

## **Reflecting on Reflection: Improving teacher's readiness to facilitate participatory learning with young children**

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Provide short biographical notes on all contributors here if the journal requires them.

### **Note on contributor**

Naomi McLeod started her career as an early years teacher and deputy head teacher. She now works as a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Hope University as part of the Childhood Department leading both undergraduate and post graduate courses. She also teaches and contributes to the QTS and PGCE programmes. Naomi recently completed her doctorate at the University of Sheffield and continues her research interests working closely with education and creative professionals in the field of critical reflection and participatory teaching and learning. In doing so, she is particularly interested in the use of creative methodologies.

### **Abstract**

This paper explores whether teacher's habits and assumptions about their practice can be enhanced by Continued Professional Development through nurturing self-awareness of lived experiences. Within the paper a practical understanding of critical reflection as a process is explored and particular attention is given to Moon's (2008) assertion that one person cannot make another person reflect. Reflection as a process is re-evaluated through the application of Theory U and the axiom that reflection needs to start with the self. The paper's central argument is that at the heart of critical reflection is the need for embodied readiness. Without such openness as the first step, critical reflection is misinterpreted. The main outcome of the study was the development of '*9 R's of Reflection*', a practical framework which enabled critical reflection to become part of teachers' day to day practice enabling them to focus positively on the challenges they faced within the applied educational setting. The findings of the study demonstrate that the '*9 R's*' broke down sites of conflict between the desire to follow children's interests and the pressure to conform to the technical demands that dominate modern education so that the teachers changed their habits and become better at participatory teaching.

**Key words:** critical reflection, self-awareness, openness, embodied readiness, Theory U, professional development

### **Introduction**

The article details the findings from a research study which explored whether it was possible to influence teacher's views, assumptions, understanding and practice of participatory teaching with young children through the facilitation of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) which developed deep self-awareness and critical reflection. Using such processes the study developed, with participant teachers, a shared understanding of participatory teaching, and explored whether it could be sustained through a process of critical reflection (*9 R's of Reflection* which developed as an integral part of the research process).

This research then started with the needs and interests of teachers and responded to their personal interests, motivations, and practices of working

with young children. The study's contextual axiom is that our lived traditions produce values, biases and beliefs which influence the manner in which we consciously or unconsciously form our professional identity, our priorities and understandings of working with young children (Hassan, 2005; Beijaard et al., 2004). It is these embodied experiences, especially those unconscious ones that we need to understand if we want to understand the 'richness and subtlety of human experience' (Leitch, 2006, p. 551). Within the context of education, teachers tend to feel restricted by an outcome driven curriculum and targets imposed by government as part of a top down approach. As a result there is the tendency to sometimes 'play it safe' and follow rules without questioning (Wilkins, 2011). Being aware of these power relations promotes a consciousness of reality so that teachers are more able to make informed decisions and take ownership of their practice (MacNaughton, 2005; Freire, 1994).

The paper's central argument is that critical reflection requires and begins with self-awareness, which can be developed through CPD activities that nurture embodied openness and readiness. In the development of such attitudinal dispositions the paper applies Theory U to demonstrate the need for openness. The main focus is to show how the process of becoming open was supported by a practical framework for reflection, named here as the '*9 R's of Reflection*'. This framework emerged as result of the study and proved to be an essential foundation to teacher's development of critical reflection which in turn was a catalyst to them focussing positively on the processes which promote participatory teaching and learning.

## **Developing critical reflection through self-awareness of embodied lived experiences**

In relation to education, critical reflection is regarded as a meta-cognitive (reflexive) process (Bolton, 2005) that assumes and requires awareness and self-examination of what people do and think. It is an internal process which consists of exploring personal beliefs, emotions, assumptions, thoughts and actions (King and Kitchener, 2004; McLellan, 2004). van Manen (1995) refers to critical reflection as ‘finding oneself’, an experience though which can be both difficult and uncomfortable. Becoming a reflective professional as an agent of change (Price and Valli, 2005) is gained by reflection upon the difficulties of classroom practice and the ability to ‘stand back’ and see different perspectives (Etherington, 2004). Critical reflection in relation to teachers (and the participation of young children) then, means that teaching as a whole becomes an examination through different ‘lenses’. In a sense, it becomes an on-going ‘learning journey’ as part of professional development. Awareness by the teacher of the issues of power and control lead to more deliberate thinking about creating democratic classrooms. In this formulation, critical reflection becomes crucial for 21st century teachers as a means of enhancing practice in the development of meaningful CPD (Author, 2011; Reed and Canning, 2010; Edwards *et al.*, 2002). **My argument is the need to nurture and develop open-mindedness and a readiness to see as the necessary starting point for critical reflection.** ‘Failure to see is the biggest barrier towards tackling our challenges’ (Hassan, 2005, p. 6). As Dimova and Loughran (2009) clarify, open-mindedness requires being ready to listen to more sides than one as an active listener. This means being prepared to hear views and ideas that

may be contrary to our own and being able to admit that a prior belief may be incorrect particularly in relation to pedagogy (Rinaldi, 2006). To start this ‘opening process’ there is the need to be ready and demonstrate an openness of mind, heart and will (Scharmer, 2009, p. 37).

