to a lead from those in HE? The seeming lack of direction at times, a necessary part of exploring and developing the research paradigm, could be interpreted as woolly and without focus. Educators in the UK have become accustomed to 'delivering' a curriculum within a predetermined framework (DfEE 1999 and 2000); would the freedom to explore be both tempting and challenging or might people miss the security of a known structure? Targets and testing appear to be at the centre of educational 'training' (in itself an example of how the discourse of management has infiltrated teacher development) in the UK, with little time or space allowed for reflection or innovation. Even the Government's latest initiative, the Primary Strategy (DfES 2003) may only pay lip service to evidence based policy and practice. According to Alexander (2004) 'In the same way that the Downing Street (Government) line on professional development invalidates the teacher-friendly rhetoric emanating from the DfES, so the outright rejection of academic research by prime ministerial appointee Wright undermines the department's avowed respect for evidence. Such developments confirm the continuing hegemony of the culture of pragmatism and compliance.' (pp 29-30). In such a climate would people welcome giving up time to a being involved in academic research?

The project design had therefore to foster situations in which all participants could share and discuss the findings in a spirit of collaboration.

Three significant ways to nurture this were:

- meetings of the whole research team to reflect on key ideas coming out of the research
- the forming of 'home groups'
- reflective dialogues and the use of video

## **Establishing a culture of reflection**

### **Educator/ research team meetings – reflecting on key ideas**

The developing perceptions, understandings and pedagogical practices of the educators were monitored throughout the project by a variety of techniques. These included concept maps, questionnaires requiring examples of opportunities and constraints on independent learning and reflective dialogues (described more fully in the following section). By bringing all participants together there was the opportunity to share some of the findings from the data gathered and for all to contribute to refining ideas for the future. For example, an assessment tool (**CH**ildren's **I**ndependent **L**earning **D**evelopment: **CH**ILD 3-5) was developed over the course of the project highlighting the key aspects of independent learning for the Foundation years. Educators were crucial to the development of this. They refined statements, said which ones were not relevant for this age group and helped to put together a checklist that would be a useful tool for all early years educators. As well as this they also piloted the CHIL 3-5 by tracking 6 children through the year. The data gathered were analysed and also used to refine the checklist; the original list of 35 statements being reduced to 22 and categorised into elements of Emotional development, Cognitive development, Pro-social development and Motivational development.

The educator/research team meetings provided an important opportunity for work in progress to be shared and this included watching and discussing video clips from individual settings. At the beginning of the second year of the project, all the educators from Cohort One gave presentations to those joining the project in Cohort Two, thus showing aspects of the project from their perspectives. This helped reinforce the notion of being a community of researchers, with all participants, educators and researchers alike, taking part in dissemination.

Towards the end of the project the meetings enabled agreement trialling of the CHIL3 3-5 checklist to take place, with all members watching the same video clip to decide which aspects of independent learning were featured. As the project progressed, its importance as a vehicle for change became more apparent and so time was spent pursuing this through questionnaires and discussions about how the project had impacted on individual practice.

The meetings (including those of each home group, see section below) created a forum for educators to listen to each other's ideas, discuss what they had been doing and where they wanted to go next. They were highly valued by all.

### **C.IND.LE Home Groups – a vehicle for collaboration**

Four 'home groups' were formed in Year 1, comprising a member of the Faculty research team, two Reception class teachers and two Nursery educators (either teachers or early years specialists). This structure was to enable educators, coming from very different backgrounds and experiences, to get to know each other better and to invite open and constructive dialogue. This was achieved in a number of ways but was fundamental to raising awareness and stimulating professional development by providing opportunities to observe different ways of working, to discuss these and to articulate one's own practice.

Interestingly, the home groups tended to stick together at the larger educator/research team meetings possibly because they became such a safe space for exploration. The formation, and success, of the home groups was central to creating an ethos of openness and partnership that permeated the project. Without this, the videoed reflective dialogues, which were the main means of collecting data for the CD Rom, would have been less effective.

In Year 2 these groups were expanded to include a further four educators, therefore making up nine members in all. Cohort 1 educators had already forged close links and the expansion, although good to have more perspectives being shared, meant that the group identity changed. Some Cohort 2 educators felt the gap in perceived knowledge and ownership of the project between Cohort 1 and 2.

*'Hearing what Cohort 1 did in the first year of the project and realising how the CHIL3 3-5 statements have become an integral part of their thinking. I am only just beginning to feel more familiar with them.'*

(IMPACT questionnaire)

Some Cohort 1 members commented they had to work hard to include new educators.

