

**How do beginning teachers develop their  
knowledge of early-years pedagogy?**

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Louise Khalid  
Birmingham City University

**Abstract**

The focus of this paper is on the development of early-years pedagogy for a beginning teacher during her initial training and newly qualified teacher year. A series of interviews was conducted with the beginning teacher and the class teacher and mentor she worked alongside. The findings suggested that a shared pedagogy of early-years practice developed between the participants during their interactions within the setting. Three themes emerged from the data analysis highlighting the importance of learning through observation; learning through critical reflection; and learning as an apprentice for the development of a personal pedagogy. The implications for mentors and class teachers in their interactions with beginning teachers are considered.

**Key words**

Early years, pedagogy, beginning teacher, observation, reflection, apprentice, communities of practice.

**Introduction**

This study was set against the background of debate taking place in initial teacher training (ITT) in England to determine the most effective methods for training teachers. The publication *Towards the Next Generation of Outstanding Teachers* (Department for Education [DfE] 2011) was pertinent as the Coalition Government began its reforms of ITT and stipulated that more training should take place in schools. The recent *Carter Review* (Carter 2015), an independent review of initial teacher training in England, suggested that there was no one way for teachers to be trained and advocated continuing with a range of training programmes and entry points into the profession. Carter did, however, recommend that “subject knowledge development” and “subject specific pedagogy” should form part of the framework for ITT content and stressed the importance of “effective mentoring” (Carter 2015: 67). These viewpoints appeared to suggest that beginning teachers (BTs) develop a strong pedagogy and identity as a teacher through close interaction with experienced teachers in the classroom setting. The *Tickell Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* (DfE 2011) reopened the debate surrounding effective pedagogy in the early-years and recommended a new statutory curriculum framework for early-years in England (DfE 2012). It promoted three characteristics of effective teaching and learning: play and exploration; active learning; and creating and thinking critically. These three reports were influential in shaping this research which seeks to explore how beginning early-years teachers developed their knowledge of early-years pedagogy during their training period and on into their newly-qualified-teacher (NQT) year.

**Research question**

- How is the personal pedagogy of beginning early-years teachers shaped by interaction within the early years’ community of practice?

**Citation**

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Early-years BTs are exposed to a variety of different pedagogical models through interaction with tutors, teachers and peers during training. Learning how to be a teacher can be viewed as a transformation in terms of knowledge, skills and practice and beginning teachers undergo a series of changes as they take on the identity of the teacher. It seems sensible to assume that beginning teachers, in this case, post-graduate certificate of education (PGCE) trainees following an early-years (3-7) route at a university in England, gained the required pedagogical and subject knowledge during the course through the combined experiences of study at university and practice in schools.

### Literature review

In this research, early-years BTs and the class teachers and mentors they were working alongside were interviewed during the foundation-stage teaching practice experience and during their NQT year to determine how their personal pedagogy and identity were shaped. In defining pedagogy for this research, the psychological model of pedagogy of Grossman, Wilson and Shulman was useful (in Reynolds 1989) as they explored the importance of “subject matter knowledge” for teaching and considered that an effective teacher will have detailed subject content knowledge for teaching, an ability to promote learning and also a deep understanding of the children being taught. In early-years practice the “subject content knowledge” is often linked to the idea of ‘learning through play’. Many commonly-held views of early-years pedagogy have emphasised ‘playful experiences’, ‘child-initiated activities’ and children having the freedom to choose their activities (Drake 2005; Edgington 2004). This view of a play pedagogy is not, however, uncontested. Wood (2010a) and Rogers (2011) explored the idea that play in settings is used by adults as a means of instruction. Wood (2010b) argued that adults are challenged by the idea of ‘free play’ and that play is organised through the curriculum frameworks to “harness children’s learning and development” (p13). Brooker (2002:168) earlier recognised the role of instruction as she stated “a theory of play must explicitly include a theory of instruction”. This was underpinned by the findings of the *Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning* (Moyle et al. 2002) and the *Researching Early Pedagogy in the Early Years* (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) projects that concluded that effective practice should involve direct instruction. These research projects have influenced the development of the latest curriculum framework (*The Early Years Foundation Stage* DfE 2012) as it promotes adult-led learning in the foundation stage to ensure that children are ready for more formal learning as they move into Year 1. The contested nature of the role of play and how it is used by adults in early-years settings presents a particular pedagogical challenge for early-years teachers.