### **An emancipatory theoretical framework**

The study takes critical social theory as its underpinning, based on the principles of empowerment, social justice, emancipation and freedom. It is predominantly informed by Freire’s (1994) theory of ‘conscientization’ which involves questioning assumptions that have been taken for granted and raises awareness of new perspectives and personal actions that can lead to the transformation of oppressing professional customs (Jacobs and Murray, 2010; Mezirow, 1997). Within this paper a practical understanding of critical reflection in relation to participation, relevant for the present day, is explored, (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1987; and Brookfield, 1995) and through the *9R’s of Reflection* (Author, 2012). Particular attention is given to Moon’s (2008) assertion that one person cannot make another person reflect; they can only facilitate or foster a critically reflective approach through appropriate conditions. In doing so Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) is presented as a means of exploring in detail the complex and challenging internal processes involved as part of being ready to be open and develop self-awareness (Hassan, 2005).

First, though, it is necessary to define participation, participatory teaching and participation of young children in the pedagogical space and context of this study.

## **‘Participation’ in the context of this study and the need for developing personal / embodied awareness of underpinning beliefs, values and habits**

In the context of this study, participation is understood as a child’s right to be involved in their learning and sharing responsibility and power for decision making about matters that affect their lives (Davies and Artaraz, 2009; Hill *et al.*, 2004; Article 12 (UNCRC) 1989). Participation is underpinned by progressive steps involving listening to and consultation with children (Shier, 2001; Lancaster, 2003) which are crucial in building a pedagogical space that contributes to children’s learning and well-being where they can make independent choices, share responsibility and make sense of their learning (Clark, 2005, 2004; Nutbrown, 1996).

Within the framework of this study, listening, consultation and participation are contextualised and understood as integrated parts of Shier’s (2001) *Pathways to Participation* model. His five levels of participation are defined as follows:

### ***Listening:***

1. Children are listened to
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.

### ***Consultation:***

3. Children’s views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.

### ***Full participation:***

5. Children share (some) power and responsibility for decision- making.

At the heart of participatory learning spaces, children are respected as individuals, and learning is supported through constructive thought and communication rather than on the transmission of knowledge and skills (Villen,

1993 and Malaguzzi, 1992). This can be a challenging process for adults because the value attributed to a child's participation is subject to adult self-awareness and issues of power imbalance that adults have over the child. These power relationships must be unpicked if participatory teaching is to be effective (Feldman and Weiss, 2010). Unless teachers are able to identify such embedded and unconscious influences on their epistemological beliefs and pedagogical approach, then any changes in critical reflection will remain ornamental and tokenistic rather than genuine and meaningful. This paper, then, takes a fresh look at critical reflection and the need to start with a personal readiness through the application of nurturing an open mind, heart and will (Theory U) (Scharmer, 2009).

### **Theory U: Becoming open and ready**

Here I use Theory U to reinforce the prominence that needs to be attributed to the initial and vital stage of nurturing an open, receptive authentic approach as well as demonstrating the complex and challenging internal processes involved in becoming critically reflective (Hassan, 2005). As Moon (2008) notes, one person cannot make another person reflect, they can only facilitate or foster such an approach through appropriate conditions in relation to the habits already formed by teachers. Such conditions were nurtured through the '9 R's of Reflection' as explained later.

**Figure1:** Theory U (Scharmer, 2010, p. 6)

As Figure 1 indicates, an open mind, heart and will is the nucleus for embodied readiness, essential for critical reflection. Next I provide a summary of the different 'spaces' involved which in reality are not straight forward or easy (Hassan, 2005). It can involve a journey of fluid movements forwards and backwards with different spaces blending into each other. It is also a journey that involves feeling uncomfortable. For this reason, it is helpful to see the spaces as areas for personal self-awareness rather than a precise and prescriptive order of actions. Rather than a fixed self as part of research, the self is fluid and is created in the process of the professional development as part of a reflexive process of coming to know oneself (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

### **An open mind**

Opening the mind is based on accessing the cognitive or intellectual, so that a person sees differently (Scharmer, 2009, Titchen and McCormack, 2010). To be open and to move from a conception of knowledge (formation or interpretation) towards a contextual understanding (reformation), Moon (2008) emphasises an understanding of the context in which critical reflection is required. Hassan (2005) clarifies the complexity of this process and the difficulties because of the lifetime biases and beliefs attached. Here 'the voice of judgement' (VOJ in Figure 1) may cause a person to play safe, follow the imposed rules (Wilkins, 2011; Scharmer, 2009, p. 42) and not take risks, (which as a result can prevent a participatory teaching approach). Scharmer (2009) and Titchen and McCormack, (2010) argue that for a person to see and act differently, a deeper level of *feeling* beyond the mind is needed. **An open heart is required.**



