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Teachers' Understanding of Interactive Approaches in Special Education

MELANIE NIND
CATS, School of Education, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK

ABSTRACT *This paper considers the adoption of interactive approaches in the history of special education and addresses teachers' use and conceptualisation of interactive approaches. Teachers in special schools and units in the United Kingdom were asked whether they used interactive approaches and, if so, what this meant in their context. Interactive approaches were reported to be used by two-thirds of the sample and what this meant to the 58 respondents, from different areas of special education, varied considerably. Their responses are compared with the central elements of interactive approaches in the literature. Areas of consensus are discussed and a relative lack of emphasis on process amongst the teachers is identified.*

The development of interactive approaches represents a significant transformation in the relatively short history of the education of pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) in the United Kingdom. The importance of this is recognised by Garner, Hinchcliffe, and Sandow (1995):

> Special education has certainly moved on since the 1970s ... The interactive approach, particularly in relation to language and communication, has been driven by a strong research base. This approach has done much to reorientate teachers' attention from focusing on what children cannot do, to giving them more control over what they can do. (p. 89)

In this article some of the critical concepts that underpinned the original development of interactive approaches are compared with the understandings of a variety of teachers using such approaches more than a decade later.

The development of interactive approaches was informed by research about how normally developing children and infants learn best (Field, 1979; Sameroff, 1975; Schaffer, 1977); how children and infants with learning difficulties learn best (Calhoun & Rose, 1988, Hanzlik & Stevenson, 1986; Langley & Lombardino, 1987); about teachers' creative responses to challenging situations (Davis, 1985; Ephraim, 1989); and research about how teachers understand these situations and their responses (Hewett, 1995). The research base for interactive approaches continues to develop. New empirical analyses of the facilitative style of caregiver-infant

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interaction build on the major studies of the 1970s and 1980s (Beckwith & Rodning, 1996; Feldman & Greenbaum, 1997; Gable & Isabella, 1992; Papousek, 1995). Studies of interventions utilising this early interactive model proliferate (Mirenda & Donnellan, 1986; Nind, 1996; Watson & Fisher, 1997); and particular emphasis is now placed on the role of interactive partners in fostering communication development as a two-way process (Arthur, Butterfield, & McKinnon, 1998; Kaiser & Goetz, 1993; Siegel-Causey & Bashinski, 1997). The research discussed in this article was an attempt by the author to develop greater understanding of the ways in which interactive approaches are conceptualised, not just by the researchers and proponents of such approaches, but also by teachers in the SLD and wider special education field.

History of Interactive Approaches in the Education of Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties in the United Kingdom

It was not until the 1971 Education Act, which established in principle that no child was ineducable, that children with severe learning difficulties in the United Kingdom were formally included within the education system. The immediate goal of special education for these children, therefore, was to prove by results that they were indeed educable. Behavioural psychology offered a framework for day-to-day operation and record-keeping in the special schools and much emphasis was placed on systematic programs and behavioural approaches. However, by the mid 1980s problems were becoming apparent with what had become the dominant behavioural approach. Teachers were finding themselves uncomfortable with the mechanistic, sometimes harsh nature of their teaching practice (see Byers, 1994). They were discovering that not all areas of the curriculum could be reduced, through skills analysis, into observable behaviours, and that generalisation of new skills was an elusive crucial stage in the teaching process (Billinge, 1987; Wood & Shears, 1986). At the same time, interest in interactive approaches was beginning to gather momentum. Teachers were influenced by cognitive psychology and motivated by a desire to see more genuine learning taking place.

Collis and Lacey (1996) have provided a useful summary of this transition in thinking and identify several key markers in the growth of interactive approaches in the field of severe learning difficulties, including two key articles published in *Special Education* in the early eighties. In the first of these, "Education Without Understanding," McConkey (1981) argued that "education is more than activity and it should be more than 'product centred' teaching. Education entails the sharing of knowledge (understanding) so that the children come to use it autonomously" (p. 10). McConkey called for special education to really "educate;" to go beyond behavioural techniques and to learn from how children learn naturally in a way that allows them to acquire greater understandings. Smith, Moore, and Phillips (1983), in the second article aptly entitled "Education With Understanding," built on McConkey's position and raised awareness about the possibility of "mentally handicapped" (sic) children having their own goals, directing their own activity, developing their metacognitive processes, and being more than passive recipients of instruction and shaping. The authors used examples from research on the normal development model to illustrate that significant learning takes place in infancy in interactive exchanges and free play situations. Furthermore, they warned of the danger that "we may unwittingly put them [the pupils] in situations in which they are unable to participate in their own 'education"' (p. 24).

