

### 3.3 THE VALIDATION GROUP AS A CONVERSATIONAL RESEARCH COMMUNITY.

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In his MEd. dissertation, 'The Teacher as Researcher', Martin Forrest (1983) describes how he used a Validation Group to test the validity of his account of the effectiveness of his in-service support in primary education. The questions below are concerned with making explicit the criteria we use to judge improvement and with judging the effectiveness of one's own actions in relation to improvements in the quality of learning. Such questions appear to be fundamental in many of our enquiries.

#### MARTIN'S QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

1) *How can we know that an improvement has taken place in the school classroom? What criteria do we use to judge whether an innovation has led to an improvement in the quality of learning?*

2) *In the context of my work as an inset tutor, how effective am I in my role as a disseminator and supporter of innovation? What evidence is there to support my claim to be helping teachers to improve the quality of their children's learning?*

Both sets of questions were concerned with providing criteria for judging improvement and with trying to identify evidence of improvement of a kind which would satisfy the Validation Group.

The first meeting of the Validation Group engaged in a lengthy discussion which ranged widely over a number of possible criteria of improvement; there were many conflicting points of view and many different pieces of advice were offered to the researcher. Two features stand out in this discussion: firstly, the expressed wish to try to pin down in fairly precise terms the nature of the improvement sought and think in terms of established educational research methods using experimental and control groups. Carol reacted strongly to the suggestion which came from several members of the group, that improvements might be measured in the conventional way:

*"It reminds me of the old system of teaching children by the I.T.A. method and the traditional (method). How can you compare one group of five year olds to another group of five year olds. How can you compare the methods of teaching reading against completely different groups?"* (Taped discussion of first Validation Group meeting).

Carol's response shows up a key weakness in traditional methodology and encourages the search for an approach which takes account of individual differences in children and teachers.

The alternative methodology of an action research approach in which improvements are evaluated over a period of time was put forward as a totally different approach and one that was unfamiliar to most members of the Validation Group.

*"Suppose it's not a method where you compare. Suppose we don't look at it like that, suppose we say that as a teacher you have certain values, that you're trying to stimulate certain kinds of qualities in them and that's our main task, to try to understand how you as an individual are relating to these pupils, what you're doing, the kind of problems you say you have, the solutions you've imagined ... if you can actually hold up for public criticism the kind of realtionships you have in the classroom with pupils and other people who can identify with the experiences and the problems you're having (we) can actually learn something about the process of improvement from you, because you've been through certain kinds of processes, that in itself is extremely valuable, because you're holding up for the first time to public criticism the actual process of education and in groups like this I think we'll be able to identify with each other".* (Jack Whitehead - taped discussion of first Validation Group meeting)

It was agreed that evidence would be collected in the form of audio and video-tape recordings and, where appropriate, examples of children's work with a view to demonstrating improvement taking place over a period of two to three months (almost to half-term in the Summer term).

Following the first Validation Group meeting, the researcher discussed with the two teachers how the action research might be given a sharper focus, bearing in mind that the intention was not for the researcher to engage in a traditional form of educational research activity, but to monitor improvements taking place over time in relation to the teacher's own educational values and to look at particular children in the class for particular improvements taking place. By the time of the second Validation Group meeting both Sue and Carol were well under way with their respective cycles of action and reflection.

## **Evaluating the solutions -**

The report presented to the final Validation Group meeting which attempts to explain the educational practices of Sue Kilminster, spanned the period from early February to late May. This report traced the history of one full action/ reflection cycle in which Sue attempted to resolve two particular problems that she had encountered in her work with historical artefacts. Firstly, there was her need to establish effective ways of promoting the development in her children of lively enquiring minds and the ability to question and argue rationally. Secondly, there was her concern to provide opportunities for children to relate the artefacts to an historical context and in so doing to promote her other aims. For example, her concern with change through time, interdependence and moral values.