### **An open heart**

Having an ‘open heart’ entails accessing personal emotions which relate to empathising with others and a persons' ability to see from another perspective or ‘through the eyes’ of someone else (Scharmer, 2009 and Titchen and McCormack, 2010). This is central to critical reflection and is also important in terms of helping teachers to explore and understand their identities (Nias, 1996; Noddings, 1996) and Hargreaves, 2001). While emotion can distort critical reflection and the need that teachers can feel to be right (De Bono, 1983), cultivating an open heart by being vulnerable and honest, can promote trust and enable emotions to be put to one side. Here Scharmer (2009) warns of the voice of cynicism (VOC in Figure 1) or scepticism which can prevent a person putting themselves in vulnerable positions such as being open and honest. Recognising the value of emotions strengthens the significance of an open heart through self-awareness and the sometimes unquestioning acceptance of life experience and assumptions. Active engagement or questioning of how we know what we know is crucial (Mezirow, 1997) particularly in teaching. **Thus an open will is required.**

### **An open will**

Opening the will refers to ‘letting go’ and being true and honest. This is crucial but ultimately depends on being able to drop the ‘habitual self’ (Scharmer, 2009: 41). Often ‘the voice of fear’ (VOF in Figure 1) can block an open will; for example the fear of being in the minority. As Scharmer (2009) outlines the journey to openness is ‘always the road less travelled’ (p. 42) because of the complex and difficult inner work it involves in relation to self. This embodied

openness is situated at the heart of a series of fluid spaces which facilitate the uncomfortable process of coming to know oneself.

### **The Spaces of Theory U**

**Downloading:** represents the beginning, through open conversations about past experiences, practice or habits in relation to the challenges as part of teaching, which in reality, as Dewey (1933) highlights, is not straightforward and can involve confusion and doubt.

**Seeing** involves becoming aware of personal habits or practice that previously a person may not have been conscious of (Scharmer, 2009).

**Sensing** requires being able to view the context from another perspective (such as the child's perspective). Here there is a grasping of the context as a whole which comprises a consideration of our own relationship to the wider work environment and a questioning. This is essential as part of developing an awareness of imposed conventions on teachers (Gilroy, 1993).

**Presencing** entails connecting to the deepest source in order to 'let go' so that 'letting come' is possible. Letting go is 'about putting ourselves into a state of profound openness' and involves courage, leaving the shores of our certainty....and overcoming our fear of the unknown' (Hassan, 2005:8). 'Letting come' is about being open to change which can be a time of anxiety, emotional difficulty and the most vulnerable stage of the process, but likewise it can also be one of new creation (Hassan, 2005). This stage represents a realisation and a shift in action. It is referred to as 'passing through the eye of the needle' (Scharmer, 2009, p. 42) because it requires 'dropping everything that isn't essential' (p. 191). In an active classroom situation, van Manen (1995)

questions the reality of this happening because of the necessity to act on the spot without having time to step back and consider alternatives.

**Crystallizing** is concerned with the new vision or possibilities that can emerge as a result of embracing new awareness. Again, van Manen (1995) draws attention to the complexity of this happening as part of the active practice of teaching.

**Prototyping** requires exploring the future through dialogue with the head, heart and will; the will being the action or commitment that Shier (2001) refers to so that new understanding impacts directly on teaching. Prototyping is driven by vision and trust and is different from a set plan. It is about 'letting come' in a similar way to *phronesis praxis* as described by Aristotle (Barnes, 1976; Grundy, 1987). Instead of an unreflective technical product approach, the teacher focuses on the process and what makes for human flourishing (Kemmis, 2010).

**Performing:** is exemplified in a new commitment, comparable with the deliberate and committed open 'plan of action' that Dewey referred to (McDermot, 1973, p. 505).

### **The study and appropriate methods used to support openness and insight**

The study was in two Phases over a period of seven months. The focus of Phase One (January to June) was on developing a shared understanding of participation (based on Shier's *Pathways to Participation*, 2001) through critical reflection. Phase Two (over the period of one month - July) explored whether participation could be sustained through a process of critical (the 9 R's of Reflection that emerged as an on-going part of the analysis (Author, 2012).

The study departure point was that of the needs and interest of two teachers in relation to participatory teaching (Loucks-Horsley *et al.*, 2003, p. 47). Two teachers as part of the Foundation Stage were involved, one was a Reception Teacher (RT) and the other a Nursery Teacher (NT). The overriding aim was to develop a deep insight into the teachers' experience of developing a reflexive approach as I worked 'with' them (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). Through previous projects we had developed a positive, open working relationship built on a mutual respect of the value and commitment to listening to young children. Involving other participants may have changed the dynamics of the group and the trusting, secure environment required for embodied readiness and openness. As the focus of this study was to understand and explore the teachers' perspectives and experiences of participation with young children, the research was designed to be participatory and emancipatory by nature (McCormack and Boomer, 2007; Goldstein, 2000) using methods which reflected this by choosing open and engaging approaches. The study employed a multi-method creative and exploratory approach that provided the flexibility to respond to the emerging nature of the data (Corbin and Holt, 2005). It began with an open questionnaire followed by conversations about the teachers' views and understanding in respects of consultation and participation with young children. The findings were used to inform the framework for **Phase One**; the collaborative (CPD) workshops over a six month period. **A qualitative thematic analysis approach drawing on a conceptual framework of creative hermeneutics (McCormack and Boomer, 2007) was utilised as a way of embracing the theoretical and methodological underpinning consistent with the approach of openness and engagement. In doing so, the analysis of data did not wait until the end of the study. Instead, all elements were considered to be**

