

The learning child



B. Sc. (Hons) in Childhood Studies Module-The Learning Child. Module Code-FC3S005 Tutor-Mair Sinfield. Assignment Title-Research Critique Hard to Reach Engaging Fathers in early Years Settings.

The aim of this essay is to critically evaluate a published research article, analysing methodologies and identifying strengths and weaknesses within the research paper. It will attempt to relate the findings to implications for practice within the working environment. The essay consists of two sections.

Section one will focus on critiquing the chosen research paper and section two will examine its application to current practice and propose recommendations for future development. The framework used to conduct this critique is A Framework for Critiquing Qualitative Research (Rees, 1997). The research paper explores the concept of Engaging Fathers in Early Years Settings and looks at the reasons behind fathers being hard to reach. This subject area is interesting and could provide opportunities to investigate whether there is a link between the reluctance of fathers to interact in the Early Years environment and the limited academic achievement of boys in schools. The report used for this critique is from a recent study which was published by the University of Derby in conjunction with the Preschool Learning Alliance on the 11th of May 2009. The title of this article is; ??? Hard to Reach Engaging Fathers in Early Years Settings???.

The author(s) of this report are; Andrew Saunders, Ruby Oates (University of Derby) and Tim Kahn and associates (Pre-school Learning Alliance). www.derby.ac.

This is a qualitative study, which seeks to build upon previous research, containing primary data used to explore and examine the views of fathers and early years practitioners regarding experiences of early years settings and how it manages father involvement. According to Dunsmuir and Williams (1992) the most common primary research resources are: social surveys (questionnaire surveys and/or informal or structured interviews) and observation of participants as in this particular qualitative study. The objective of the study is to examine opinions and experiences of fathers and early years practitioners and to explore the fathers familiarity with and self-confidence in the setting environment in the hope that it will open up many areas for future development such as making settings more father friendly by listening to them and acting on their prior concerns.

The abstract is concise and focused. It provides the reader with a clear overview of the research topic and the methodology used within the study. The study itself does not pose a testable question as it wouldn't be expected in a qualitative study. It contains enough preliminary information to enable the reader to ascertain the purpose, and results/conclusions of this piece of research.

The research question is: What are the reported experiences of practitioners and male care-givers surrounding their everyday encounter in the early years setting? The purpose of this research is clearly identified as the importance of fathers being part of what goes on daily in early years environments, and the reluctance of fathers and early years workers to accept and respect the vital role fathers play in their children's lives and

in education. The literature review of the research article focuses on three main areas; Father involvement in families, father involvement in Early Years services and Father involvement in Early Years setting-informal communication. After analysing the literature on fathers and their involvement with their children, the review concludes with what other research has found about informal contact between practitioners (mostly female) and fathers in early years settings, setting the scene for the current research. The research builds on two separate pieces of work which were the pre-cursors to this pilot research. According to Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), Pilot studies are a crucial element of a good study design. Conducting a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study, but it does increase the likelihood.

The author identifies that this is limited exploratory research to analyse and make sense of the everyday interactions between practitioners and fathers in early years settings. This report also illustrates the lack of previous research into how early years practitioners view their relationships with fathers. It seems that the author has reviewed a sufficient amount of literature however, some of it dates back to over ten years ago and although this does not de-value the research paper, it should be taken into consideration. The reading material used in this study is quite extensive and is indicative of the overall study content. The study presents a variety of literature that supports the researchers'™ position. This research was carried out using focus groups and one-one interviews with practitioners and fathers.

This is a valuable method of information gathering in a qualitative study as it is able to extract rich, thick data and gives an in depth understanding of participants' attitudes and experiences. Small focus groups and one-to-one interviews are an adequate way of collecting information in a qualitative study as many people would feel intimidated if questioned in larger groups and the validity of the information could be compromised as the urge to fit in with peers can sometimes outweigh the importance of personal opinions. Focus groups and interviews are also able to generate deeper and more meaningful discussion and the focus groups are more cost effective as they obtain information from a number of people at one time. They can however, be difficult to arrange as the people involved often have other commitments leading to time constraints. All research methods have benefits and limitations. This is especially true of qualitative methods because the research tends to be less structured and the results harder to interpret than those of quantitative techniques Chanimal (2004). The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes each.

The research took place in four counties in the UK Midlands between October 2007 and April 2008 which means the information gained can be generalisable to the Midlands but not to wider society. The study could be repeated in other areas to establish reliability and generalisability on a wider scale; however the results would probably be the same. In total, 41 people were interviewed. 35 female and 1 male practitioner, and seven fathers in different contexts. In addition four fathers were surveyed by e-mail; only three responded and although their responses are included in the research they were not counted which could be seen to compromise the validity of the

study. The number of practitioners involved in this study seems to be extremely high, especially considering the subject area. The focus is supposed to be on examining the experiences of fathers and while the opinions of practitioners are valuable, they don't really give insight into the reasons for reluctance of fathers to engage. Also, the majority of the practitioners were female, possibly due to a shortage of males working in the early years.