Sue's educational values may be said to have been negated (Foster, 1982) in two particular respects: firstly, in relation to helping her pupils to develop lively enquiring minds, Sue felt that she had failed with the first artefact case to provide conditions which might most effectively promote a questioning discussion and rational argument among the children. This problem was resolved by implementing group work, and by the use of a feely box to help sustain discussion. Secondly, Sue had experienced a negation of her declared intention of helping the children to study each object in its historical context. On the one hand, she felt it important for them to speculate in an imaginative way and on the other she wished to introduce relevant source materials. With the first box, problems arose because Sue found difficulty in integrating the additional resources she had provided with the childrens' study of the artefacts. This difficulty arose partly from Sue's not knowing precisely what resources would be needed to back-up the artefacts. Furthermore, her own wish to share the childrens' ignorance in relation to the nature of the objects conflicted with her need as a teacher to be ready to tackle the next stage of development: the exploration of the historical context of each object. The long term solution as suggested earlier would be to produce supporting packs of two-dimensional resource material. The short-term solution was provided by the phased introduction of relevant resource supplies from the Polytechnic resources collection.

### **Sue - modification of practice in the light of evaluation**

The report presented to the Validation Group represents one completed cycle of action/ reflection by Sue and had incorporated within it a number of suggestions for modification of her practice. The eighth point relates to seeing how far the children can work systematically on their own.

In the course of the third Validation Group meeting, Sue indicated that, as a result of seeing the video-tape of Carol's five and six year olds and the extent to which they had learnt to work independently of the teacher, she would like to see how far her eight and nine year olds had now developed the ability to work autonomously as the result of the work she had been doing. *"I would like to use the experience and just give them the objects without any help at all."*

Accordingly, Sue planned two weeks after the final Validation Group meeting for the researcher to video-record the whole class, divided this time into new groups, each working with a completely new object. Sue had thus embarked upon a new cycle, spurred on by her colleague from another school and taking into account the eight points which arose from her evaluation of the earlier implementation of work with artefacts.

### **Evaluating the solutions - Carol**

Carol's educational values included her contention that it is important to try to get children to appreciate some idea of time. Her belief in the importance of this may be said to have been negated by her perception of limitations in her children's understanding of time past. In discussion with the researcher, Carol voiced her doubts about helping children to sort out a 'sense of chronology.' A second way in which Carol's educational values may be said to have been negated is in relation to her aim of developing lively and enquiring minds. Here again, it was Carol's own perception of her childrens' limitations which formed a barrier. Carol felt that words of exhortation written by the Avon primary teachers 'Working Party of which she had herself been a member, were less appropriate to her own much younger children, for example the report states:

*"The exercise is likely to be more productive if, in the first instance, children are allowed to handle and discuss the object without teacher interference."* (Avon Education Committee, 1982c)

Carol's conviction that such a technique was impossible with five and six year olds, at first seemed unshakeable, but her recognition that they may be "helped to do this through experience" is contained in her statement:

*"It's like putting a maths card in front of a five year old and saying 'Try and work things out for yourself.' They wouldn't be able to unless they'd had experience before."*

Carol was prepared to try out the procedure and to see what happened, though she was clearly sceptical:

*"..... I will give it a try just to prove the point."*

The second Validation Group discussed the transcript of the children using their second artefact case in which Carol introduced the feely box and made some reference to the transcript of the subsequent discussion between Carol and the researcher. The documentation makes clear that Carol acknowledged that an improvement had taken place in relation to developing an enquiring mind as evidenced by their use of language. The language used by the children drew the following question from Jack Whitehead at the second meeting of the Validation Group:

*"If we could get back to that point about criteria; on the first question, would everybody accept that kind of evidence if it was subjected to analysis of the relevant criteria of lively enquiring minds, the ability to question and argue rationally was evidence .....*

*..... I've got a feeling for the first time that Martin might be able to justify that statement - it's on the last page (of the transcript) - "I wonder whether my Auntie Millie's auntie was born there."*

Encouraged by the response of the children to the second artefact study case, Carol decided to withdraw from the discussion to an even greater extent when she came to use the third study case. This time she did not use the feely box but reverted to wrapping each object in paper. The proceedings were video-taped and the recording presented to the third Validation Group meeting for them to scrutinize. The Validation Group was clearly impressed, in particular, by the way the children approached each object in turn with very little help this time from their teacher.

