

Children as partners:
Children's perspectives
on parental involvement



Sharing our experience

Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

PLR0809/015



This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

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- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

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Lynnette Chapman and Jim Wood
February 2009

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to the Children's Workforce Development Council who provided funding for the research as part of the Practitioner-Led Research Programme 2008/2009.

Thanks also go to Debbie Watson from Making Research Count for providing research advice and input to the project.

And of course thanks to the children and staff of the school where the work was done – it makes no sense without their involvement!

Contact for further information about the study:

Jim Wood
Educational Psychologist
Iddesleigh House
97 Heavitree Road
Exeter
Devon
EX1 2NE

Telephone: 01392 686300
Email: jim.r.wood@devon.gov.uk

Lynnette Chapman
Research and Evaluation Manager
Early Years and Childcare Service
Kingfisher House
Western Way
Exeter
Devon
EX1 2DE

Telephone: 01392 386556
Email: lynnette.chapman@devon.gov.uk

Contents

Abstract	6
Introduction	7
Aims of the project	7
National context	7
Methodology	9
Findings	12
Implications for practice	17
Conclusions	20

Abstract

This research explores the extent to which the child's voice (aged seven to 11 years) can be included as part of the integrated working agenda. In particular, it considers whether children's views can be collected around the area of parental involvement in their children's education in order to inform policy and practice.

The study aimed to consider the following research questions:

1. How can we best capture the child's voice as part of the integrated working agenda?
2. How can we best measure parents' involvement in their children's education from the child's perspective?

A self-completion questionnaire was completed by 113 children from a school in an area facing deprivation and poverty. The questionnaire was developed to explore the extent to which children were able to reflect on and answer questions about parental involvement. The focus of the questionnaire was to measure involvement and joint activity between the child and an adult in the household. Data collection for the study was carried out in a school setting.

The study demonstrates that children are able to give their views on parental involvement and that a questionnaire is an effective and efficient means of collecting their views. However, future research might consider the role of qualitative methods and how they might complement and add to quantitative information about parental involvement from the child's perspective.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that there is great scope to include the child's voice as part of integrated working and to a greater extent than currently takes place. Children are well placed to provide an insight into parental involvement and questionnaires can be a fun and effective way for them to share their perceptions and experiences.

Lynnette Chapman and Jim Wood
Hampshire Educational Psychology Service

Introduction

This report considers how children's voices are represented as part of the integrated working agenda. In particular, the research considers how the child's voice might be heard. The research focuses on the child's experiences and the level of shared activity that takes place between parent and child.

Aims of the project

The project aimed to answer the following questions:

- How can we best capture the child's voice as part of the integrated working agenda?
- How can we best measure parents' involvement in their children's education from the child's perspective.

National context

Parental involvement is central to children's development and outcomes (Hango 2005). Parent involvement in a child's education is positively related to levels of progress in school, especially in the primary phase (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Evidence indicates that parents with high levels of involvement are usually those of higher socio-economic status (SES). Consequently, schools in areas containing parents predominantly from lower SES backgrounds may report lower levels of involvement and this may affect attainment levels. Parental involvement is therefore relevant to schools as it may affect the progress children make. For schools this may be important, as it can influence the 'value-added' component in league tables.

The importance of links between home and school is recognized in policy (The Children's Plan 2007) and research in this area has been extensive. Research has explored the relationship between parenting and child outcomes, pupil achievement, behavioural issues, and different types of involvement (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). A range of methods have been used when looking at the area of parental involvement which include observations (NICHD 2000; Sylva et al. 2003), questionnaires (Arnold, Zeljo and Doctoroff 2008) and interviews (Baker and Scher 2002). Few studies have attempted to gain the child's perspective on parental involvement.

Defining parental involvement

When discussing research in this area, it is important to define the term 'parental involvement' and to consider what types of parental involvement are most beneficial for children. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) discuss the importance of distinguishing between different types of involvement and note that 'at home good parenting' has the biggest impact on children's achievement and adjustment. Sui-Chu (1996, *in* Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) notes that parental involvement can explain differences in academic achievement above and beyond that explained by any effects associated with family background.