McDonald (2009:7) explored the idea of the beginning teacher “reshaping their pedagogical content knowledge” as she believed that BTs need encouragement to engage with this area of professionalism through interaction with class teachers willing to discuss their own personal pedagogy. However, this contrasts with Shulman (1987) and Atkinson and Claxton (2000) who believed that it is difficult for teachers to articulate what they know as a great deal of teachers’ knowledge about their own professional conduct is implicit in their actions. Polanyi (1983:4) referred to the ‘tacit dimension’ and believed “we know more than we can tell”. The value of meaningful interaction is discussed by Bruner (1996:162) who described “a sub-community of mutual learners” where teacher and learners (in this case, BTs) are actively involved in the learning process. This can be linked to the work of Schön (1987) who advocated a “reflection-in-action” approach to developing practice. The notion of reflection and its part in developing pedagogy proved useful for this study.

In seeking to become members of the ‘community of practice’, BTs, according to Beauchamp and Thomas (200:178), shape and re-shape their identity “in interaction with others in a professional context”. It is worth noting here that MacGregor (2009) and Varghese et al. (2007) viewed the BT as being “active” in co-constructing their identity. This has been explored by Lave and Wenger (1991)

and Rogoff (1990) who emphasised the importance of constructing an identity within a community of practice. BTs in schools are not passive recipients of knowledge but are active in co-constructing their pedagogies. In taking a situated view of learning, the development of pedagogy can be viewed as an interactive process where beginning teachers learn from and are guided by more experienced teachers during time spent in school. It is not realistic to assume, however, that every BT will be continuously considering their practice and that of the experienced teachers they work with, critically and reflectively in order to become members of the community of early-years practitioners. This process is not without difficulty as Trent (2010) found in his work with BTs that research led to greater uncertainty – those BTs who engaged most in reflective practice and learning from the practice of others may find they have more ‘critical incidents’ where their pedagogy and identity as an early-years teacher is challenged. Adopting the dominant pedagogy within a setting could be an easier route to acceptance than “confronting the core problems of pedagogy” (Scardamalia and Bereiter in Reynolds 1989:29). The status of BTs may also be a barrier to establishing a culture of enquiry and discussion. McIntyre (2009) raised this issue and stated that those with the lowest status in schools cannot be expected to be ‘agents of change’. Whilst McIntyre was considering the influence BTs can have on the pedagogy of the school, it is possible to view status as a potential barrier to developing a pedagogy that is not merely a reflection of a particular setting or based upon unchallenged “folk pedagogies” in order for BTs to gain a place in the community of practice of early-years teachers.

## **Methodology**

### *Case study approach*

A qualitative case-study approach was adopted as this research sought to understand the way social interactions were involved in the shaping of pedagogy and identity. These concepts are bound within the social constructivist tradition (Bruner 1999; Lave and Wenger 1999) and this is the substantive theoretical position underpinning this research. Employing a case-study approach facilitated the use of a range of methods suited to the particular needs of the “bounded situation” under investigation (Yin 2003). Stake (cited in Punch 1998) explored the use of an ‘instrumental’ case study where a case is examined to illuminate particular issues and it is pertinent to this research. The term ‘early-years community of practice’ is used in this paper to describe the early-years settings, the practitioners working in them, the policies and curriculum frameworks that the BT interacted with during her training and her NQT year. This community of practice formed the “bounded situation” (Yin 2003) that was necessary to establish for a qualitative case-study approach to research.