data (workshop transcripts, reflective tasks, teachers' journals as well as my own on-going journal) and were continuously compared with each other in order to obtain themes for understanding and interpreting the nature of the relationship between consultation and participation and critical reflection. Throughout the study, the two teachers actively participated in both the generation of data, through their engagement in the study and the analysis of data (through the identification of themes, and categories) by commenting on significant elements and aspects as a result of reading each workshop transcript, as part of Phase One and Phase Two). The involvement of the teachers in the analysis process was crucial as part of the inductive, reflective nature of the combined thematic and creative hermeneutic approach. The collaborations offered a means of 'capturing the essence' of their stories (Corbin and Holt, 2005, p. 52)

The mentor workshops in Phase One were the hub of the research and learning process, supported by the relaxed atmosphere, openness and desire of both teachers to engage. The focus was on the following:

- Knowing yourself - personal values and beliefs
- Perceptions of children
- Consultation and participation with young children
- The benefits of consultation
- Understanding Shier's (2001) *Pathways to Participation*
- Becoming critically reflective
- Supporting participation through keeping a reflective journal
- Creative evaluation for Phase One

As a result, they were able to tap into seemingly forgotten memories and emotions. This in turn unearthed a consciousness of themselves that enabled fresh perspectives of how personal experiences influenced their very being (Leitch,

2006). We explored new, individually tailored concepts which in turn presented fresh challenges. All of the workshops followed this format:

1. Reflections on transcript (10 minutes)
2. Sharing follow up task (10 minutes)
3. Aligning practice with Shier's model (5 minutes)
4. New theme explored (25 minutes)
5. Supportive reading (5 minutes)
6. New agreed task (5 minutes)

Each workshop began by spending time reflecting on the transcript of the previous session to identify anything the teachers found interesting, valuable, challenging, or were particularly proud of, and points of agreement or dissent. Time was also dedicated to discussing the follow up agreed tasks that the teachers had reflected on in their journals. These tasks were individually tailored and agreed between us in relation to the personal and professional needs and challenges of each of the teachers. Examples included teacher planned sessions, (with individual children, pairs, small or larger groups), or 'continuous provision' (activities chosen by the children). Each reflected the teachers' personal readiness and openness to engage in the study. This meant each task was aptly pitched in terms of motivation and challenge (Platteel *et al.*, 2010), but perhaps most importantly the task focus was decided by the individual teachers.

Almost half of the workshop time was spent exploring a new participatory concept through exchange of knowledge involving collaboration and open discussion. This enabled the teachers to identify a deeper self-awareness, and

unearth a consciousness of personal strengths and weaknesses pertinent to participatory learning and teaching, which consequently presented fresh challenges and areas for development which ultimately required openness. I provided supportive reading for each workshop in the form of accessible hand-outs as a way of enhancing the teachers' developing understanding of participation, which as Moon, (2006) identifies can be a way of supporting professional understanding and development. Through the teachers' engagement in the reflective and collaborative nature of the workshops, '9 steps of reflection' emerged. These 9 R's of Reflection (or *9 Steps of Reflection*) are distinctly relevant to this study and are presented below in Figure 2.

**Phase Two** of the study involved exploring whether participation through a process of critical reflection was sustainable over a period of one month with the participant teachers. Two workshops were provided over the period of a month, after which a final collective creative evaluative session took place.

At the end of both Phases, creative evaluation sessions, were planned to capture the essence of the teachers' personal learning as a result of engaging in the study. These included collages (Simons and McCormack, 2007), the use of creative hermeneutic cards (Bijkerk and Loonen, 2009) and metaphors crafted into poetic haiku (McIntosh, 2009). Together these highlighted visual journeys of transformation experienced by the teachers (Titchen and McCormack, 2010). In doing so a deeper kind of knowledge was available (Jupp, 2006, p. 133). The use of creative hermeneutic arts based approaches facilitated a reflexive approach and enabled the teachers to articulate and summarise the essence of their experience of the project

and their transformational learning. Further insight in relation to the creative methodologies as part of the project is available in McLeod, 2014)

**Insert Figure 2 here:** *9 Steps of Reflection* as a tool for sustaining critical reflection

It was **the gradual development of these ‘9 R’s of Reflection’** as a practical framework that reinforced the essential nature of embodied readiness (Scharmer, 2009) at the heart of critical reflection. The 9 R’s enabled the teachers’ to focus positively on the challenges and difficulties they faced within the applied educational setting on a day to day basis and provided insight into what participation felt like from a child’s perspective. As a way of demonstrating how the 9 R’s of Reflection evolved and empowered the teachers to become critically reflective (and follow children’s interests necessary for participatory teaching rather than conforming to the pressures that dominate modern education) (Scharmer, 2009 and Corbin and Holt, 2005), **the findings and the discussion from the research are analysed through referring back to the themes espoused by Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) namely downloading, seeing, sensing, presencing, crystallising, prototyping and performing, facilitated through the 9 R’s. This approach is adopted as a way of demonstrating the embodied readiness displayed by the participant teachers as**



well as indicating how appropriate conditions were created (McCormack; Boomer, 2007) as an integral part of the '*9 R's of Reflection*'. The following account therefore unravels the reciprocal relationship between the *9R's of Reflection* and readiness (embedded throughout Theory U) as an integrated experience.