*'Having a larger home group in the second year it has been challenging to get to know Cohort 2 as well as Cohort 1 have got to know each other.'*

(IMPACT questionnaire)

### **Home group Organisation**

In the Autumn and Spring terms of both years each 'home group' would meet to decide upon a focus for enquiry to explore throughout the term, an innovation intended to stimulate an aspect of independent learning. Home group meetings were held to plan the innovations, to share ideas and then to feedback what had happened. Over the course of the two year project, there were four opportunities for educators to explore a different aspect of their practice related to independent learning. In their settings, educators were asked to make observations as to how children were responding to the innovation, to take digital images and to reflect on what they were learning through the exploration. The research partner linked to the 'home group' also visited to video aspects of the innovation. This film became another vehicle for educator reflection (see section on Reflective Dialogues).

Pedagogical innovations explored by the home groups over the two years included

- developing mathematical language through role play and the use of puppets

- developing a child-directed table or area
- developing writing through role play areas (eg: Post Office, School Office)
- promoting reciprocal learning and peer tutoring
- encouraging children to make plans and decisions about their learning activities
- collaborative group work
- encouraging children to evaluate and discuss their learning

As can be seen from the above, these were flexible enough to allow individuals within the 'home group' to pursue something of interest/ concern to them. In this way once a common theme for each innovation had been decided upon by the group each person could try out things which were pertinent to them and their own setting.

It was interesting to see how, over time, groups moved away from the safety of a clearly defined activity led focus (for example setting up an area in order to develop the children's writing) to one which was process based and dependant on the educator's ability to reflect on a variety of situations within their setting (for example promoting reciprocal learning). As with the example below, ideas for the second innovation often grew out of reflections on the first.

*'The children identified the nursery offices, the place we do our work, and they see writing as a key activity in our work so we intended the innovation provide the opportunity for the children to imitate the adults in the nursery. But the innovation also offered the opportunity for the children to learn to co-operate in the use of resources and to encourage collaboration between them when they are working. Generally we find because they sit opposite each other when they are working in the role play they do collaborate'.* (Reflective Dialogue 1<sup>st</sup> term)

*'The focus for the innovation this term is reciprocal learning and how it happens in the classroom. What I've definitely found is I'm going to need a longer period of time observing the children to identify very specific activities. And also to see how the group dynamics influence reciprocal learning within the group. I've found that each child has their own strengths and those strengths they've been passing on to other children in the group but in all different ways. It happens right the way through the session. It may be a particular activity, construction activity or building puzzles. Making puzzles, something like that where children who are very good at doing those sort of activities are sitting with the children who struggle. And they work together. It could be language development. We've had some quite interesting examples of one child correcting another child's speech.'* (Reflective Dialogue 2<sup>nd</sup> term)

### **Paired visits**

Within the 'home group', members working within the same age phase were paired and invited to visit each other's settings. The visits were highly valued, both in terms of providing a professional dialogue and, equally important, to strengthen the bonds that were being created between group members. Being observed in one's workplace is a risky business but the reciprocal nature of the visits engendered a feeling of camaraderie so that exposing ideas and practice within the group became less threatening. As people felt more secure so more risks could be taken in what was being tried. Just as the children were being encouraged to take risks in their learning, so the adults were encouraged to try out ideas, to run the risk of failing but with the support of others involved in similar struggles.

*E1 'It was so interesting to see other people. Seeing the settings and the connections and the differences between them is more fun.*

*E2 It is much more fun.*

*E1 And the constraints are different I think. Taking in the age range as well.*

*E3 Yes. And they are distinct ages its so obvious to see and they have clear needs from a nursery point of view and from a school.*

*E4 It's nice for me to see the nursery school. I don't have very much experience of the nursery and then there's things my perhaps my little children my younger children or my less able children will really benefit by doing things that I've seen happen in the nursery because that will just give them that assurance.*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort Two 5<sup>th</sup> Term. E= educator)

*E1 Having other people's perspectives opens your eyes.*

*E2 I think there's scope for more. Doing more. I really do. And having visited C and seen their lovely outdoor area. I feel there is scope for more.*

*E3 But theirs is to do with it being cleverly accessible from the classroom.*

*E2 Yes. Yes. Erm although I think it's almost a question of personnel because you'd want small groups to be able to go out and use it in their own way.*

*E3 Yeah.*

*E2 And you have to have an adult out there with them and K said that in C too. And they... You know we do have an adult for half an hour a day, who can take small groups outside but that's about it really. Otherwise it's me and the whole class.*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One 5<sup>th</sup> term)