Later, in a collection of papers from the conference *Interactive Approaches to the Education of Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties* (also one of Collis and Lacey's key markers), Smith (1987) drew together the thinking and varied practical work of teachers in the UK developing these ideas. The interactive approaches that were represented here, and that have developed since, include interaction using computer technology (Bozic & Murdoch, 1996; Glenn, 1987); interaction based around movement routines (Burford, 1988); work on metacognition (Staff of Rectory Paddock School, 1983); interactive communication teaching (Coupe-O'Kane & Goldbart, 1998; Harris, 1987, 1993); early interventions focused on enhancing the enabling quality of everyday interactions (McConkey, 1994); and Intensive Interaction—a whole curriculum for pupils with more severe and complex difficulties based on the process of interaction (Hewett & Nind, 1987; Nind & Hewett, 1988, 1994).

In recent years several writers in the field have devoted attention to clarifying the trend from behavioural to interactive approaches and many of these (e.g., Collis & Lacey, 1996; Farrell, 1994; Garner et al., 1995) have advocated a mature marrying of the two. Much of the practitioner/research dialogue in the 1990s, however, has been given over to issues of curriculum content and curriculum access, rather than to issues of pedagogy and philosophy. The work of Smith (1991) and Sebba, Byers, and Rose (1993) on redefining the curriculum using interactive principles illustrates that this has not made the interactive debate redundant, but it has certainly been sidelined.

Development and evaluation of effective pedagogy in special education depend upon a clear conceptual understanding of what is needed for good teaching and learning. Interactive approaches emerged from a critical awareness of the importance of the social, dynamic basis of learning in ordinary development. The author designed the current study to address the question of where and how interactive approaches, and Intensive Interaction in particular, were being used. More importantly this was part of an examination of the critical notions underpinning the choice of approaches and the teachers' conceptualisation of them as interactive.

Method

Participants

Data were collected, through a questionnaire and follow-up interview, from teachers and headteachers in special schools and units from four counties in the UK (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and Oxfordshire). Of 118 questionnaires sent, 58 were returned. This low return rate may reflect a lack of interest in the issues, a perceived lack of relevance based on unfamiliarity with Intensive Interaction, or simply the demands on teachers—pressure on their time and the massive amount of paperwork with which they have to cope. The small sample, however, did represent a range of areas of special educational need including moderate learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties, profound and complex learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, specific learning difficulties, communication impairment, and autism. The follow-up interview sample ($n = 7$) comprised five teachers and two headteachers across the counties whose questionnaire responses indicated that they were using and interested in Intensive Interaction. In one interview the teacher was accompanied by a classroom assistant who contributed to the responses. These participants were all women who worked with pupils with either severe learning difficulties, profound and complex learning difficulties, or autism.

Procedure

The questionnaire was used to gather information on the size and type of school/unit, comments on familiarity with and use of Intensive Interaction, and a summary statement on the main approaches used in the provision. Participants were asked: "Are interactive approaches to teaching used in your school/unit?" followed by the open question: "If yes, please give details about what this means in your context."

The questionnaire was not time-consuming to complete and sought participants' immediate associations with the term "interactive approaches" from their perspective as teachers involved in their particular area of special education. Half a page was allowed for comment with responses ranging from utilising very little of the space provided to all of it. Greater emphasis on this one issue, with more time to reflect, would have generated qualitatively different data. The quick responses, though, generated data that allowed greater opportunity for inferring about the familiarity of the concept for teachers, how much this had been on their minds recently, and how this related to their current priorities.

The follow-up interviews were semi-structured and based around the opening question: "You said in the questionnaire that you used interactive approaches—what for you makes an approach interactive?" Interviews lasted from 12 to 25 min and took place in the workplace before or after school hours.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses in relation to the concepts of the main proponents of interactive approaches enables some understanding of the relationship between the main discourse on interactive approaches and the everyday understandings of a sample of over 50 teachers. This analysis, along with a more detailed look at the interview data, is intended to help to clarify what it is about interactive approaches that makes them *interactive* and perhaps even what it is about them that makes them an attractive pedagogical option for some teachers.