### **The unravelling and analysis of readiness (Theory U) through the '*9R's of Reflection*'**

Right from the start of the project the space created was valued as a chance to collaborate, share and develop together. The teachers saw it as a protected, safe space where risks could be taken and time was set aside for exploring past experiences and influences on their personal views. It was the beginning of 'downloading' and 'seeing' afresh (Scharmer, 2009) so that challenges and uncertainties were openly discussed without fears of being judged. '**Downloading**' was evidenced as part of the open discussions by the teachers' about their childhood experiences and memories and their views of children as part of society. For one of the teachers this involved memories of parents who were '*over protective and safety conscious*'. She became aware of the influence of her background and upbringing on her behaviour '*to always please and do what I was told to*', which often resulted in thoughtful but passive actions. She lacked confidence in her pedagogical reasoning and recognised the impact of this on her teaching and her discomfort in sharing power with children as part of their learning. For the other teacher, connections were made between emotional experiences linked to family relationships. This was particularly challenging and uncomfortable as it evoked many emotions and forgotten

feelings (Dewey, 1933). She recalled not liking how it made her feel and noted the emotions provoked (Scharmer, 2009). The impact for each of the teachers was a realisation of how they viewed children as part of society. **Seeing** and **Sensing** (as processes of Theory U) (Scharmer, 2009) were evident here. The Reception teacher explained how she felt about '*sharing power with children*':

*It's definitely not right. I think there should be more of a balance. Children's experiences are limited and in terms of safety and everything else that goes along with it... but I don't see children as having any power in society, not enough anyway. Children's views aren't very appreciated in society at the moment....Power should be shared.... but more weighted with the adults in terms of responsibility'. Having conversations isn't adult talk and children listening. I think there should be a balance. One without the other is not right and one is wrong. It's a balance between the two...it's consultation. If you don't listen to children they don't feel valued, they're not going to share their ideas or flourish into the people that they can be It's about respect. Until you question where that's come from you don't question and think.*

In terms of what influenced her views and understandings, she noted '*I think with me, it's innate, it's something that I automatically do*'. She was uncertain of where her personal views came from, but she demonstrated a connection and developing awareness of 'seeing' and her personal understanding of valuing the children's perspective (Brookfield, 1995 and Lancaster, 2003) as underpinning her pedagogical approach (McAlpine and Weston, 2000).

*From my own practice, I can see the benefits but I feel I would like additional knowledge on the pedagogy behind children's learning.....I've got confidence but I also want to know research that backs up the fundamental values of children's views and opinions.*

In a sense, she saw the barrier as herself in terms of requiring further knowledge about the reasons why consultation underpinning participation is important. She demonstrated evidence of valuing children as part of society and the 'need to question' her underpinning values. The NT was very clear that different views and approaches taken '*depend on your background and*

*understanding and how you were brought up*'. In terms of her understanding of children in society she was clear that *'children make their own choices but the power lies with the adult so it's up to the adult whether they agree with the child's choice'* (Lancaster, 2003; Moss, Petrie and Poland, 1999). One of our early CPD sessions revealed her uncertainty. She used 'safety' as a means of demonstrating the need for children to listen to adults as part of adult led teaching and considered how *'a child may struggle'* in terms of giving their views. But ultimately she viewed this as the child's problem rather than seeing the role of a teacher as enabling talk. Following a moment of thought, she added, *'but if we don't listen to children....they're not really going to want to listen to you'*. She was clear that consultation was 'about both sides being involved', but she was not comfortable in letting go or taking the risk of giving children the choice of consultation and participation. She appeared to want to believe in participation but had doubts (Hassan, 2009). As part of this stage in the process of developing readiness, she was '*sensing*' (Scharmer, 2009) by developing an awareness of imposed conventions (Gilroy, 1993).

During one conversation, the RT noted:

*We all make assumptions about how we think we know best and how we see other adults doing the same and we make those assumptions on children's behalf. We assume they can't do this or won't be happy about that, instead of just giving them the opportunity to show us*

She had developed an appreciation of the value of stepping back and sensing the importance of not making assumptions about what children can or cannot do, as well as a realisation of how personal misunderstandings impact on practice. What was also significant through our open collaborations was the growing awareness of critical reflection as a means for appreciating and seeing

practice more holistically (Pollard *et al.*, 2008; Mezirow, 1997). During one of the CPD sessions, the NT grew in confidence as she shared her new learning:

*The first thing I noticed was everything we're doing now is much more natural so I notice the whole process of participation much more as I'm doing it and as I follow it through more than ever than I did before.*

They were engaging in meaningful reflection as part of everyday practice (Schön, 1983; Kemmis, 2010).