### **Researcher as Critical Friend**

The researcher role in the 'home group' was that of a 'critical friend' (MacBeath (1998), Doherty (2001), McLaughlin (2002), Swaffield (2002), Dadds (2003): 'A trusted person who asks provocative questions.. takes time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the group is working towards.. an advocate for the success of that work' (Costa and Killick in Black-Hawkins 2003). The relationship fostered between educator and research partner was an important aspect of the project. Time was needed to foster and establish a rapport between the researcher and each school partner that would allow for a relationship where challenging questions could be asked. Crucial to the building of this trusting partnership was the ethos of the 'home groups', that researchers were not the 'knowers' and were not there to tell the educators what or how to do something. Rather, right from the start it was made clear that the 'knowledge' was with the educators and the research being carried out was in their domain, their classroom. Educators had ownership of the innovations and areas to be explored. They decided what they would like to do and the research partner was seen as someone to bounce ideas of. Indeed, other educators in the group were seen in a similar way.

*'The support and encouragement from the home group has been fantastic. It has been extremely beneficial to discuss own observations freely within a small group. It has meant that we have some understanding of each others restrictions and solutions to problems.'*

(IMPACT questionnaire)

This all sounds very rosy. The four 'home groups' did all become a source of great support for educators and group entities became quite strong. However, there are complexities hidden within this general outlook. Each home group contained five then nine individuals who were coming from different places and who had differing expectations and experiences. Many commented that they enjoyed this mix.

*'Home groups have given me the opportunity to work with practitioners from different types of setting who I would not usually have the benefit of training with. This has given me a broader view of how the Foundation stage is being met and to see a wide range of practice.'* (IMPACT questionnaire)

In terms of the critical friend relationship, however, it was important that researchers did not see educators in their group as uniform. For example, once educators understood and trusted that they could take ownership of what they were to explore, they reacted in varying ways. Some leapt at this chance straight away, saw it as their own research project and immediately introduced their own ideas.

*'I really think when I'm in my classroom and I see something going on 'Where's my folder. I really need my folder! I need to go with this, its happening. It feels really important and useful'.*  
(Reflective Dialogue 2<sup>nd</sup> Term)

Others were much more reticent and needed more support and encouragement to work out how they were to proceed. This difference is really to do with those educators who 'took ownership' of their involvement in the project and those who responded to us 'giving ownership'. The two forms of ownership give different forms of engagement, the latter group still being quite dependent on the Faculty whereas the first group who 'take ownership' would run with the ideas and innovations regardless of Faculty input. The research partner therefore needed to be aware of the different levels of engagement in their group.

The other point to reflect on is the perceived importance of the researcher 'critical friend' role. There is no doubt that having a member of the Faculty team in each home group provided an excellent link between the two parties. However, as the educators got to know each other better they increasingly looked to each other as 'critical friends'. Their relationship had much more in common in the sense that they were doing the exploring in their settings – they became the experts and the researcher often sat on the sidelines listening and learning. In the group reflective dialogues educators shared video clips from their own settings so that the group could discuss which aspects of independent learning featured in the activity. This often resulted in a debate about the checklist being devised.

*E1 'We felt that whatever's coming out of that commentary could actually be placed in other categories. You know it could be motivation, it could be concentration maybe in the class, it could be focussing attention, and it could just be reasoning. You know reasoning aloud of the work [both talking]'*

*E2 'Which would be cognitive?'*

*E1 'Yes. Cognitive. So we discover we could actually put it into the other categories. Rather than have separate codes for each entry'.*  
(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One, 5<sup>th</sup> Term)

### **Reflective dialogues and use of video**

Reflective dialogues are a process promoting reflection by educator and researcher that enables perspectives to be shared and assumptions challenged. It is made up of two parts:

- 1) Videoing practice in each educator setting
- 2) A dialogue between educator and researcher about practice observed in the video

The aim of the Reflective Dialogue is to 'uncover significant thinking about day to day practice through the process of scaffolded discussion about images of that practice' (Moyle, Paterson and Kitson 2003: p142). Embedded in the reflective dialogue procedure is that of educator ownership. Looking at ones own practice can be daunting enough. Having another person looking and questioning your practice can be very threatening. The ownership of what was filmed, what video sequences were shown in the subsequent dialogue and the content of what was to be discussed were all therefore decided upon by the educator. This locus of control was central to empowering and respecting each educator.