### *Participants*

The participants for the wider study were drawn from the cohort of Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) trainees following the 3-7 (early-years) route that began their training in September 2012. Six participants indicated their willingness to participate in the research project following completion of a cohort-wide initial questionnaire. The class teachers, mentors and tutors who worked with these trainees during their training period and their NQT year were also interviewed. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on one exemplar trainee.

### *Materials*

The main method of data collection involved interviewing the BTs and the practitioners. Hobson and Townsend (in Hartas 2010) suggested that the semi-structured or unstructured interview is often most associated with qualitative research and the structured interview with quantitative research. They advised against adopting this simplistic division and suggested that it is not possible to have a completely “structure-free interview”. Indeed there will always be some structure involved as the interviewer will have a purpose in conducting the interview connected to the research questions and this agenda will provide a framework for the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This

interactive process was at the heart of this study as the views, opinions, feelings and perceptions of those involved were central in gaining an understanding of how pedagogy developed. Cohen *et al.* (2007) referred to the 'intersubjectivity' involved in an interview where the interviewer and interviewee can discuss and co-construct their interpretations of a particular situation.

#### *Procedure*

The initial questionnaire was given to 60 of the trainees following the 3-7 (early-years) PGCE route and sixteen responses were received. Nine respondents indicated that they were willing to participate further and six of these were subsequently interviewed on three occasions during their training. The class teachers working with them during their Foundation-Stage teaching practice were also interviewed. Four of the initial group of six trainees were interviewed towards the end of their NQT year and, in three cases, the mentor was interviewed. As noted above, the focus in this paper is on the interview data of one exemplar trainee.

#### *Analysis*

In analysing the data a grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2011) was adopted and the questionnaire and interview questions relating to each beginning teacher were subjected to a line-by-line textual analysis and coded. These codes were then compared and grouped to give the five *a priori* themes: pedagogy; change; identity; relationships; and structures which were derived from the questions asked in the interviews. The codes for each individual BT were then compared and analysed to identify themes emerging from the responses to determine how their view of pedagogy had evolved during the research period.

#### *Ethics*

The focus group were PGCE trainees and, as the researcher was also a member of staff at the University, there were particular ethical implications to be considered. As Lindsay (in Hartas 2010) recommends, permission was sought from the University to approach trainees to take part in the research. The University was satisfied that the requirements of their ethics committee (BCU 2010) had been met. The codes issued by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and the British Psychological Society (2000) regarding the ethical implications in terms of conduct, consent and confidentiality for research were incorporated into the research design.

For this research, the hierarchical situation between the participants and the researcher as member of staff was of particular significance. Lindsay (in Hartas 2010:117) urges the researcher to "minimise the risk of negative consequences". A key challenge for this research was to ensure that the trainees did not feel obliged to participate in order to meet a request from a tutor. It was made clear to any potential participant that their involvement in the research was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time during the period of the research. The professional contact the researcher had with this particular cohort of trainees was minimised as she did not teach, act as personal tutor or supervise the teaching practice experiences of any trainees in this cohort to avoid any possible conflicts of interest.

#### **Results**

The complete data set of interviews for one BT (a questionnaire, four interviews with the BT, one with the class teacher and one with the mentor) was analysed to explore how this BT's personal pedagogy developed during the training and NQT year. The BT undertook her early-years teaching practice in the school that subsequently employed her and she completed her NQT year working alongside the class teacher who had supported her teaching practice. The school was a larger-than-average primary school in an urban environment. Most pupils came from a White British background and an above-average number of children were identified as having special educational needs and

an above-average number were eligible for additional funding through ‘pupil premium’. The Reception class was one of three occupying a large, open plan area and the three teachers planned collaboratively.