The teachers noted the opportunity to ‘*review together*’ as essential in becoming more open. This was supported by, the additional reading I provided which enabled a sense of relevance, purpose and authority for the teachers. During one of the ‘participation’ workshops, the RT demonstrated further personal links between relevant reading (Lancaster, 2003; Shier, 2003 and UNCRC, 1989) and her developing ability to provide openings and opportunities for young children as part of her teaching. She noted how ‘*the reading really encourages me and backs up my practice*’. Her engagement in this process enabled a sense of permission, empowerment and justification of participatory teaching in terms of her own professional development as well as her teaching (Eun, 2011). It was their desire for relevant reading that essentially provided the courage, which allowed / enabled them to leave the shores of certainty and overcome their fears (**presencing**) (Hassan, 2005). It provided the authority they felt they needed to focus positively on challenges associated with participatory teaching. The implementation of the ‘9 R’s’ supported the breaking down of the conflict between the teacher’s desire to follow children’s interests and ideas and the pressure to conform to the technical demands that dominate modern education which can result in following rules and targets

without sometimes questioning (Wilkins, 2011; Claxton, 2003). The reading promoted a consciousness which enabled the teachers to question, make informed decisions and take ownership of their practice (MacNaughton, 2005; Freire, 1994). Together we decided that '*Relating to Relevant Reading*' should be added as an essential *R for Reflection*.

New participatory possibilities emerged (***Crystallized***) (Scharmer, 2009) as a result of embracing new awareness through engaging in the collaborative CPD sessions (the *R's of Reflection*).

The teachers noted the following:

**RT:** *I find as well that this (the process of the 9 R's) has helped, when you talk about your practice to other people or when other people say 'how do you do that?' and I've found that it pulls everything together really and gives you the justification for what you're doing, so it's not just we've got to play outside because that's what the Early Years Foundation Stage says'.*

**NT:** *It also highlights what you do without realising that you do it naturally, but when you have to tell someone about it, it makes you consider more.*

This indicated the valuable nature of the collaborative process in contrast with van Manen's (1995) concern that reflecting together interferes with the natural process of teaching. In the case of this study, the collaborative nature of the CPD workshops provided a sense of ownership of knowledge, empowerment and understanding of why alongside the open, reflective approach of the teachers, as they questioned their practice rather than simply accepting a strategy or framework (Scharmer, 2009; Moon, 2008; Hassan, 2005, Freire, 1994). As they shared their reflective accounts, their thoughts often included connected emotions (Leitch, 2006; King and Kitchener, 2004; McLellan, 2004) and a sense of personal efficacy.

They realised the value of their evolving transformative participatory practice for both the children as well as their own practice. In turn, the open collaborative nature of the CPD workshop conversations promoted a sense of active involvement in, and ownership of learning; and meta-cognition (Moon, 1999). Essentially they were able to explore the future through dialogue with the head, heart and will; the will being the action or commitment that Shier (2001) and Scharmer (2009) refer to in the form of '**prototyping**'. Together we agreed on the following as valued future actions:

- seeing and appreciating other perspectives
- valuing a reflective approach
- the adult as the one required to offer an opening in order to make changes
- the need to be more flexible in following the children's interests and ideas as part of teaching
- the dilemma of the pressure of targets and external barriers
- the importance of being able to justify participatory teaching.

RT: *'I can see the benefits for the children and for us and I can justify why'*. She had questioned the unequal power balances and control as part of her practice and was able to think more deliberately about the creation of democratic practice (Scharmer, 2009; Brookfield, 1995; Carr, 1998). However, there was still the dilemma of the pressure of targets when teaching activities that had been planned (Wilkins, 2011; Tickell, 2011; Dimova and Loughran, 2009; Bell, 2003).

The collaborative nature of sharing through the evolving '*9R's of Reflection*' played a central role in the teachers becoming critically reflective and valuing

participation (McCormack and Boomer, 2007). Both teachers became more confident in exploring aspects of their planned teaching. A new deliberate commitment, comparable with *'performing'* or transformational learning (Scharmer, 2009 and Shier, 2001) is provided below as a way of demonstrating the final 'space' of Theory U necessary for embodied readiness and commitment.

The RT referred to the *'Steps of Reflection'* as a way of embedding a meaningful reflective approach as part of her everyday practice (Schön, 1983).

