

Being a teacher, being a researcher (and being a parent.)

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The area of teachers as researchers is one which has been given quite a lot of attention, as has the relationship between teachers and researchers, which is not always a comfortable one. Partly as a result of spending a year working on a research project in which I took both roles, I am interested in exploring the interactions between the role of teacher and the role of researcher in a very personal way. My interest is in trying to look at my own actions and reactions within both roles, and seeing how one can inform the other. As my daughter attends the school in which the project is running, I now find it impossible to ignore the role of parent (and particularly that of parent-as-teacher) in this context. What follows is in the nature of an exploratory discussion, rather than any well formed theory or argument. Interspersed in this paper are a number of 'fragments': short pieces of writing (printed in italics) recording incidents, conversations, reflects which have informed my thinking on this topic, but which I have not yet worked on in detail.

Background: the research context

The experience I have had recently had working in school was part of the Primary Laptop Project, a long term project exploring the effects of high levels of access to portable computers on children's mathematical learning. For one academic year we had the following research model for our work in school. Two lecturers (myself and Dave Pratt¹) were combining study leave (research) and CATE leave (teaching). We worked in two classes, alongside the class teachers. For each class, one lecturer taught maths and science (3 half days per week). During these lessons, the other lecturer acted as researcher. The class teachers were generally present during the lessons, sometimes working alongside the 'teacher', and sometimes acting as a second'researcher'. In the remaining time each week, the lecturers worked on other aspects of the project, partly in school. We were in school both as teachers and as researchers, but also to some extent as parents (Dave's daughter was in one of the classes that I taught). Two other factors are relevant to the overall situation.

- The school generally has very good relationships with parents. Several of the teachers have their own children attending the school, and there are a large number of paid and unpaid 'helpers', most of whom are parents.
- Before this stage of the project, we had already been working with the class teachers involved over a period of two years. In this time we had

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¹ It is been impossible to work on these ideas without involving Dave. I have discussed the contents of this paper with him: and he is broadly in agreement with my account of our joint experiences.

developed good professional relationships, but also become good friends in many other ways, not least through factors which linked us as *parents* (social events within the school, teenage children acting as baby sitters).

Our role(s) within the school

Whilst working in school, we had to interact with a number of different groups of people: children, teachers involved in the project, other teachers in the school, parents, governors, visitors to project. Our roles were inevitably perceived differently by these different audiences. In preparing for our work in school, we felt that it was important that we were seen to be 'teachers' by a number of these groups - particularly by other teachers in the school. Partly through conscious decisions, and partly by choice or circumstance, we did a number of things to identify ourselves as 'teachers'.

- We planned and ran lessons, set up activities, marked work, led class discussions, demonstrated how to do things with the computers,
- we did housekeeping jobs in the classroom (registers, displays, giving out messages, keeping National Curriculum records),
- we dealt with discipline and behaviour problems in the classroom and around school,
- we dressed like teachers,
- we attended (some) staff meetings,
- we helped with the Christmas concert and joined in with staff social events,
- we met parents (with the class teachers) for consultations on Parents' Evenings.

However, a number of things set us apart as not being teachers.

- We were known by our first names to everyone (something which initially happened by accident, but which we actively maintained),
- we didn't do some 'teachers' jobs like playground duty, writing reports, keeping reading records,
- we weren't in school all the time,
- we were generally open with children about our research role.

