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Deaf pupils and teaching assistants: embedding impact within research

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My research aim is to develop our understanding of how deafⁱ children learn by engaging Teaching Assistants (TA) who support them in mainstream secondary settings in researching their own practice, particularly with regard to their role in supporting learning. The insight gained will be used to inform the potential development of the TA role and, hopefully, improve the educational experience for deaf learners. This paper briefly describes the rationale for my research and how impact is embedded within both the design and anticipated outcomes.

My motivation for embarking on a PhD was, and still is, to make a positive difference to the educational experience of deaf children educated within mainstream settings, children with whom I have worked for many years. Consequently arriving into the research field as an experienced practitioner, impact was at the centre of my endeavour.

As I embarked on my new venture it became apparent that impact is currently a widely considered issue as research design strives to anticipate and plan for outcomes with identifiable impact. Reassuringly a key message that emerged from a workshop that considered impact within educational research (Chaiklin, 2013), and a presentation on success in securing funding for large scale projects (Priestley, 2013), is that embedding the impact aims within the initial research concept is extremely valuable.

Why research deaf students?

There are approximately 34 000 deaf students currently educated within English schools (CRIDE, 2012). Learning within the expectation of mainstream education may be particularly challenging for these pupils as any level of hearing loss is likely to impact on educational outcomes (Dalton, 2011; Halliday and Bishop, 2006; Bess and Tharpe, 1984). Of this cohort 81% is now being educated within a mainstream school (CRIDE, 2012). This represents a significant change in placement away from special schools provision that has been driven by major developments in technology (Archbold, 2010) combined with the inclusion agenda established at Salamanca in 1994.

Developments in the field of diagnostics, as well as hearing aids, cochlear implantsⁱⁱ and other implantable devices, are now enabling many deaf children to develop spoken language alongside their hearing peers in the course of everyday childhood experiences (Archbold, 2010; Spencer, 2004). However, no technology is able to replace normal hearing and in particular the flexibility to listen and understand speech in a wide range of acoustic environments. The presence of background noise, such as found in many classrooms, is particularly problematic for deaf children (Boothroyd, 2002; Crandell and Smaldino, 2000). Consequently many receive additional support from a TA.

Extensive research has also been undertaken into how deaf children learn, particularly in the field of cognitive psychology. It identifies deaf children as atypical learners (Marschark and Hauser, 2008; Nunes, 2004; Marschark, 1993; Wood et al., 1986) and indicates that

...subtle and not so subtle differences exist in the cognitive foundations of learning among deaf learners and between deaf and hearing learners. (Marschark and Hauser, 2008, p.454)

It would be expected that this growing understanding combined with technological advances should lead to improved outcomes. However, studies indicate that whilst some pupils are matching the academic attainment of their hearing peers many are not (National Deaf Children's Society, 2012). This raises questions regarding how these pupils are learning within the mainstream classroom environment.

Why teaching assistants and why researching their own practice?

For those deaf pupils who receive a substantial amount of TA support it is not unreasonable to assume that the TA contributes significantly to their educational experience. The role of the TA has come under close scrutiny in recent years and doubt has been raised by some researchers as to its value in supporting pupils with special educational needs (Giangreco, 2010; Webster et al., 2010; Blatchford et al., 2009; Giangreco and Broer, 2005). Other research, however, indicates a more positive impact (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Alborz et al., 2009; Savage et al., 2009). The effectiveness of TA provision within the UK has recently been reviewed in an extensive study that reported

...there was a consistent negative relationship between staff ratings of the amount of support a pupil received and the progress they made in English and mathematics... The more support pupils received, the less progress they made... (Blatchford et al., 2009, p.34)

Whilst this research has been challenged (Balshaw, 2010; Fletcher-Campbell, 2010) questions are being raised as to the value of the TA role in the classroom by the current Education Secretary, Michael Gove (Hurst, 2013). However, very little research has considered the TA role from the TA perspective. (Sikes et al., 2007; O'Brien and Garner 2001).

Pring (2006, p.161) considers

...that the complexities of an educational practice can only be fully understood by those whose values, beliefs and understandings make it a practice of a certain sort.

Whilst this view was stated in the context of teachers researching their own practice it follows that TAs will also possess a body of knowledge directly related to the nature and impact of their role. A greater understanding of this knowledge may provide new insight into

how deaf pupils learn within the mainstream setting. My research therefore engages a group of TAs working with deaf pupils in a mainstream secondary school in researching their own practice.

My original concept of the potential impact of my research, what it will entail and the manner in which it will manifest itself, is changing as I become more familiar with research and how this new world functions; this I understand is a very normal part of the process. Although it is too early to determine whether my thinking will in fact penetrate beyond the pages of my contemplations it is possible to declare a personal impact in relation to my developing understanding of theory; how it relates to practice and the many and varied perspectives through which to consider the numerous questions I have. My practitioner experience will, however, enable me to situate my consideration of the issues firmly within the everyday world of the classroom and, I hope, speak to practitioners as well as researchers and maybe, policy makers.

ⁱ The term “deaf” refers to any level of hearing loss that affects access to speech including both unilateral and bilateral losses.

ⁱⁱ A cochlear implant is a surgically implanted device that has the potential to provide access to sound, in particular speech, to severe and profoundly deaf children and adults.

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