Measuring parental involvement

The measurement of parental involvement is not new. However, the majority of measures start by asking parents about the type and level of activity that they do with their child. This may introduce bias into the information collected. There is a great pressure as a parent to be seen to be a 'good parent', and this may bias the responses that parents give, which are often based on self-report methods. Some studies (Sylva et al. 2003) have tried to overcome some of these biases by using a mixture of self-report and observation.

A Home Learning environment (HLE) measure was used in the study for the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al. 2003). This study found that after age, HLE had the strongest effect on cognitive development. This effect was stronger than social class or the mother's highest qualification.

Few studies have measured parental involvement from the child's perspective, especially with younger age groups. As a key partner in the integrated working agenda, it is important that children are able to give their perspective. This study therefore seeks to contribute to the current gap that exists in children's perspectives on parental involvement.

Researching with children

There has been a rise in the interest in childhood studies and 'hearing' the child's voice. Children are increasingly seen as social actors in their own right, and their views as valuable and 'authentic' (James 2007: 261). However, 'hearing' the child's voice is not without difficulties. Some of the difficulties noted by James (2007: 262) include:

- *How to ensure the child's voice is authentic*
Often those collecting data will choose which parts to share, and will interpret, decide and define the 'important points'.
- *Assuming there is a single child's view of the world*

In striving to collect information from children there is a danger that the diversity of children's voices can be ignored (age, class, culture etc).

- *How to include the child's voice*
There are many power differentials to be considered when researching with children. James (2007: 262) questions whether using children as researchers leads to more authentic and accurate messages.

The issues discussed above are relevant in deciding how best to obtain the views of children. These will be discussed further in the next section 'Methodology'.

Methodology

Selection criteria

The study aimed to explore children's perceptions of their parent's interest and involvement in their education. Children needed to be of an age and level that allowed them to be able to respond to certain questions. There was, therefore, a focus on children who:

- could read to a limited extent
- had begun to develop ideas about how they differed from other children
- had developed abilities to consider their situation within the family
- were unlikely to have moved away from the family as significant others
- were of an age when parents were likely to be able to demonstrate their interest.

Children in the sample were aged seven to 11 years (Key Stage 2).

Local description

The school in the study was interested in how it might understand and increase parental involvement. The school is situated in an area facing deprivation and poverty. One of the researchers was the school's educational psychologist at the time of the study.

Study design

A self-completion questionnaire was used to collect data from children taking part in the study. This method of data collection was chosen for the following reasons:

- Short time-scales for the research lent itself to a quantitative approach.
- The study aimed to see whether it was possible to elicit children's views in a similar way as in the case of parents. So, instead of asking parents

to self-report levels of parental involvement, can the same be asked of children?

- A self-completion questionnaire allowed the collection of data within a school setting with minimal disruption to the school day.

The questionnaire focused on the levels of involvement and joint activity which took place between an adult and child. A decision was taken to ask about children's experiences of involvement from an adult in their home, rather than specifically asking about a parent(s). This was to avoid ambiguity and sensitivity that might arise where children live with a range of different family types and people (eg grandparents, older siblings, lone parents, step-parents). It was felt that an older adult in the home might have a potentially positive impact for a child, despite not being the child's parent.

Before designing the questionnaire, the work of the EPPE study (Sylva et al. 2003) was considered. This study focused on asking parents about a range of different types of involvement. Our research aimed to explore whether it was possible to ask similar questions of children and in doing so ensure that their views as partners in the integrated working agenda were included.

When considering which questions to ask, the area of cultural relevance became apparent. The school under study was located in an area of disadvantage and cultures relating to parent involvement may vary to those in other, perhaps more prosperous, areas. If a longer time-scale had been available then a qualitative approach would have been used initially to check out items for cultural relevance prior to data collection.

In seeking to hear the child's voice, the study aimed to establish whether it was possible to design a questionnaire to 'capture' those elements which are so often asked of parents only. An attempt was made to improve on previous processes by asking children directly, rather than asking parents, and therefore include their views as part of the integrated working agenda.