*'I was outside with the boys who wanted to play football but the ball kept rolling under the ramp so by the afternoon there were no balls left. I encouraged them to think of how they could retrieve the balls. I wanted them to work it out for themselves. They tried a bat and realised it wasn't long enough, so they decided to get the brush poles and things with long handles. Instead of saying, 'No, do it this way', I offered it as a real problem so we were sharing responsibility. They couldn't play football if they didn't have the football.*

*There was so much open discussion. I listened and watched. Every now and then I said, 'Did that work?' or 'why do you think that was?' It took them a long time to get the brush poles themselves. They weren't worried about getting dirty, probably because I wasn't. They were openly discussing and thinking together. I could see their delight and empowerment. I asked how they felt. One child said 'Me mum wouldn't let me do it cos I'd get me jumper dirty', and another said 'When we get the ball we can play football again'. We've got to encourage them to think for themselves and be empowered, not dominated.*

*In terms of implications and responding, I can see I need to stand back and let them work it out for themselves. So by letting go, there was more participation and involvement for the children. I could really see how much they understood and I also realised, I needed to talk to the classroom assistant about needing to let the children do more of this, because we can set problems up but if it doesn't come from them, it's not as meaningful, like when we're on the carpet and I say 'I need to find out which one is taller' and they think that's a boring problem.*

I encouraged them to think. I wanted them to work it out for themselves and see the operationalization of Theory U. The RT responded directly to the children's suggestions and made appropriate changes as part of her practice as it happened. She understood the relevance of children needing to be empowered

and not dominated and recognised their valuable understanding as part of problem solving learning experiences. She also valued the importance of asking the children how they felt about their experience, rather than relying on her assumptions. She clearly valued and appreciated the experience from their perspective. What was also significant was her realisation of the consequences of her reflective practice and her new found confidence and decision to challenge wider issues (Scharmer, 2009; MacNaughton, 2005; Athey, 2007; Brookfield, 1995; Taylor, 1993; Freire, 1970, 1994).

In reality the first step of '*Readiness*' was only added towards the end of the project when we reflected together about the importance of being open and aware of the influence of past experiences on practice (Scharmer, 2009). The realisation of being ready dawned on the RT: '*It suddenly hit me that this wouldn't have been possible unless we were ready and open to question ourselves*'. As the workshops progressed, the teachers became more expert at evaluating and *Reappraising the Relevance* of their teaching in relation to participation (Shier, 2001). This included a heightened awareness of the need to question and challenge personal ideas and habits. They became more proficient at evaluating their participatory teaching and the implications (Moon, 2008, 2006). As part of the *Re-appraising* process, both teachers became more critical of their own practice and began to *Re-appraise the relevance* by identifying and appreciating the benefits for the children as well as for themselves. *Responding* was added as an *R*.



Finally, at the end Phase One of the study, '*Remember*' was a collective suggestion as our ninth *Step of Reflection*. The teachers recognised that remembering the *9 R's of Reflection* as a process of value, empowerment and encouragement would be important in sustaining participation as part of their teaching in the future (Kemmis, 2010 and McIntosh, 2010).

The structure of the *9 Steps of Reflection* provided practical steps that enabled the teachers to focus on obstacles and problems associated with consultation and participation which they encountered as part of their teaching (Marcos, *et al.*, 2009). The evolving steps also acted as a framework around which the teachers were able to construct written reflections about their practice. The significance and potential value of this tool as a means of supporting critical reflection as part of daily teaching became clearer, more significant and more detailed as we analysed the data as an on-going part of the study (McCormack and Boomer, 2007; Corbin and Holt, 2005). The *Reciprocal Relationship* arrow represents the 'golden thread' connecting each aspect of the cyclical process. This indicates the fluid and live relationship between the conceptual steps (R's) as part of the purposeful process of critical reflection. The term 'step' was used simply to indicate the depth of the processes involved in becoming reflective and is used to indicate the supportive and flexible process. It should not be seen as a restrictive set of rules to be followed rigorously. Equally, the term sequence represents the connectedness as a whole rather than a particular pattern that should be followed.

## **Findings from Phase 2 of the study: sustaining openness through the 9R's of Reflection**

Phase Two of the study reported in this paper was concerned with whether participation could be sustained by embedding the 9R's of Reflection as part of on-going teaching. The text is a transcription of the narrative spoken by the RT as she reflected on her participatory teaching and her experience of reflection before the project, during the project and thoughts on her future practice.

### **The Reception teacher: Before**

*I felt like I had a massive mountain going on and really I just needed to understand that there are such huge benefits that come out of reflection. It's just letting go and not letting it get to you. It was scary because you leave a lot behind but the R's make sure the scary doesn't take over.*

### **During**

*I think this project has been about getting stuck in....just going for it and just totally immersing yourself. It never ends or finishes. It's a continuum. It's on-going, never ending and something you will always do using the R's. Because of the process we've been through together it's just something I need to carry out now. Now that we've realised and experienced the importance of participation and listening to children through reflection, it's something that I'll do forever. It's become a part of life.*

*It's the experiencing for ourselves and valuing it. I've specified specific reflection time... it's just an additional thing that I do now so I'm reflecting as I'm doing. Using our developing Steps [of Reflection] has definitely enabled a deeper level of reflection than just thinking. Yes, because when you write it down you're more engaged in it and you question it and think it through more than just thinking 'Oh that was good'. It sort of goes from thinking it to talking it to writing it down in three stages but more clearly.*

### **Forwards into the future**

*The way I see it, the journey's not finished yet, we've got further to go and I don't think we'll ever be finished. I also liked the way that she's trying to pass something to her friend and we need to do the same thing now. We need to*

*share with other people and to help them realise the importance of participation with children. The benefits are huge. it's just a case of opening the door.*

*I love where the project has brought us. I love that you know that we dedicate time to reflecting, I love the freedom we've found.*

The RT reflections indicate a genuine passion, readiness, enthusiasm and commitment as part of engaging in the reflective process (the 9R's) particularly in light of initial uncertainties (Scharmer, 2009). The importance of collaboration is emphasised as well as the need to remember and share her new found confidence (Kemmis, 2010). RT recognised the benefits both for herself and the children. Having experienced the process of reflection, she is committed to making time to reflect both as part of daily teaching and keeping a journal (Bolton, 2005; Moon, 2008).