*A priori theme of pedagogy*

The following Table 1. indicates key elements and associated words derived from the interview responses related to the *a priori* pedagogy theme:

**Table 1.** Key words and elements associated with the *a priori* pedagogy theme.

	Interview 1 Trainee	Interview 2 Trainee	Interview 3 Trainee	Interview 3 HP	Interview 4 NQT	Interview 4 Mentor
Articulates Pedagogy		Recognises strengths (of children). Builds on prior learning. Emphasises active learning That is practical and engages	Stresses focused and ‘snappy’ teaching that is exciting and fun	Emphasises discovery, observing children’s responses. Exploratory play		
View of how children learn	Trial and error. Interactive. Exploratory. Experimenting. Discovery.	Engaging children. Giving choice. Independent learning. Exploration. Active learning,	Practical Active learning	Ensuring it is practical. Exciting. Related to their interests. Fun. Creative. Engaging.	Practical activities. Independent exploration. Positive reinforcement.	Play-based. Practical. ‘Hands-on’. Active. Independent.
View of the role/qualities of the practitioner	Encouraging. Inspiring. Facilitating. Modelling. Starting from children’s interests	Encouragement. Praise.	Improvising/ adapting. Observing. Directing. Supporting. Guiding play.	Making work exciting. Stimulating. Giving positive praise. Questioning. Observing.	Patience. Role model. Relationship with parents. Modelling behaviour. Positive reinforcement. Guided reflection.	Calm. Firm. Nurturing. Good communicator.

All participants (BT, class teacher and mentor) were asked in the interviews to give their views on how young children learn and the role/qualities of the early-years teacher.

There was a clear association between the pedagogical views articulated by the participants to the current curriculum framework for early-years. The three characteristics of effective learning (play and exploration, active learning, and creativity and critical thinking) advocated by the EYFS (DfE 2012) are present and the views of all three participants were broadly similar. They all emphasised a play-based approach that built on children’s interests, was active, fun and featured practical

activities. Brooker's (2002:68) view that a "theory of play requires a theory of instruction" was also represented as each participant identified specific strategies that the teacher employed: modelling, questioning, guiding, facilitating and positive reinforcement in her role consistent with a constructivist approach. There was a high level of consistency and compatibility among the views expressed and a shared understanding of early-years pedagogy with play as a means of instruction developed during their interactions within this community of practice.

#### *Emergent themes*

Beyond the *a priori* theme related to pedagogy, the following themes emerged from the data set: i) learning through observation; ii) learning through critical reflection; iii) the BT as an apprentice. These themes provided an interesting insight into how the BT's personal pedagogy developed.

##### i) Learning through observation

Further analysis of the *a priori* theme of pedagogy indicated that all participants emphasised the importance of learning through observation in supporting her pedagogical development. In the initial questionnaire the BT indicated that she expected her initial views to be '*challenged*' and was open to developing '*new perspectives by having first-hand experience within the role and working closely with others in similar situations*'.

In interview one, in responding to a question asking what had influenced her ideas about the role of the early-years teacher prior to joining the course she explained it was '*from observing what I've seen in practice*'. In this interview she also indicated that she found observing children valuable in gaining an understanding of how young children learn.

The next interview took place during preparations for the early-years teaching practice experience and the beginning teacher explained that observation had a key role in developing her confidence '*I've done a lot more observations of teachers ... I observed in KS2*' and she made a conscious effort to use observation to integrate herself into the new school setting.

During the practice a third interview was conducted and the beginning teacher was asked if she had an understanding of the personal pedagogy of the class teacher she was working alongside and her response gives further evidence of the value she places on observation – '*I haven't actually directly spoken to her but, obviously, I've observed her teaching a lot*'. This view aligned with that of the class teacher who, when asked to explain what had instigated the changes in the BT's practice, stated '*she's observed throughout the school, she's observed me teach as well early on in her placement*'.

Towards the end of the beginning teacher's NQT year a final interview was conducted and the BT reflected on how her practice continued to develop through observations in the open-plan Reception setting – '*I can look over and see that they are doing it in a different way and then I do stop and question myself*'. The value of observation for reflective practice was clearly stated and the views of the mentor about her role in developing the BT's practice extended this further – '*it's enabling her to observe good practice and see what bits she wants to bring to her own teaching style*'. Each of the participants clearly aligned themselves with the view that providing opportunities for observation had a key role in enabling the BT to develop her personal pedagogy.