**Jack:** *"The last thing that impressed me most (with that shoe last) was the way, somehow, these children came to that conclusion through dialogue and discussion themselves. It was very impressive."*

**Mary W:** *"I just wanted to say I was very impressed by the evidence of lively enquiring minds....."*

The researcher was asked by Jack to pick out the points in the early dialogues with Carol when she made plain her doubts about the children's ability to work in this autonomous way. The following dialogue ensued:

**Carol:** *"You proved me wrong on this!"*

**Jack:** *I think that's quite crucial to Martin's work: I was very impressed at the way the children were arguing among themselves and I just felt here, when you say here on the bottom of the second page "they wouldn't be able to unless they had experienced it before" .... (reference to analogy with Maths workcard) .... what you've demonstrated here is that you were giving them that experience and they did argue rationally."*

Group member: *"You weren't giving them this before"*

**Carol:** *"They'd actually progressed."*

With regard to Carol's concern with developing in her children an understanding of time past as well as with regard to language development, one extract from the first Validation Group meeting, after Carol had used her first artefact study case, shows that Carol recognised the importance of using artefacts to overcome the severe limitations in children's understanding of time.

**Ron Adams:** *"What do you hope to achieve with these that you couldn't achieve in their absence?"*

**Carol:** *"Well, it's a lot better to have the objects than photographs with this age. Such a lot of language has come out of it - I suppose I could have had language out of other objects - it's given them some insight into historical things. They've been very excited about them."*

With the second and third study cases, very limited attention was paid to placing objects in their historical context and associating specialised vocabulary with the artefacts. However, with encouragement from the researcher this level of specificity was gradually extended. For example, with the second box, Carol's explaining the use of the weaving comb and the researcher's intervention which placed this object chronologically before the Roman mosaic.

Comments were made by members of the Validation Group on the evidence presented in the video-tape of children showing some awareness of time. One of the objects discussed by the children was a leather-bound eighteenth century book.

One group member made the following point:

*"It couldn't be a library book, because you couldn't keep a book out of a library as long as that: obviously they've got some concept of time, haven't they? Also their idea of a Roman book which was a scroll, they obviously felt that, because there wasn't a suggestion that you could have the same things at the same time."*

At the end of their study of each object in turn, Carol invited the group, on the researcher's suggestion, to see whether they could arrange the objects in chronological order. The result was that they placed the Roman amphora as the oldest with the eighteenth century book as the next oldest (which is fact it was). The cobbler's last was placed at the other end of the time scale.

### **Carol - modification of practice in the light of evaluation**

The fifth phase of Carol's action/reflection cycle was not presented in the Validation report on her educational practices. The Validation Group met very soon after Carol had used her third case of artefacts and there had been no opportunity to interview Carol about her reactions to the children's responses.

The video-tape was played back immediately after it had been recorded on a monitor with a large screen to the whole class in the middle of the school hall. Several colleagues were among those who came to see part of the video-tape at the end of afternoon school. Carol and her colleagues were impressed by the progress they observed in the children which they saw to be the result of their work with artefacts.

Since this written study has been restricted to the practice of two teachers, it has seemed unwise to be side-tracked into discussing the interest shown by other colleagues of the two teachers. At Sefton Park Infant's School, however, several teachers used the artefacts with their own children and followed Carol's work with interest. The Head showed a lively interest throughout.

### **Evaluating the researcher's role**

*"What I think I'd need to see in relation to your (question) No.2, are the teachers saying they actually lack something and that you're actually working with them to provide something they say they lack; this being used in the classroom with your pupils, and then trying to relate this to your No.1 which is then judging whether or not improvements have taken place in the quality of the pupils' learning."*

(Taped discussion of first Validation Group meeting.)

Both Sue and Carol were questioned independently and on separate occasions by members of the Validation Group about the researcher's inservice role. With regard to the researcher's role of disseminating the innovation, in this case the use of historical artefacts, and in sustaining teachers in their own work as teacher researchers,

**Ron King:** *"One change is that there wasn't much history taught and now there is!"*

**Peter:** *"That's a very important point."*

(Taped discussion of second Validation Group meeting.)

### **Support for Carol.**

**Jack:** *"(Martin is claiming to have provided) inservice support and I think we've got to be able to demonstrate this, that yes, he has assisted in some sense improvements to take place in the classroom. Now I can cope with the first question (i.e. that improvements have taken place in the classroom); I'm still a bit hazy about the claim to know that inservice help is actually helping!"*

**Mary Wilson:** *"Carol thinks that the inservice help has been helpful .....  
.....surely if we're looking at Martin's role as an inservice teacher, in opening .. teachers to something they didn't know before, we saw this here and now we're sure."*

**Jack:** *"That will in itself be evidence."*

**Mary Wilson:** *"Sue is now going into the classroom to try the same things herself because her expectations have been raised and I don't think we need further evidence from the teachers."*

(Taped discussion of third Validation Group meeting).