The author's own concept of an interactive approach was not made explicit in the questionnaire or interview. Teachers unfamiliar with Intensive Interaction were responding without having any real clues about the study's conceptual framework. In contrast, teachers who had read about or received training on Intensive Interaction were likely to have had some insights into this particular perspective. On this basis the author anticipated that there would be some difference in the ease and kind of response, but also that all respondents would be able to make some judgement based on the phrase "interactive approaches."

Results

What Teachers in the Study Understood by "Interactive Approaches"

Questionnaire data. Forty of the 58 respondents (69%) affirmed that they used interactive approaches and 11 (19%) used Intensive Interaction. Although first impressions indicated widespread support of a pedagogical approach or set of principles, further analysis of what interactive approaches meant for the respondents revealed a more complex picture.

Firstly, clearly not all teachers were familiar with the concept or phrase *interactive approach*. Responses indicating this varied from apologetic in tone to possible resentment that familiarity with this had been assumed.

- I am not clear about this terminology.
- I don't think I understand what you mean by interactive approaches.
- I am not aware of what is meant by an interactive approach.
- DON'T know WHAT YOU MEAN BY "interactive approaches," this is not a term known to teachers at this school.
- Do not understand the question.

Inability or unwillingness to respond to this concept occurred, with one exception, from teachers working outside the field of severe learning difficulties in which the main behavioural-interactive debate took place. These respondents were also often less forthcoming to a question about what approach was primarily used in their school. One of the schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) used a behaviourist approach, but otherwise the section was left blank or a very general answer given, such as "full range" or "class teaching." It is possible that there had been little discussion in these particular schools about their approach or, perhaps more likely, that the questionnaire had failed to connect with the respondents' own agendas to elicit a more thoughtful response.

Secondly, the range and variety of responses were extensive. This can be seen in the complete list of answers given in Table I. The literature indicates that the adoption of interactive approaches has primarily occurred in schools for pupils with severe learning difficulties. None of the 17 SLD schools said that they did not use interactive approaches, though one said that they did not understand the term, and three affirmed their use of them but did not expand on what this meant in their context. There was less use of interactive approaches, and more confusion as to their nature, in the other sectors. Of the 17 responses from moderate learning difficulties (MLD) schools, one indicated that interactive approaches were not used and four did not understand the term. In the albeit smaller EBD sample it was as common for interactive approaches not to be used ($n = 3$), or not understood ($n = 2$), as used ($n = 2$). Respondents working in provision for pupils with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) (SpLD) were slightly more likely to see their work as interactive (two not using, one not understanding, and five respondents using). Clearly the numbers here are small and trends inconclusive, but the data suggest that familiarity with interactive approaches is more widespread in SLD provision, and that in other areas of special education there is much individual variation. Reading and hearing about Intensive Interaction may be partly responsible for heightening awareness of interactive approaches in the SLD sector.

Despite the considerable variety in responses, in terms of the meaning of interactive approaches, some themes were echoed. Many of the teachers focused on the group situation, associating interactive approaches with one-to-one ($n = 7$) and small group work ($n = 7$), possibly distinguishing this from whole class work that may have been seen as more didactic. Sometimes the social aspect of interactive approaches was incorporated in the answers, but for others the interaction could be with equipment (especially computers), rather than with other people.

There is some resonance in the data with themes in the literature (see Table II). Many of the responses focused on the role of the pupil and, to a lesser extent, the role of the teacher in interactive approaches. Although expressed in different ways appropriate to the different contexts, emphasis was placed on pupils being active in the learning process, sharing control, and taking responsibility. These concepts were evident in almost half the responses and across the different areas of special educational need. The active pupil role was sometimes an explicit element and sometimes implied by the nature of the activity, such as “practical activities,” “problem-solving,” and “work experience.” Another theme recurring in the data and in the literature was the two-way nature of interactivity. This was apparent in responses about communication, game-playing, giving feedback, and responding.

Answers from teachers familiar with Intensive Interaction came from the SLD field and from provision that included children with autism. Some of these responses predictably associated interactive approaches with intensive activity, communication development, and play. There were also some references here to the more pervasive themes of the children being active and taking the lead. Just one respondent, in an SLD setting and familiar with Intensive Interaction, volunteered the issue of the process of the educational experience being more important than the product. This raises the question of what has become of this issue, crucial to the early move towards interactive approaches, but apparently less significant for this sample of teachers.