##### ii) Learning through critical reflection

As mentioned previously, the BT was open to change through interactions with more experienced practitioners. What emerged through the analysis was that she developed her pedagogical understanding through a process of critical reflection.

In interview two, during preparations for the early-years practice, she expressed her approval for aspects of the observed practice – *‘they use lots of props and things...it’s really engaging, the activities are designed so they can follow-up from guided activities and extend their own learning’*. These views matched with her previously articulated ideas of how young children learn. It is also clear that she reflected on the practice of the class teacher who – *‘always gives them praise and encouragement which I feel is really important in the early-years to recognise their strengths and build on them’*. There were areas where she disagreed with the practice and this led her to rethink her approach even though she was not convinced of the benefits – *‘I think I will adapt slightly to how they approach their teaching because it’s consistency for the children’*. Throughout the interviews she referred to learning from reading, research and theoretical perspectives that she valued as a contribution to her understanding – *‘the knowledge that I’ve gained from my last course and this course reading around the different theories of development’*.

The reflective approach to her practice continued into her NQT year and in interview four when asked if she had made changes to her practice she stated *‘I feel like it has continually changed throughout the year, every day is new and different and every day I think of something that I would do differently to improve my practice’*.

iii) The beginning teacher as an apprentice

The third theme that emerged from the analysis was the BT as an apprentice. During the interviews she made reference to her view of her role, status and credibility within the school. She cast herself clearly as an ‘apprentice’ and actively developed this role. In interview two she identified an element of the practice that she was not comfortable with and deferred to the experience of the class teacher – *‘obviously she knows the class a lot better than I do’*. She explained the need to – *‘keep that consistent throughout because if I come with too many new strategies it’s just going to confuse them’*.

In interview three, when asked if she felt ‘part of the team’ she stated – *‘I feel really welcome as part of this team. I always go out of my way to ask if there is anything that needs doing’*. Later in this interview when asked if the development of her practice had been encouraged or constrained she expressed a desire to ‘fit in’ and again questioned her own status and credibility *‘when you are a student there is a little bit of you that’s always held back because you know that it’s not your class’*. Her success in ‘fitting in’ was noted by the class teacher who commented – *‘whatever we’ve suggested she’s taken on board’* and described a strategy used to develop the beginning teacher’s practice – *‘we’ve showed her how we do it’*. She praised her practice and stated – *‘she’s been good, she’s followed on from what we’ve done’*.

In interview four (towards the end of the NQT year), there was a marked contrast in the responses the BT gave when asked whether her practice continued to develop during the year she stated – *‘with my class I can introduce anything I want to really. I feel a bit more in control because they are mine’*. Her confidence and status had increased as she was no longer a trainee in the setting but her view of the BT as an apprentice remained firm as she advised other NQTs to – *‘build up a good relationship with the people you work with and ... try to establish yourself as a competent face within the school and get involved’*. When asked in the final interview if she felt that she was part of the team in the setting she confidently responded – *‘Yes, definitely I do now’*.

## Discussion

### *Learning through observation*

This paper began with a consideration of the current situation in ITT in England and the contested view of the play pedagogy. The view from the DfE and Carter Review that trainee teachers will