### **Concluding thoughts**

This study demonstrates the essential need for an embodied 'opening process' of mind, heart and will as the starting point for critical reflection (Scharmer, 2009, p. 37) (Theory U) in the context of appropriate conditions (McCormack; Boomer, 2007), which was developed, supported and sustained by the *R's of Reflection* (Author, 2012; Kemmis, 2010). By facilitating openness, self-awareness, and personal questioning over a period of time as part of professional development, the teachers' experience was one of a personal sense of purpose, meaning and relevance which promoted empowerment, ownership of knowledge, permission to question and confidence in taking necessary risks (Brookfield, 1995; Freire, 1994). As part of their day to day teaching they were able to focus positively on processes that promote participatory teaching, and

became better at listening to, consulting and participating with young children.

The NT's concluding comments were,

*'I think that until you go through this process you don't realise how important it is'.*

The following points were recommended by the teachers for teachers as a means of sustaining critical reflection as part of professional learning and development:

- Be ready, open and willing to develop self-awareness
- Be prepared to explore emotions as part of understanding one's own identity
- Commit time and enthusiasm
- Be prepared to let go, take risks and make changes
- Commit to sharing the value of participation with other colleagues
- Remember the benefits for the children and teachers
- Be prepared to respect and value children's ideas and interests
- Identify listening, consulting and participating with children as a personal area of interest and priority for professional development

Each of the above suggestions pertinent to reflection are situated within the 9 *R's of Reflection* (Figure 2) signifying perhaps the relevance and purpose of the 9*R's* for other teachers. Ultimately, of course, further research involving the sustainability of the 9*R's of Reflection* with the teachers involved in this study is needed (despite the fact that they are no longer teaching in the same school). As Givvin and Santagata, 2011; Tickell, 2011; Hughes, 2008 reinforce, change takes time if it is to be embedded and sustainable as a valuable part of teaching.

Therefore, further research could focus on how to nurture action research to support embodied readiness through creating appropriate collaborative conditions (McCormack; Boomer, 2007), involving teachers and university tutors working and researching together (Stenhouse, 1971, 1976). The practical focus would be on enhancing both individual and collective transformations. Likewise, the *9 Steps / R's of Reflection* need further evaluation against other models that have been found to support the key features of critical reflection and participation as part of a meaningful process.

In terms of considerations for the wider teaching population, there is the need to recognise the importance of starting *with* and working *with* teacher's personal priorities and interests as a means for purposeful collaborative inquiry. In addition, creating the right conditions is essential, such as an open and trusting safe environment so that uncertainty and willingness to take personal risks are embraced. To a certain extent these recommendations are dependent on policy makers valuing the contribution that critical reflection can make alongside the constraints and tensions caused by LA targets and SATs.

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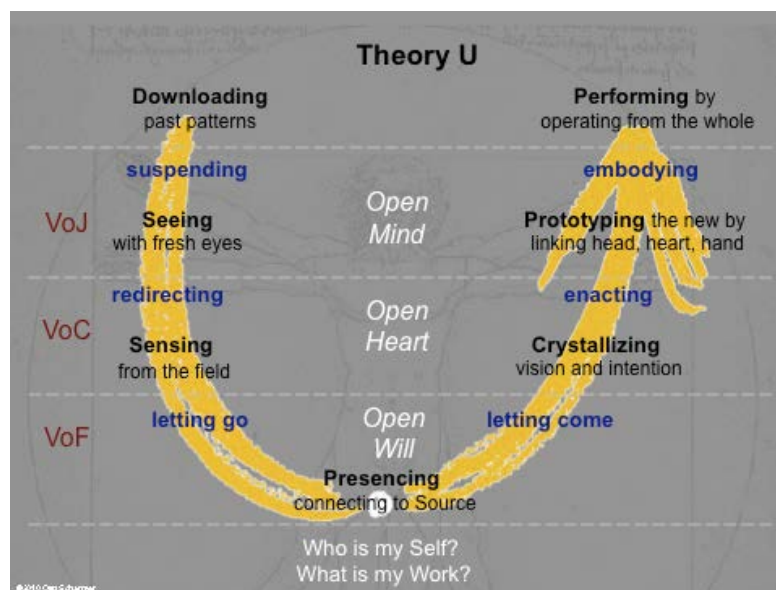
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**Figure 1:** Theory U (Scharmer, 2010, p. 6)



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**Figure 2:** *9 Steps of Reflection* as a tool for sustaining critical reflection  
(Author, 2012)