Interview data. The amount of detail given in the interview responses varied, but all respondents illustrated their points by referring to specific pupil(s) with whom they or colleagues had used an interactive approach. The interviewees were all users of Intensive Interaction or had read about the approach and had some training in its use. Nonetheless their responses to the question of what, for them, made an approach interactive were often tentative, for example, “that’s hard,” “I’m not sure what you mean” (RH). One (head)teacher (RC) turned the question around—“I need you to spell out your concept of interactive.” Another teacher struggled to remember what had been said about Intensive Interaction in a training event. Inevitably perhaps, given the context of the study, all the respondents related their answers to Intensive Interaction. For much of the time the interviewees relied on a

TABLE I. Summary of individual responses to the question about the meaning of interactive approaches (each grouping reflects responses from one school)

Summary of responses	School/ unit type	Familiar with Intensive Interaction
intrusive approach to social interaction	SLD	No
activity in multisensory suite individual work, particularly communication through games, IT, work experience and record of achievement	SLD +	No
TEACCH pupils setting own targets selecting own materials and equipment pupils working on their own	SLD +	No
communication accepted at whatever level/form child can offer intention is to reinforce child's effort with communication sensory materials and activities used	SLD +	Yes
intensive one-to-one	SLD	Yes
emphasis on communication pupil-led and teacher-led	SLD +	Yes
informal interactive play skills	SLD +	Yes
the way the task is carried out process not product playfully, encouraging interaction, games	SLD +	Yes
one-to-one work	SLD +	Yes
music, art and physical education	SLD +	Yes
pupils given as much responsibility as possible for own learning	SLD +	Yes
all pupils take active part in own learning pupils take responsibility for own learning pupils encouraged to take control by choosing teachers as enablers and facilitators	SLD +	Yes
choice of worksheets choice of order of work IT games	MLD	No
group discussion practical work brainstorming	MLD	No
individual support	MLD +	No
interactive computer programs	MLD +	No
group work computing	MLD	No
Intensive Interaction	MLD/autism	Yes
Social Use of Language program	MLD/autism	Yes
close teacher–pupil activity placing of learning responsibility with pupil instant feedback sharing of outcomes with group	MLD/autism/ EBD	No

TABLE I. *Continued*

Summary of responses	School/ unit type	Familiar with Intensive Interaction
participation video/CD rom	MLD/EBD	No
Individual Education Plans high level of teacher feedback	MLD/EBD	No
one-to-one exchanges role play turn-taking activities work experience school council responsibilities counselling/support	MLD/EBD	No
use of student responses giving the pupil control	MLD/SLI	No
individual tuition varied groupings practical activities brainstorming	EBD	No
first hand experience/trips out problem-solving/investigational work	EBD	No
teacher and pupil responding to each other pupils making decisions	SpLD	No
combined use of senses	SpLD	No
small group work/discussion one-to-one games/computer activity	SpLD	No
small groups meeting individual needs pupils involved in own learning encouraging positive responses	SpLD	No
computer	SpLD	No
interactive communication	SLI	No
Walden	SLI	No
working intensively with children teacher following pupil's lead as in mother–infant interaction	autism	Yes
shared attention musical interaction interactive language groups	autism	Yes
pupils taking active part in learning	HI	No
each student treated as an individual engaging on a personal level with each student	Mainstream +	Yes

Note.
SLD + = severe learning difficulties plus additional disabilities; MLD + = moderate learning difficulties plus additional disabilities; HI = hearing impaired; mainstream + = mainstream plus pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities

TABLE II. Features of interactives approaches in the literature and the study

Dimensions and Elements of an interactive approach	McConkey (1981, 1987)	Smith (1987, 1991)	Nind & Hewett (1988, 1994)	Collis & Lacey (1996)	Teachers in this study (SLD)	Teachers in this study (full range)
Roles						
Learner is active	√	√	√	√	√	√
Learner takes control		√	√	√	√	
Learner takes lead	√		√		√	√
Learner as novice or apprentice			√	√		
Learner as equal partner				√		
Learner takes on increasing responsibility for own learning		√	√	√	√	√
Learner makes decisions		√	√		√	√
Teacher as more experienced/expert			√	√		
Teacher as facilitator of learning process	√	√	√	√	√	
Sharing of knowledge and understanding	√	√			√	
Relationship						
Close interpersonal relationship			√	√	√	√
Emphasis on respect			√	√	√	√
Context						
Meaningful	√		√	√	√	√
Social	√		√		√	√
Enjoyable	√		√	√	√	
Safe	√			√		
Games	√	√	√	√	√	√
Activity						
Chosen by learner	√		√	√	√	√
Intrinsically motivating	√		√	√	√	
Game routines	√		√	√	√	√
Pedagogy						
Close observation	√		√	√	√	
Giving/receiving feedback	√		√	√	√	√
Emphasis on understanding not skill	√	√	√	√		
Emphasis on process not product	√	√	√	√	√	