develop their teaching through interaction with more experienced colleagues is commonly accepted but there is little consideration of what type of interactions are effective in helping BTs to develop. For the BT, this view of the transmission of expertise through observation was reflective of the views of Lave and Wenger (1991) whose “situated view” of learning requires the learner to engage in an authentic situation with experienced members of the community they are seeking to join. This learning process involves a gradual absorption in the practices and values of the community and the acquisition of expertise through observation and imitation. The Office for Standards in Education (2014) stated that trainee teachers should have opportunities to observe outstanding teachers during their training period in order to “learn from outstanding practice”. The class teacher, the mentor and the wider school context have clearly influenced her development and a shared understanding of early-years pedagogy emerged. This co-construction of pedagogy does not, however, emphasise an exchange of ideas and discussion and reflection. Bruner (1996:162) reflected the importance of interaction as he referred to “a sub-community of mutual learners” where teacher (class teacher) and learners (BTs) were actively involved in the learning process. For this BT, the interaction appeared to be lacking – *‘I haven’t actually directly spoken to her’* (about her pedagogy). McDonald (2009) believed that BTs need encouragement to engage in discussion and interaction with class teachers who are willing to share their own personal pedagogy. As previously noted, Shulman (1987), Atkinson and Claxton (2000) and Polanyi (1983) all considered that it can be difficult for teachers to articulate what they know. The interviews conducted with the class teacher and mentor demonstrated their ability to articulate their own pedagogy but they did not appear to attach as much importance to this aspect of their role as they did to providing opportunities for observation. The mentor expected to act as a guide – *‘I don’t want to tell her how she should be doing it’* and afforded the BT numerous opportunities to observe the process of learning and teaching. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Rogoff (1990) emphasised the importance of participants in a community of learning being active in co-constructing their pedagogies and the second emergent theme (learning through critical reflection) explores how the beginning teacher takes an active role.

#### *Learning through critical reflection*

It has been noted that the BT developed a pedagogy that was closely aligned with that of the school in which she undertook her teaching placement and was subsequently employed as an NQT. It could be inferred that she did not fully engage in ‘confronting the core problems of pedagogy’ and merely adopted the dominant pedagogy within the setting. The analysis of the interviews demonstrated that she did engage in constructing her own pedagogy and was a reflective practitioner who drew on a number of sources as her ideas developed. As previously stated, early-years pedagogy is not an uncontested area. The BT experienced challenges to her previously held ideas and, as suggested by Beauchamp and Thomas (200:178), shaped and re-shaped her identity as an early-years practitioner by confronting these challenges. She was receptive to the idea that her practice would change and actively engaged in its construction through critical reflection and adapting her practice as a result of the challenges posed to her existing ideas from her observations. During this process, she experienced uncertainty and began to question and reflect. Trent (2010) noted that those beginning teachers who were most open to reflection experienced greater uncertainty. This can be viewed as a form of “reconceptualization” that Bennett et al (1997) observed when the early-years teachers in their study reflected on and questioned their practice. The BT in this study was highly reflective and made changes to her pedagogy through her interactions within the community of practice. Her role in that community is discussed in the third emergent theme.

#### *The beginning teacher as an apprentice:*

The relationship between the beginning and experienced teacher has been viewed as an authentic apprenticeship situation (Lave and Wenger 1990) which resulted in the adoption of new theories and frameworks. It was apparent that the BT was aware of her lack of ‘status’ within the setting

(McIntyre 2009) and actively deferred to the knowledge of more experienced colleagues. She was 'held back' during her teaching placement as it was not her class and worked on integrating herself into the existing community of practice through hard work and 'fitting in'. Lave and Wenger (1990:87) suggested that legitimate peripheral participation "is about being located in the social world...developing identities and forms of membership" and it is possible to see that her development was aligned with this view of learning. Shulman (1987) explored the idea of "transformation" in developing an understanding of pedagogical reasoning and this is pertinent here. This BT was involved in a transformation through her chosen role as an 'apprentice' in the setting and, as her credibility increased towards the end of her NQT year, she became confident of her place within the community of practice and acquired the credibility to make changes.

### Conclusion

The emergent themes from the research indicated that BTs were active in constructing their own pedagogy through observation, reflection and interaction with more experienced colleagues in the community of early-years practice. There are implications for developing the role of mentors and class teachers involved in ITT. Those working with BTs should be aware of the value of sharing and discussion in the development of pedagogy and create opportunities for this to happen. The commonly-held view of observation being the key to developing the practice of beginning teachers that is promoted by the DfE needs to be challenged to ensure that an emphasis is placed on discussion and reflection. The BT in this study was open to change and co-constructed her personal pedagogy using a number of different strategies to gain her place in the community of practice. It is recommended that BTs should be viewed as active participants who engage in observation, discussion and reflection to develop their pedagogy rather than passive observers of good practice.

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