Educators were exploring activities and strategies in their setting related to independent learning. They chose what aspect of this they wanted to be videoed. The research partner then came in for a session to video this and the tape was immediately transferred onto VHS and returned to the educator. This meant that they were the first ones to observe the video and to choose key moments from it to form the basis of the later dialogue. They also chose areas they wanted to discuss from the Reflective Dialogue Question Framework that included enquiry into educators' intentions, their role, their observations and their learning. Having done this, a reflective dialogue took place between educator and research partner, the educator showing chosen video clips and responding to chosen questions. The research partner's role was to listen and take the discussion further when appropriate. Reflective dialogue discussions were recorded, transcribed and returned to the educator.

In the first year the reflective dialogue took place between researcher and educator and initially it was a risky activity for all those involved. Relationships were still being formed and, more importantly, educators had to expose aspects of their practice and articulate their ideas about it. The first round of dialogues was a significant learning curve for everyone involved. The most important feature from both sides was that there were no set expectations as to how the dialogue would proceed. They became the type of journey you embark on without knowing where you will finish. The Reflective Dialogue Question Framework was a useful tool to start the discussions but quickly became redundant as the dialogue became a sustained and genuine conversation. There was a degree of self consciousness at the start but having completed the first round of dialogues people relaxed and even enjoyed them. This was partly because a conscious effort had been made to make them as unthreatening as possible, but was also because there was an overwhelming sense of benefit from the educators having used the video as a tool for observation and being given the chance to talk about their own practice.

*'The video has provided a way of challenging assumptions I may have made about children in my group and to see things that may happen in my setting that I miss in my day to day observations. This has helped me to evaluate my practice.'*  
(IMPACT questionnaire)

In Year 2, Cohort 1 educators had built up such a good rapport with each other that they decided to have a group reflective dialogue in which each educator shared video clips from their practice with other home group members and contributed to discussions about each other's practice and general themes. This model was transferred to Cohort 2 educators. Their first reflective dialogue was one to one because it was seen as a useful space to develop the 'critical friend' relationship and might be less intimidating. But, on the strength of Cohort 1's success, Cohort 2 also decided to meet and discuss their clips as a group for their second RD. It became clear through their discussions that they too felt that to meet as a group was preferable.

*E1 'I much preferred this method.'*

*E2 Yeah.*

*E1 Much. I felt more on the spot when it was one to one.*

*R Did you.*

*E1 I mean I did feel. I did feel on the spot today, but then I think it was worse than one to one cos you're really looking at just your work as if you looked at other people's work then you maybe got an idea even though I went first. Afterwards I may have an idea of what other people had been doing.*

*E3 It was so interesting to see other people. Seeing the settings and the connections and the differences between them is more fun.*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort Two, 5<sup>th</sup> Term E= Educator, R= Researcher)

*R Listening to how you interact is really quite powerful.*

*E1 It feels more productive.*

*E2 It jogs your memory, things you had been going to mention that had escaped you  
All (Yes, yes).*

*E3 Having other people's perspectives opens your eyes.*

*E4 Its been really helpful, the settings as well. When I see them on video I can be there. I don't think I could have this kind of discussion with my colleagues because it's been quite an intimate event over the 18 months. You do feel you can say things, that everyone will understand what you mean, there's a shared.'* (Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One, 5<sup>th</sup> Term)

The use of the video image has become very popular in the field of research over the last few years for it allows the researcher to gather detailed data that can be viewed repeatedly, can be shown to a variety of audiences and can be re-used again and again. CINDLE educators have found the use of video in their own practice incredibly informative, both about children's abilities and development but also a starting point to reflect on wider aspects of their practice.

*'I was just astonished to see that all that had gone on and was absolutely delighted to see the little girl in pink being so verbal because she is very shy and quiet with adults. And the times I've seen her interacting the most conversationally have been on video. And that was true of another child that you videoed the last time you were here. That was the first time I'd heard her say a whole sentence.'*

(Reflective Dialogue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Term)

*'Things that you wouldn't normally see within the classroom, on a video tape you can. 'Gosh that child can do it' or 'They are aware of that'. What they've learned you wouldn't see it, but you can pick it out [on the video]. That's exciting. [To see] what they're capable of.'*

(Reflective Dialogue, 1<sup>st</sup> Term)

*'When I saw this clip beginning I thought, oh dear, now that's not independence is it? This just proves it's my lack of organisational skills!'*

(Reflective Dialogue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Term)

The use of video has also been a powerful tool in nurturing partnership between educators and researchers. This goes beyond the video as a useful tool for assessment to the video as a potential for radical transformation of research and knowledge. For too long the notions of the 'researcher' as analyser and the 'educator' as doer have existed. Through exploration of practice using video as a stimulus for discussion, either in a one to one or small group, these outdated polarisations are broken down. A space is created where educator voices are brought into the analytical part of the equation. A 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) that enables a joint construction of meaning is created.