description of their own practice. Two of the respondents began in this way, but then attempted to extract the interactive components. Only one teacher (CB) was able to go straight to an interactive principle with confidence.

The sometimes uncertain nature of the responses may primarily reflect the perennial problem of the interviewees' desire to please the researcher. Even acknowledging this dimension, the tentative responses indicate that, despite involvement with Intensive Interaction, the principles of an interactive approach did not come to mind readily for this group of interviewees. This may reflect a divorcing of educational practice from educational theory that may, in turn, reflect a need for studies like this one, that attempt to resurrect the discussion of the theoretical basis for interactive approaches.

Responses about what made an interactive approach interactive for the interviewees included the following.

- Two-way communicative exchanges—"taking the child forward into turn-taking ... a conversational approach" (JW); "it needs to be two-way" (JW); "a means of communication" (AB).
- Eliciting a response from the pupil—"no matter what the difficulties are that the child has we can usually get some kind of response [through Intensive Interaction]" (AB).
- Teachers giving an individual response based on observation—"to me it's very much based on observation. It's very much an individual response" (RC); "starting where the child is and taking it from there" (JW).
- Joining in with the pupils' interests at their level—"fun games together" (AC); "doing what he [the pupil] wanted to do" (AC); "going right down to their level" (JC).
- Being sensitive and responsive to signals and cues—"seeing those key triggers" (RC); "it's about listening in its broadest sense, with every bit of you" (RC); "valuing a child by responding to all the sounds she makes" (AC); "so if you've started to actually get a response from a child and it becomes a turn-taking and a response led by a child then you start to tune in to what the child is actually doing and then I think it becomes interactive" (JW).
- Trying to see the world as the pupil sees it—"getting under the skin of the pupil;" "trying to get to know a pupil" (JW).
- Active participation—"about participation and choice" (RH); "where everybody involved is participating actively" (CB).
- Pupil choice and decision-making—"teachers not being in control all the time or making all the decisions" (RC); "pupils making decisions" (RC); "about participation and choice" (RH); "we try not to be in control all the time" (RH).
- Closely focused and intensive work—"a time when we can be intimate together" (AC).

As one might expect this more homogenous group of respondents, with informed use of a specific interactive approach in common, gave a more homogenous set of data. Here the ideas have much in common with some of the key principles of interactive approaches as advocated by some of the main proponents (Collis &

Lacey, 1996; McConkey, 1981, 1987; Nind & Hewett, 1988, 1994; Smith, 1987, 1991).

What is Understood by Interactive Approaches? The Perspectives of the Main Proponents

In his paper for the key conference *Interactive Approaches to the Education of Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties*, McConkey (1987) teased out some of the beneficial educational elements of interactive games: focused attention of participants; repetition; models and examples; feedback; activity which is child-initiated and child-maintained; and a context that is friendly, meaningful, and simultaneously safe yet exciting. In their training materials Collis and Lacey (1996) built on these elements, and on the work of Smith (1987, 1994) and Nind and Hewett (1994), and attempted to clarify what constitutes an interactive approach.

Collis and Lacey (1996) described some of the different ways in which interactive approaches have been interpreted and offered their readers theoretical themes as well as practical descriptors. They emphasised interactive approaches as being fundamentally underpinned by the role of the learner as active and taking control.