To address the research question, a higher number of fathers could have been involved to make up a higher percentage of the overall cohort adding to the credibility and validity of the study. There was also very little research done on the background of the participants with regard to age, level of experience and academic achievement which would all have an impact on the overall dynamics of the study group. An understanding of group dynamics is essential for effective practice with any type of task (Ronald, Toseland Lani V Jones . Zvid, Gellis, 2004). The transcripts were analysed in terms of themes and threads which allowed the researcher to draw out the themes that he felt were present or implied by what the participants did or did not say.

This could also impact on the validity of the results as they are open to the interpretations of the researcher and do not rely solely on fact. The researcher(s) followed the University of Derby ethical guidelines (University of Derby 2008) and paid particular attention to the explanation of the issues of prior informed consent, anonymity, data management, right to withdraw and validation. Signed agreements were obtained prior to the beginning of data collection which enabled the use of participants' words in the report.

Bailey et al (1996: 4) state that, 'Research ethics refer to the responsibility of the researcher to make sure that the participants are not harmed by the research...

and that 'ethics are principles or values pertaining to rules of good and bad behaviour. Ethical behaviour is good or right behaviour. Unethical behaviour is bad or wrong behaviour'.

The researcher identifies some practical initiatives and the continuing professionalisation agenda in UK early years workforce development. The article illustrates (mostly negative experiences or perceptions) the intimidation felt by fathers and suggests the urgent need for interventions aimed at prevention as most settings seem to be predominantly female environments. It is a relevant topic within child care, development and education as it focuses on the early experiences of fathers of children in nursery settings. The researcher states that the study, although successful from a practical and methodological point of view would need to be improved if the study were to be replicated.

This was a reliable study which could be repeated on a larger scale and produce similar results. The study was valid and tested what it set out to test. On the whole, the research is sound.

There are no graphs, statistics, tables (other than the dynamics of the group) or any other visual resource to appeal to the visual learner. These would have been possible if there had been specific questions for the participants to answer thus making it easier to interpret the results. However, this is a qualitative study which does not require measurable results. It would be

interesting also to see the same study on a larger scale, with specific questions. The vast majority of the article was taken up by transcripts of the interviews which, although made for interesting reading were very vague, again due to the absence of any answerable question. The research method was appropriate to the nature of the topic but could have been used in conjunction with other methods such as longitudinal case studies to enlarge on the amount of information obtained. The inclusion of surveys might have been beneficial to the study as it would have allowed for answers to specific questions in addition to the broad responses transcribed in the study.

The study identified a sense of social change in what fathers roles are in caring for their children and some fathers felt that despite this they were still not properly included in the early years setting. Both practitioners and fathers identify the settings as being a female domain which meant fathers were intimidated by the experience. Developing services to support fathers' relationships with their children is immensely important work and what better place to start than in the Early Years. In the past, bringing up children and involvement in their education has traditionally been seen as the role of the mother.

This theory has been challenged since the United Kingdom (UK) Government in 2004 stated an intention to include fathers in all aspects of a child's well-being. Since this time efforts have been made to include more fathers and encourage them to become more involved with their children's education and as a result these relationships seem to be improving in some areas however, in a report published by the Children and Young People Committee in May 2009, it was suggested that, ??? The Welsh government

should provide clearer direction to schools and authorities on the need to involve parents, particularly in terms of working with fathers and harder-to-reach groups??? (National Assembly for Wales 2009: 37). An issue affecting many children in Wales today is poverty. Many of the children in the UK are living in areas of deprivation. To enable children to escape this situation, and indeed the vicious circle of family deprivation, education and aspirations are vital. In a report from the Fatherhood Institute, it was identified that; whatever the fathers education level, his interest and participation pays off for his children. Blanden (2006) cited in Fatherhood Institute (2010) found that a father??™s low interest in his son??™s education, reduces his boy??™s chances of escaping poverty by 25%. In 2007/2008, 32% of children in Wales were living in relative poverty, which equates to around 205, 000 children.

During the late 1990??™s the percentage stood at 36%, however, most of this has been amongst those who are in severe poverty, which means that many are living on less than 50% of the average median income (Child Poverty, 2009). One setting that has embraced the opportunity to involve fathers in the education of their children is an Upper Rhondda Primary School. It has been running its ??? Superdads??? group since 2001 where children and their fathers (or other male family member as a father figure) meet at the school on a weekly basis and enjoy some quality time and a variety of activities together. Page A et al (2009: 65) stated that ??? The school reports that a few fathers who had previously had negative communications with the school have completely changed their attitude towards school and towards their children??™s learning and well-being as a

result of being in Super dads???. There was an attempt by an Upper Rhondda Comprehensive School in April 2010 to recreate the success of the feeder school when they launched their initiative to involve more fathers in the children??™s secondary education by holding a ??? Dads and Lads??? evening.