*'I have been able to take time to develop my understanding [of independent learning] throughout the two years. It has been great to have the excuse to question my practice and develop my understanding of early years education. I've done lots of soul searching.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

Many educators have commented on how beneficial it has been to just be part of a group exploration. In a busy school, pre-school or day care centre there is little time in the day for staff to sit back and reflect on teaching and learning but being part of a research project has given them space. It is perhaps a weakness in our educational system that those with the tacit knowledge, those that day in and out do things to make a difference to children seem excluded

from the arena of debate. There are courses open to educators yet few of these allow for self defined exploration. Increasingly at Key Stage 1 and 2 teachers attend professional development courses that inform rather than allow for professional debate. A system is imposed. One of the strengths of using educators own videos as a stimulus for discussion is that it brings together theory and practice grounded in their daily reality.

The video research groups formed within the home groups became arenas for exploration and analysis of practice and through it a new language of practice was formed. Educators found themselves using a different language. Terms such as cognition, self commentary and metacognition became part of the conversation. Using video, pairings and groups of educators moved from the 'evaluation' of their own and each other's practice to the 'interpretation' of child behaviour, adult behaviour and the organisation of learning space.

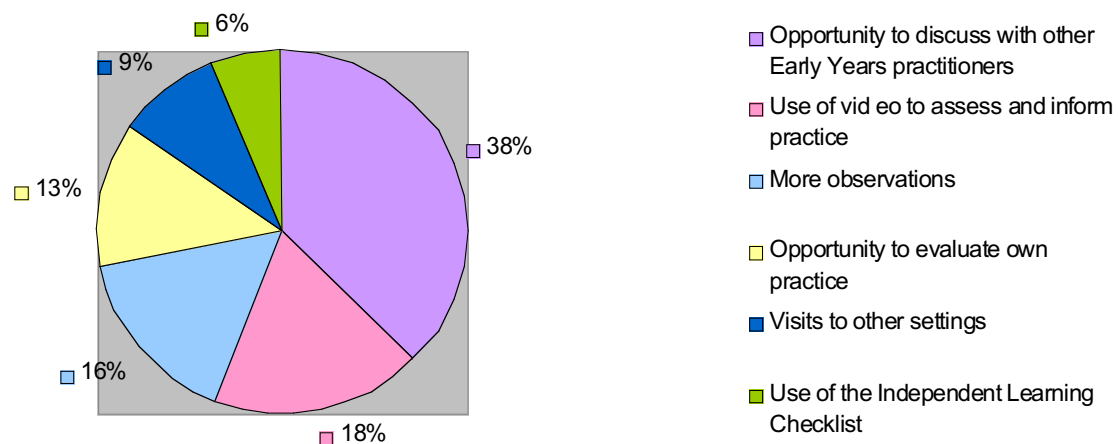
## Findings

### Educator Perceptions of Project Impact

In the Spring Term of Year 2, educators were asked to complete a questionnaire probing the impact that the Independent Learning Project had had on their practice and on their own ideas. In addition, the last group Reflective Dialogues invited comments on the effect of being part of the project. Below we use data gathered from the questionnaires (showing the number of times each key theme was mentioned) and quotes from educators. We highlight the project processes which were found to be useful, how educators' perceptions changed as a result of the project and the problems and difficulties that were experienced when taking part.

### Effective Project Processes

#### What aspects of the project have been most beneficial for you?



#### Opportunity to discuss with other practitioners

The most beneficial aspect of the project was seen to be the opportunity it gave educators to share practice and ideas with other early years colleagues through the home group and reflective dialogues. This validated the ways in which we fostered the collaborative relationship. It allowed educators to explore independent learning in more depth, explore their own practice and others', challenge each other's assumptions, share ideas about how to nurture independent learning. It also was a space in which educators grew in confidence, being nurtured by others working in similar ways.