Being a researcher and being researched

Because of the structure of our research model, the roles of teacher and research were clearly defined for us within any particular lesson, but the transitions between roles was frequent. It was normal for each of us to spend half a day as a teacher, and the other half as a researcher; each role being clearly linked to a particular classroom and group of children. The close proximity of the two roles over an extended period, and the fact that as teachers we always had a researcher in our classrooms revealed some

differences in our perceptions of the role of researcher. the following table is a crude attempt to characterise two approaches to classroom based research. Broadly speaking, my actions and motivations as a researcher are closer to those in the left hand column, while Dave's are more like those on the right, although we both recognise that the boundaries are very fuzzy.

| Observer | Experimenter |
|---|--|
| passive - monitoring situations initiated by the teacher | active - initiating situations to see what happens |
| trying to record everything | focusing on the interesting bits |
| holding back - not wanting to invade the teachers' territory | getting involved - fitting into the territory by behaving like a teacher |
| <i>as a researcher</i> , I sometimes found this uncomfortable | <i>as a teacher</i> , I found this irritating |
| class teachers found this threatening - 'being researched' | class teachers found this familiar - 'team teaching' |

For me there was a tension here between my feelings as a teacher whose classroom was the subject of research, and my experiences as a researcher. I occasionally felt irritated when Dave seemed to take on the role of 'experimenter' in my classroom, introducing new ideas to groups of children. I felt that he was encroaching on my role as teacher. Having said this, I know that there were many occasions when he did take this active role and I didn't feel any conflict, because we general have very similar approaches to working with children. I also recognise that he took a much more active role in my classroom than he might have done with a teacher that he did not know so well.

In retrospect, I feel perhaps the single most important feature of our research situation was trust. We trusted each other, so we were able to take blur the line between our roles in the classroom. Just as importantly, the teachers we worked with trusted us, both as researchers and as teachers. I'm not sure which came first, but I'm sure their confidence had a strong effect on the children.

As a researcher, I always feel conscious of trying *not* to trespass on the teacher's territory, and consequently I often hold back to an extent which actually feels uncomfortable. It was a surprise to realise that at least one of the teachers I observed in the classroom found this passive approach threatening, and felt much happier when I did behave more like a teacher.

Earlier in our project I was observing a lesson in which the teacher was using an activity we had planned together. The activity was not going as smoothly as we had expected, and she was clearly getting a bit flustered. The fact that she felt I

was watching made it worse - she felt I had deliberately let her get in a mess. We talked about the activity, and eventually I asked if she would like me to get the class together and talk to them about what they had done, and what they might do next. I was a bit hesitant, in case she felt I was taking over. In fact she was surprised and relieved that I was willing to become a teacher. She found working with a colleague more familiar, and less threatening, than being 'researched'.

As a researcher I feel I want to be neutral. I try to resist getting drawn into a teaching role, either by the children, or by my own instincts. It is hard to explore children's misunderstandings without trying to correct them, but in pushing ahead to correct them, I feel I miss opportunities to understand their misunderstandings more clearly.

When I am trying to record in a neutral way, I sometimes feel uncomfortable, as though I'm not doing anything. I have the same sort of feeling as a teacher when I stand back to observe children working.

As a teacher, I want to lead children forward, to present new opportunities, and to try to get them to take notice of them. I get led into questioning and telling. As a researcher, I want to see what children can do, to explore their understanding, but not to put words into their mouths. I want to ask questions, but their purpose is different.

I am aware of times when I consciously stepped over the line between researcher and teacher (rather than just wandering over it - which often happened.). The children were starting something new, and making a lot of demands on the teacher's time, so I gave up trying to observe in order to help the lesson get going. Children were not working sensibly as a group, and I intervened to talk to them about how they might get on better. I could do that because I felt confident that this would be all right with the teacher. In another situation, I might not intervene myself, but talk to the teacher about the situation, and let them deal with it.

Being a teacher, being a researcher and being a parent

In reflecting on my roles as teacher and researcher, I have found it very helpful to also think about my role as a parent, or perhaps more particularly my role when I act as a 'teacher' to my own daughter. She has just started in Reception, and is very keen on doing her 'work'. Much of our time in the evenings is spent with her wanting me to help her with reading, writing, drawing or working with numbers. In order to think about how I might react differently in different roles, I have used two focusing questions.

When I intervene in children's work, how far do I go? And who decides when to stop?

