

0360

Identifying the perceptions of young children on poetry using phenomenography.

Margaret Perkins

University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom

Background

The current emphasis in teaching poetry in the early years puts much weight on the value of rhyme and rhythm in supporting phonological awareness and increasing children's awareness of language. The Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (2008) mentions poems as texts to be enjoyed but identifies rhyme as the key learning focus. Indeed, some text books on early years literacy do not have the word 'poetry' in the index but only refer to rhymes.

The simple view of reading (Gough and Tunmer 1986) identifies two elements to reading which are taught in parallel: word identification and language comprehension. Much emphasis is placed on phonic teaching in the early years as the first approach to teaching reading and rhyme plays a significant part in this teaching. The emphasis is now moving to comprehension and the National Strategy has produced resources to support teachers in this. However, it is still stated that in the Early Years the emphasis is on word identification and teaching is 'staged' to give greater emphasis to comprehension as children become older. This is the likely explanation for the emphasis on poetry as rhyme rather than a literary genre in early years classrooms.

Research Questions

There are two main research foci in this project. One explores poetry in the early years and the other explores an appropriate methodology for accessing the perceptions of young children. The research questions are:

1. How do young children perceive poetry?
2. Can young children respond to poetry at a literary level?
3. Is it possible to gain access to the perceptions of young children?
4. Is phenomenography an appropriate methodology to use with young children?

Methods

Phenomenography is a research methodology established by Ference Marton who first used the term in 1981. It is designed to study people's perceptions of the surrounding world and the qualitatively different way in which phenomena are experienced. It has been defined as a study of 'human consciousness and experience' (Dahlgren 1995). In phenomenography the data are the understandings and experiences of a particular phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants. Hasselgren and Beach (1997) identified five different modes of phenomenography. This project uses discursive phenomenography which has a focus on determining the participants' understanding of the phenomenon and experimental phenomenography which uses texts or artefacts as a centre for discussion.

The majority of phenomenographic studies are with undergraduates and adults; there are relatively few with young children. Prammling Samuelsson (2000, 2002) is a rare example of a researcher who has used the approach with very young children.

The research presented in this paper covers work done in two Reception classes with children aged 4 - 5 years. The main data collecting method in phenomenography is interview. In this research

interviews held with individual and groups of children will be presented and also interviews where children commented on different types of poetry.

The paper will analyse the successes or otherwise of using the phenomenographic approach with very young children. The paper will include a discussion of the methodological approach and how it works with young children and the adaptations needed.

Frame

This paper looks to explore how young children perceive and experience poetry. The focus is on the children's perceptions and understandings of what poetry is rather than any accepted or recognised definition. Therefore the analysis of the data is iterative and interpretive. Data is formed into 'categories of description' which are derived from the raw data from the interviews. The categories are then presented in a relational 'outcome space'. The procedure for analysis is adapted from that identified by Dean (1994) with acknowledgement to Sandberg (1997).

The interviews are semi-structured. Both individual and group interviews are used; it is normal in phenomenographic research for the interviews to be individual and long. An adaptation of working with young children is to include group interviews and to have several shorter interviews. Analysis reflects on this adaptation.

In relation to poetry, the paper is written within a reader-response perspective (Rosenblatt 1978, Barthes 1974, Iser 1978) and a view of responsive reading as being an interaction between the text and the reader where the interpretive strategies of the reader interact with the text to create meaning.

Research findings

At the time of writing, the research is not yet completed and, due to the open-ended nature of phenomenographic research it is difficult to precisely predict the findings. It is hoped that the research will give insights into the perceptions young children hold of poetry and go some way towards addressing the question, 'Can young children respond to poetry at a literary level?' This could have a significant impact on practice in early years classrooms by developing understanding of what it means to comprehend a text and so explore the relationship between word identification and comprehension in the teaching of early reading.

It is hoped that a major outcome of the research will be to develop understanding of the phenomenographic methodology with young children. The proposed revision of the primary curriculum and the emphasis within primary practice on the whole child (Every Child Matters) and a child-centred approach can only really be effective if we understand how young children perceive the experiences they encounter. It is always difficult to obtain the viewpoint of young children and the phenomenographical approach might well be a valid way of doing so.