*'Having other people's perspectives opens your eyes.....Its been really helpful, the settings as well. When I see them on video I can be there. I don't think I could have this kind of discussion with my colleagues because it's been quite an intimate event over the 18 months. You do feel you can say things, that everyone will understand what you mean.'*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One 5<sup>th</sup> Term)

*'We were all thinking about mark making whereas now we agreed to look at non verbal communication but haven't really talked about it because the check list has come into the foreground. We're focusing on independence.....because what we understand by it has developed and we have got more confidence to talk in terms of independence whereas earlier it was easier to hang onto our books or our mark making or whatever the idea was because that's what felt most comfortable.'*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One 5<sup>th</sup> Term)

### **Use of video to assess and inform practice**

Another key benefit of the project was seen to be the use of video to observe children and practice. Finding time for observation is always a pressing issue for adults working in a busy early years setting. The use of video allows for educators to observe and reflect after the event, choosing a time when they can devote their full attention to the detail shown. Educators were amazed at how much more went on that they were unaware of at the actual time. They were particularly impressed by children's perseverance when working at activities and the abilities that certain children exhibited. The video became an important tool for challenging educators assumptions about what children were capable of at this age and the strengths of individual children. The role of the adult also came under scrutiny as educators became to realise that the nature of interventions were key in developing independence in children.

*'And it did challenge some of the ideas staff have had about her because quite often, as I say, she will sit herself down and not participate in an activity or really seem to need some adult help.'*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One 5<sup>th</sup> Term)

*'His family are French. So English is his second language. and he's a very, very, bright child too. So I just found it all very interesting because it was so revealing for me. It kind of knocked me for six that he had this ability to negotiate so much.'*

(Group Reflective Dialogue, Cohort One 5<sup>th</sup> Term)

### **Raising the status of child observations**

As with the use of video, the educators found the project observations to be very valuable, especially as the observation sheets were developed over the course of the two years in consultation with them.

*'Setting aside time to observe children within the independent learning context. My assessments of how the children were independent were challenged and I had to reassess what I thought of as being independent.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'Observations, I know they were important but realise now how important as my method of observation and recording has steadily improved.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

### **Opportunity to evaluate own practice**

It was gratifying for the researchers, who had wanted to foster a climate in which the educators could articulate their practice, to see how the opportunity to reflect and evaluate was valued by the educators.

*Having a reason for and encouragement to think more deeply about the teaching and learning environment in my class. It has given fresh interest, something to think about beyond the normal every day routines and I can see that it has made a difference to the children.*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*The support and encouragement from the home group has been fantastic. It has been extremely beneficial to discuss my observations freely within a small group. It has meant that we have some understanding of each others' restrictions and solutions to problems.*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

### **Visits to other settings**

This was a feature of the project educators found enjoyable and very informative, conveying the complexities of the learning environment in a way that discussions based on watching video footage of practice could not. Educators said how they came away with 'so many ideas' and felt 'privileged to visit another teacher at work'. Peer observation between early years educators and teachers is rare and yet when asked what they would welcome most, support from other teachers features highly (Galton and MacBeath 2002). The project therefore gave educators something that they greatly valued: time spent with other early years educators learning and supporting each other.

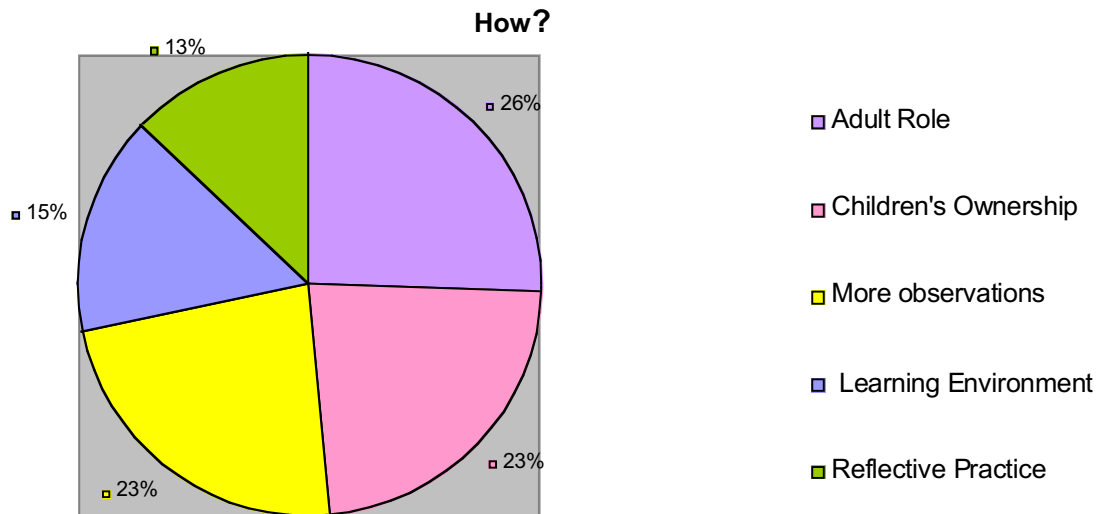
*'It's difficult to consider aspects of the project singly. They combine so well into a whole. The practitioner visits, perhaps, have been most beneficial personally. It's such a privilege to visit another teacher at work and one gets so many ideas, even from a short visit.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'It's nice for me to see the nursery school. I don't have very much experience of the nursery and then there's things my perhaps my little children my younger children or my less able children will really benefit by doing things that I've seen happen in the nursery because that will just give them that assurance.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'It was so interesting to see other people. Seeing the settings and the connections and the differences between them is more fun.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