> Central to all definitions of interactive approaches is that learners are *active modifiers of the information they receive* … In most cases this will mean engaging with other people but it can also mean actively engaging with things. It is vital that *the learner's brain is actively engaged in a given task.* (p. 9, their italics)

They linked learners taking control with them being enabled to become independent thinkers able to affect their own lives. These central elements, they argued, have fundamental consequences for teaching:

> Interactive approaches can encourage students to show self-regulatory behaviour through enabling them to confront problems themselves with understanding and active decision-making. Teachers need to begin by providing much of the regulation but their aim is to pass this over to students so that they are eventually taking control themselves. The teacher's style and role becomes one of enabling students to become active in their own learning. (p. 9)

In addition to these fundamentals, Collis and Lacey (1996) offered a set of principles for an interactive approach. These principles are clearly influenced by a reaction to the behavioural approaches with which there are elements of comparison (e.g., learning is contingent upon good interpersonal relationships; it is a process-based approach in which the quality of teaching and learning is as important as the performance of the objectives; it is based in intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic reward). In a third layer of detail, Collis and Lacey added some common features of interactive approaches, such as positive cycles of success breeding success and use of games and everyday routines. By this stage teachers using the materials for professional development may have gained a general picture of what interactive approaches are, but may have lost any sense of clarity regarding the main definition.

The next focus in their text, however, is the roles of teacher and learner in an interactive teaching situation and some of this clarity is regained. The reader can surmise that an interactive approach is one that involves the teacher in the role of expert and facilitator, utilising an enjoyable context for learning, and sharing control of the learning with the learners, who take increasing responsibility for their own learning.

The teachers in this study, although not systematically, similarly offered thoughts about interactive approaches at a range of levels, from fundamentals to principles, common features, and defining roles. Table II brings together a range of thinking on interactive approaches, relating the concepts in influential texts with the concepts of teachers in this study. Most consensus emerges around the learner being active, in the context of games, with the activity being chosen by the learner. Emphasis on understanding and process, rather than skill and product, is an issue in the literature, but not for the teachers in the study.

Discussion

Several issues arise from consideration of the findings of this study about the need to understand the conceptualisation of interactive approaches. Firstly, there is a danger that teachers can use an approach in a formulaic fashion, as if carrying through a recipe for teaching. This could potentially limit the success of the approach and the extent to which it could be used in new settings, with different learners, and with genuine understanding. Unless approaches are used with genuine understanding they are unlikely to have a lasting impact on practice. The literature indicated that use with understanding, rather than formulaic application, would be the case for interactive approaches and the findings confirmed this. Furthermore, the adoption of an interactive approach has been documented more in terms of a transformation in teachers' practice and thinking. Garner et al.'s (1995), chapter dedicated to "Teachers using Behavioural and Interactive Methods" gives some insight into teachers' feelings about the transformation:

> When I first started teaching students with severe learning difficulties, I was introduced to behavioural methods. Although I recognised their use in teaching some skill, and I felt it gave me a structure to cling to when I was new to the job, I felt uneasy about teaching communication through behavioural methods. … [and later] For the first time my intuitive feelings about teaching were reflected in an educational approach. 'Intensive Interaction' gave me the structure, the principles and the strategies to work with children in ways in which I could believe in (W.I.). (Garner et al., 1995, p. 85)

Similarly, in reflective essays on the use of Intensive Interaction (Hewett & Nind, 1998), practitioners have often commented on a kind of transformation in thinking:

> The effect of Intensive Interaction on the department and on all who worked within it was dramatic and altered all aspects of our work to a

> greater or lesser extent ... there is an improved and more equal relationship between staff and students. (Stothard, 1998, p. 163)
>
> We had to learn new skills as teachers for this kind of activity ... We had to have a more responsive role and follow Ben's lead. ... As we were using this approach focused on Ben, we found that we were becoming more flexible and confident in working with the group as a whole. We were observing better the behaviours of the other pupils and responding to these behaviours more sensitively. We were learning to take advantage of 'communication moments' ... (Knott, 1998, pp. 191–193)

Some of the teachers interviewed for this study expressed similar views about fundamental changes to their practice and about being more comfortable with their practice. RH said she read about Intensive Interaction and "was really excited about it" and "it made me think differently." AC said "we did begin using it [Intensive Interaction] in its pure form but I think it's become part of our whole school philosophy." AB commented "no matter what the difficulties are that the child has we can usually get some kind of response, so it's a combination of learning about it [interaction], putting it into practice and finding it works—that's the reason why we use it." The findings indicate that these users of interactive approaches, in common with previous accounts, were changed by being introduced to interactive approaches and were committed to them as both *effective* and as *compatible with how they wanted their teaching style to be.*

This leads into a second, related reason for the need to understand teachers' conceptualisation of interactive approaches. There is a danger that a fashion or new approach in teaching can be adopted because it is the current trend, without full understanding of the critical notions underpinning the approach. In this scenario interactive approaches, for example, become synonymous with all that is good—in the opinion of the individual teacher. Thus rather than formulaic application, one would see an interpretation of interactive approaches that allows them to fit the teacher's own practice and thinking. Rather than being problematic, this could be a healthy development, preventing the approaches from becoming static or rigid. Conversely, of course, in this interpretative process, some of the original critical thinking could be lost.