- *As a teacher, I want the child to succeed so I may go on until I am happy that they have. Children generally don't feel able to say when they have had enough.*

- *As a researcher*, the purpose for my intervention may be quite different. I want to do as little as possible. I'm more likely to withdraw quickly if the children are struggling. I may ask for the children's assent to my intervention.
- *As a parent*, I generally ask if help is wanted. I can easily read the signs about how far to go. Lilian feels no inhibitions about refusing the offer, or saying she has had enough.

How do I respond for a request for help?

- *As a teacher*, I make a decision based on what I think they need. I may give hints to help them think it out, rather than responding directly.
- *As a researcher*, I may deflect the question, or even ignore it if I am concentrating on another group. I may question the children to try to understand their problem - which they probably get irritated by!
- *As a parent*, I may refuse directly, for a variety of reasons, or I give the help that she wants (and perhaps use it as an opportunity to do some teaching.)

These responses are obviously crudely drawn: the situation is much more complex than I have made it seem. However, it is interesting to compare my thoughts to the responses of some of the children I taught last year.

Extracts from a conversation with Ben, Sam and Andrew

(The children's comments are shown in italics)

I said that I wanted to see if they thought Dave and I did things differently from Mrs Land Mrs J.

You think the same way ... because you're all adults, and you know more.

Me: Do all adults think like that?

Yes (a bit hesitant)

Me: Is it because we are teachers that we think the same way?

Yes. When you want help teachers always come and help you.

Me: Are mums and dads like that?

NO! They say, 'in a minute' 'I'm busy!' and then they say 'It's bedtime', and they still haven't done it.'

Me: Do you think Dave and I do things that are not like teachers?

Dave doesn't shout at us. Dave was just someone who came in our class sometimes and helped us, and reviewed what we were doing (his hands mime taking notes on the computer) and we could ask him for help.

Me: How would you describe what Dave and I do in school to a new person in your class?

You're the laptop teachers!

Despite having a sense that we are, in some ways, different, the view of us as teachers is deep rooted. Perhaps the boys do not have any other vocabulary for talking about our role, although they do routinely distinguish between 'teachers' and other adults around in the school.

I end with some further fragments, which for me raise many issues. I know that becoming a parent has made me a better teacher; I hope that by continuing to reflect on the interactions between the roles of teacher, researcher and parent I can learn to be better at all of them.

We often talk in terms of 'offering' things to children. The notion of the learner having the control to accept or reject the intervention seems to me to be crucial. I would like children in school to be able to say 'go away' with the same freedom Lilian does to me. But they learn very quickly not to react like that to teachers.

A teacher talking about helping her own children with school work: 'It's really nice when Sarah asks me to help her, but I find it really difficult. I start explaining like I do in school, and she says "No it isn't! That's not right!" and I don't know how to react. Children in school don't respond to me like that.'

The same teacher is currently a full-time research student, and will soon be going into her own school to do research for her dissertation. We have been talking about how she will handle this new role. For example, she needs to be careful not to get drawn into being used as a supply teacher.

Taking Lilian to school: the traffic is bad and I can't find a parking space. I say, 'I'm going to pretend I'm a teacher and go into the car park.' Lilian: 'You don't have to pretend mummy. You are a teacher at school!'

Inside school I pass a music teacher, whose children are also in the school. She asks, 'Now, are you here as a maths person, or as a parent or what? - and are you getting paid twice?'

I am aware of using car journeys to change from one role to another, focusing my thoughts on the next thing I have to do.

A mature student talking about school practice: 'It's all an act isn't it? I think I've learnt how to be a teacher. But I sometimes find I'm still being a teacher when I get home.'

Two further fragments were offered to me as a result of the discussions at the meeting.

The age of the children may be significant in thinking about differing roles, and particularly about children's perceptions of them. Working in Early Years, the distinctions are much less clear.

A researcher working in South Africa reported children being puzzled when she was leaving the school, because she hadn't taught them yet. When she said that she wasn't there as a teacher, they called her (in Afrikaans) 'auntie', a term which children would use for an adult who was a friend of the family.