## Transforming Thinking and Practice

Has your practice changed as a result of being part of the project?



### Importance of the Adult Role in nurturing Independent Learning

As the project has developed educators have reflected about their own role in developing independent learning. This was potentially risky, challenging educators practice had often been built up over years. However, through shared reflections, all participants became to understand more about the nature of independent learning, and to realise the crucial role that adults played in nurturing it in children, both in how adults interact and communicate with children and the type of learning environment they organise.

*'When we first heard about independent learning I felt it was asking the teacher to hold back and become almost redundant. I now see that it is a combination of adult modelling, giving children resources and opportunities and then the teacher can step back and give children the space to try.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'Above all it returns to the notions that children (even young children) can bring a great deal to their own learning. The teacher is not the only tool – she/he is a facilitator.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'Initially I felt uneasy about letting children investigate on their own. Now I see my role as a model. Modelling behaviour/learning activity and then stepping back to let children try on their own.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

### Importance of giving children ownership

The amount of control given to children was also seen as important in nurturing independent learning. Some educators talked about being nervous 'letting go' yet were amazed at what children were capable of when given responsibility and more ownership of their work. As one educator puts so well, giving children ownership is so much more than allowing them to choose. Rather it is allowing them to have a say in developing the activity, how the activity should be carried out and when it should be completed.

*'Since being part of the project I have given more ownership of activities to the children. Previously the children were always encouraged to approach things in their own way but I would have felt it necessary for every child to be involved in class projects. For example, each child would have been encouraged to help make our Chinese dragon. This year it was left out and only those that were interested decorated it and in a way they wanted to.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'I've tried to step back more and let the children work out their own problems where possible and give the children more opportunities to plan what they are going to do and negotiate how to go about it.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

### **Learning Environment**

Part of the adult role in nurturing independent learning is organising the learning environment. Our educators were often expert at organising resources, making them accessible to children and providing times in the day when children could choose what activity they did. However, what many educators learnt to be as important was to make the learning environment as flexible as possible to allow for children to follow their interests; flexibility in terms of the physical space as well as flexibility in the timetable. Reception teachers who are part of a wider school setting often found the latter very hard to implement, having to attend assemblies and play-times at set times.

*'Making the daily routine more flexible. Allows the children to be more spontaneous and the staff to be more individual and creative.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'The impact of the environment on children's ability to become independent learners has been significant. It has influenced my organisation of the classroom as well as my planning. I now take into account the provision for opportunities for developing independence through my planning.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

### **Reflective Practice**

On top of learning more about the activities and strategies that nurture independent learning, educators found the whole reflective practice that was at the core of the CINDLE Project very rewarding and informative. Many spoke of their commitment to this method of working and the transforming power of being given time, space and support to look in detail at ones own practice, reflect on it and develop it.

*'I now look at activities in different ways i.e. for developing specific skills AND independence. Generally my thinking has changed and this has influenced all areas of my practice.'*

(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'I feel as if I have a deeper understanding of what I believe the early years curriculum should encourage. I've re-evaluated my planning, assessments and classroom environment and recognise the need to continue questioning our practice.'*