The author anticipated that interactive approaches might be being reconstructed by teachers. The findings from the study are informative on these issues of understanding and application. The responses were never critical of interactive approaches and, as shown in the accounts above, they indicate that interactive approaches, where used, have been internalised and amalgamated with notions of good practice. The teachers in this study had not added any new theoretical elements to their conceptual understanding of what it is to be interactive. Individuals had, however, prioritised different theoretical elements and they had developed their practical understanding of the ways in which important concepts, such as shared control and active engagement in the learning process, could be enacted.

A finding that may be of greater significance, however, is that one of the fundamental concepts of interactive approaches was under-represented in the responses and may be becoming lost. The concept of the process being more important than the product received no mention beyond the field of SLD. This could be related to the reaction against behavioural approaches and objectives-based curricula (Billinge, 1987; Hewett & Nind, 1989) as peculiar to the SLD field. Even within the SLD sample and the detailed interviews, however, the importance of process was more implied than explicit. Considering the current rhetoric about raising standards and achievement in the UK, and the use of target setting for schools and achievable objectives for pupils (this time across education as a whole and not just special education), perhaps this is to be expected. Such a climate is likely to place a strain on process-based curricula and may partly explain teachers' reluctance to use the language of process.

Exploration of teachers' conceptual understanding of interactive approaches allows some comparison of the views of teachers about effective interactive pedagogy with those of researchers. This is important as, although the initial wave of research in interactive approaches was very closely linked with the critical appraisal and development work of teachers in the field, following on from this the understandings of teachers and researchers could have developed in tandem or they could have diverged. The teachers in this study who used interactive approaches did so despite continued government intervention in issues of curriculum and pedagogy driven by a different set of motivations and strategies. Those teachers who dissociated themselves from interactive approaches, through negative answers or non-response, may have been more strongly influenced by a thrust to return to basic short-term objectives. Further inquiry would be needed to ascertain this. Also beneficial would be further study to illuminate how some teachers (represented in the questionnaire responses) are blending their preference for interactive pedagogy with current policy, by involving learners in a shared process of setting and reviewing targets together. More in-depth analysis would reveal how necessary the concept of process is for these teachers and whether they are using or developing creative concepts like Eisner's (1985) "emergent ends" or Dewey's (1910) "flexible purposing" which attempt to combine structured purposeful activity with open-ended process-based learning.

Summary and Conclusion

There are increasing expectations for research to have social validity (Gray & Denicolo, 1998); to have value for society and for the individuals involved. The need for studies to benefit the subjects of the research is not something one would or could easily contradict. The author intended this study to benefit teachers by contributing to analytical reflection on practice and, in turn, to benefit pupils who need teachers to continuously engage with the process of refining their teaching approaches, to address the quality of their interactions, and to recognise the contribution of an interactive approach.

Two-thirds of the teachers in the study affirmed that they used interactive approaches. These teachers were represented in all the areas of special education. The ease with which the respondents engaged with the idea of an interactive approach varied enormously. There were also variations in what the teachers said interactive approaches meant to them. They identified some important elements or central principles of interactive approaches. There was some agreement amongst the sample that interactive approaches were about pupils taking an active role in their learning, sharing some of the responsibility for this, choosing the activity, and about the social and game elements, together with the giving and receiving of feedback. The facilitative role of the teacher in the process of the pupil developing an understanding, rather than being taught a skill, was less explicitly important to the respondents than it has been in the literature. Proponents of interactive approaches (including this author) have criticised the relevance and worth of the outcomes, as well as the route to achieving them, in special education of an earlier era. As advocates of interactive approaches we have stressed the inter-relationship between the quality of the learning process and the quality of educational outcomes for students with learning disabilities. By illustrating how interactive approaches are currently being used and conceptualised this article establishes a starting point for exploring what has happened to this critical debate and, to some extent, begins to regenerate it.

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