The aim was to get dads and their adolescent, male children to communicate more effectively and spend some quality time together. According to Goldman (2005: 12) ??? There is consistent evidence to support the fact that fathers??™ interest and involvement in their children??™s learning and in schools are statistically associated with better educational outcomes for children, including better exam results, better attendance and behaviour, and higher educational expectations???. Greater father involvement has also been associated with better social and emotional outcomes for children.

The benefits of father involvement are not only seen from an educational perspective, there are benefits to the child??™s health too. Until recently, fathers were the hidden parent when carrying out research on children??™s well-being. According to Garfield C, Isacco A (2006) The importance when looking at children??™s financial well-being was widely accepted, but their contribution to other aspects of children??™s development was undervalued. In a research article published by the department of paediatrics in Illinois in April 2006, it was stated that ??? Father Involvement is associated with improved weight gain in preterm infants and improved breast feeding rates???.

This is not really anything new. The importance of fathers was identified by Lamb over thirty years ago in 1976 when he stated that ??? Fathers are the forgotten contributors to child development???. Lamb also suggested that fathers assume multiple roles in families and influence children in multiple ways. The influence ranges from enhancing children??™s internality and cognitive development, to helping to shape their gender-role identification and also encourages more positive psychosocial adjustment. This notion was echoed some twenty years later in 1998, in a Home Office Ministerial Seminar on ??? Boys, Young Men and Fathers, the Minister stressed that ??? probably the single most effective way of helping young men was by encouraging the involvement of their fathers in their lives???. (O??™ Brien M , 2004: 11).

Furstenberg (1995) believed that Fathers seem to be often faced with a number of obstacles to being involved with their children, including high rates of unemployment and joblessness, early childbearing outside marriage, an unremitting succession of negative life events, and the absence of positive male role models. Men clearly want to be there for their children and their families, but they are sometimes hard pressed to specify exactly what being there means in terms of activities, behaviours, and contributions to family life. This lack of preparation and parenting support limits the options open to fathers as they determine the amount and type of involvement they will have with their children. Even when fathers do not share a home with their children, their active involvement can have a lasting and positive impact. Developing father-friendly services is not rocket science, but it is a challenge (Burgess A, Bartlett D, 2004: 26)This underpins the reason for the

research paper and the value placed on father involvement. The benefits of it on a child's overall health and well-being are abundantly clear.

However the research article itself doesn't really provide a reason why some fathers find it so difficult to engage as the study focused more on the opinions of practitioners.

If services are determined to reach out and involve more fathers the first step should be to find out what is preventing them from being involved currently, whether it be work commitments, lack of confidence or any other issues. The research study in this instance does not do that. To conclude, low academic achievement in school age boys in particular could be improved with the involvement of more fathers in educational settings. Fathers' interest in education would provide the children with adequate role models and positive views of education. It is a topic that is relevant worldwide and is also not solely beneficial in the educational field but from a health perspective also.

Three in ten five-year-old boys have trouble reciting the alphabet and one in five are unable to count to 10, according to statistics representing England and Wales ([www. Guardian. co. uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)).

To improve services and to involve more fathers, further research needs to be done, particularly exploring views of fathers in relation to involvement with their children. Recommendations made are that barriers to involvement need to be identified and efforts should be made to reduce those barriers and make pre-school and school based environments more father friendly. Many fathers are at work during the daytime so evening or

weekend clubs to specifically target these dads could be a possibility. More training needs to be made available for practitioners specifically on how to positively engage with parents (fathers in particular) and how to recognise and challenge their own attitudes to the involvement of fathers to enable them to reach out to those that are particularly hard to engage. As stated in this study ??? the expertise of practitioners is a key determinant of the quality of the encounter???. There seems to be a need to encourage more males into the early year??™s profession.

If settings were not seen to be exclusively for females, many fathers may feel more comfortable engaging with the setting. Reference List Bailey V et al (1996) Essential Research Skills London Collins Educational Burgess A, Bartlett D, (2004) Working with Fathers Department for education and skills Chanimal (2004) http://www.chanimal.com/html/qualitative_research.html (Accessed 12-9-2010) Child poverty (2009) [http://www.denbighshire.gov.uk/www/cms/live/content.nsf/lookupattachments/English~DNAP-7U6EAA/\\$File/APAP%202009-12%20Eng.pdf](http://www.denbighshire.gov.uk/www/cms/live/content.nsf/lookupattachments/English~DNAP-7U6EAA/$File/APAP%202009-12%20Eng.pdf) (Accessed 12-9-2010) Children and Young People Committee (2009) Parenting in Wales and the delivery of the Parenting Action Plan National Assembly for Wales Department for Children, Schools and Families, Early Learning, Gender gap. cited in [www.Guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/jul/29/early-learning-gender-gap) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/jul/29/early-learning-gender-gap> (Accessed 12-9-2010) Dunsmuir and Williams <http://www4.caes.hku.hk/acadgrammar/report/resProc/research>.

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