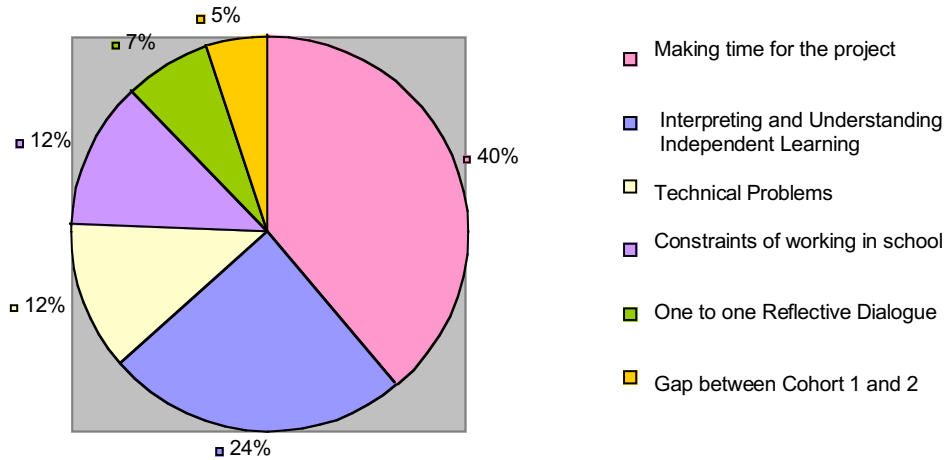
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*And just shocking how much happened with a small amount of children and me in a small little corner, in a small bit of time . But you just feel it is so tiny. When I looked at it I thought it is ridiculous, there's a handful of small children and me. And it just looked so unreal in comparison to my normal view of the classroom. You know it was so close. That one take on those children and I just sort of thought there is so much I've missed in that. You are never going to see it again. How much of that goes on in a day. Thinking when I set it up like how much actually came out of that which wasn't what I was expecting. And I think you scratch the surface slightly when you are doing this. I do find it quite overwhelming.*

(Reflective Dialogue, 1<sup>st</sup> Term).

## Difficulties faced by participating Educators

### What aspects of the project have been difficult for you?



#### Making time for the project

As can be seen from the graph above the most common difficulty was making time for the project. Not only were there regular meetings when plans and work needed to be communicated and left for support staff but the project also made demands on the educators in terms of paperwork. During the four terms when independent learning innovation was being explored, educators were asked to fill in regular observation sheets and prepare for the reflective dialogue. The latter was particularly time consuming as footage often lasted an hour. In addition, educators also completed the Checklist for Independent Learning Development for six target children, three times a year. Although the majority enjoyed and valued the processes of observation and video analysis it was nevertheless a lengthy process. Being aware of this, the Faculty made it clear that educators should only do what was appropriate for them and made every effort to reduce the time burden e.g. meetings were often held in the educators' setting therefore cutting down their travel time. It should be highlighted that the cost of any time spent at meetings during the working day was reimbursed by the project. All travel expenses were also paid.

*'All the paperwork for this project has been done at home not during nursery hours. I am on a rota on a daily basis and it is impossible to get time to do this during the day.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

*'Finding and making time for observations is often difficult. At least the project has forced me to do it.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

#### Interpreting and Understanding Independent Learning

The CHILD 3-5 (Checklist for Independent Learning Development 3-5) has been developed over the two years to be a useful tool for educators working with children aged 3-5 years old. Initially there were 35 statements taken from Martha Bronson's model for self regulation in the early years (Bronson 2000). Over the course of the two years these statements were refined to a list of the 22 found to be the most significant for children at this age range.

The language of the checklist provided some insight initially as to what was meant by independent learning. Educators found this aspect helpful, especially when the statements were



grouped into four categories of independent learning; emotional, pro-social, cognitive and motivational.

*'The CHILD 3-5 statements have clearly broadened my understanding of independent learning and will continue to be a useful tool in my observations and planning.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

However, when trying to assess a child using the statements some practitioners found them hard to interpret and hard to use consistently.

*'Child assessment checklist – still find it so open to interpretation, could easily change my mind when making assessments using it.'*  
(IMPACT Questionnaire)

## **Researcher Perceptions on Impact**

So have we achieved what we set out to do? Leaving aside the still to be completed CD Rom, has the project encouraged reflection and empowered educators? Have we promoted confidence, risk taking and the articulation of practice of workers in Early Years settings? The quotes which permeate this paper would indicate that we have achieved our aims. Moreover, the video tapes of the group reflective dialogues show people supporting and challenging themselves and each other, safe within a climate based on strong relationships in a culture of reflection. It has been a delight and a surprise to work with such an enthusiastic and talented group of people who have given of themselves so readily. Their ability to share their thinking along the way has been a real privilege.

We finish with a quote from one of the educators who said, when asked whether she would continue to work in this way:

*Oh yes, I could not do it now. They (the children) would absolutely kill me if I didn't. No I would, definitely, because it's been so good for everybody. It's been good for me too to see different sides of the children, and to relinquish some space and control to them. And it's just had really good feedback from them and their parents, and you know throughout they are so fired up about it.*

(Reflective Dialogue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Term)

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