Parents' responses may be subject to bias; there is much pressure to be a 'good parent'. By asking the child directly it was hoped that more valid and reliable responses might be obtained. However, it is recognized that children may also feel a pressure to conform to what they feel is 'normal'. This is acknowledged as a potential limitation for the method chosen.

Administering the questionnaires

The questionnaire was made into a PowerPoint presentation so that each question could be displayed in class. This was used for the first three (of six) classrooms and not used afterwards as it was found to be unnecessary. The only support given to children was in the reading of the question and response boxes. If a child asked for clarification this was given. Assistance was kept to the minimum necessary for the child to understand and choose which box to mark. Data collection was carried out on two afternoons in early December 2008 by one of the research team (Jim Wood) in agreement with teaching staff.

The research was introduced by asking children about their understanding of projects. This seemed to engage them as they identified some of the approaches and methods they had used in 'projects'. Thus, the role of the researchers and the methods being used were explained. The idea of confidentiality was talked about, in terms of their understanding, as was the issue of 'consent'. Only six children actively withheld their consent.

Children not participating were asked to select a book for reading to themselves and not singled out in any other way. Some children expressed a little disappointment in the idea of a questionnaire but were quite happy to participate – it seemed they were hoping for something much more exciting!

Ethics

The guiding principles for the study were informed by the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2003) and an ethical opinion sought from a university before proceeding with the fieldwork stage. The work was considered to be part of the school's development, parents were provided with an information sheet and asked if they wished to withdraw consent (written) prior to data collection. Three parents withheld consent. Children were also given the opportunity to opt out of the study and six choose to do so.

Data was stored securely and password protected. Great care was taken to ensure that no individual taking part could be identified. All data has been stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Findings

In total, 113 questionnaires were completed by children in the school. Children were able to decide whether they wished to take part in the research, and only a small number (6) choose not to take part. Boys accounted for 45.0 per cent of the sample, while girls made up the remaining 55.0 per cent.

The following section outlines the key results and findings from the questionnaires.

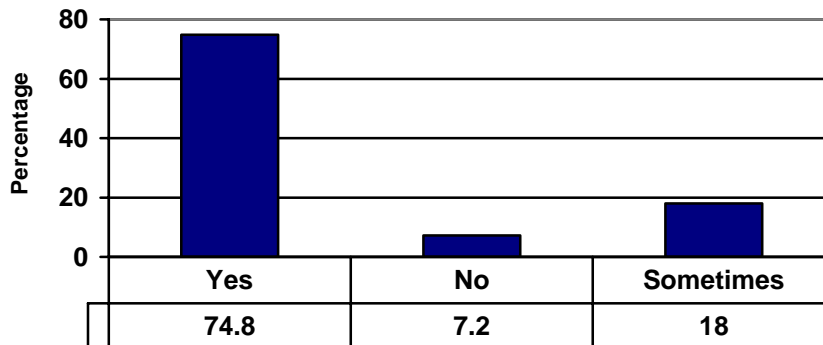
Reading and literacy

A number of questions were asked that related to reading and literacy levels in the home. The questions aimed to explore firstly, the extent to which reading activities took place in the home, and secondly, the extent to which joint activities surrounding reading took place.

Children reported that they do see adults in their home reading. So, for example, 74.8 per cent reported that an adult in their home reads the school

newsletter. In addition, 69.0 per cent of children reported that they see an adult in their home reading a book or a newspaper. The majority of the children in the study can therefore report the experience of seeing reading take place in the home.

Does an adult at home read the school newsletter when you bring it home?



Joint activity between adults and children around reading appears to take place less often. Reading does take place in the home, but in a large number of families, adult reading and child reading appears to be kept separate.

For example:

- 65.5 per cent of children reported that adults do not read to them
- 67.3 per cent of children reported they never visit the library with an adult from home
- 46.8 per cent of children reported that no-one at home listens to them read.

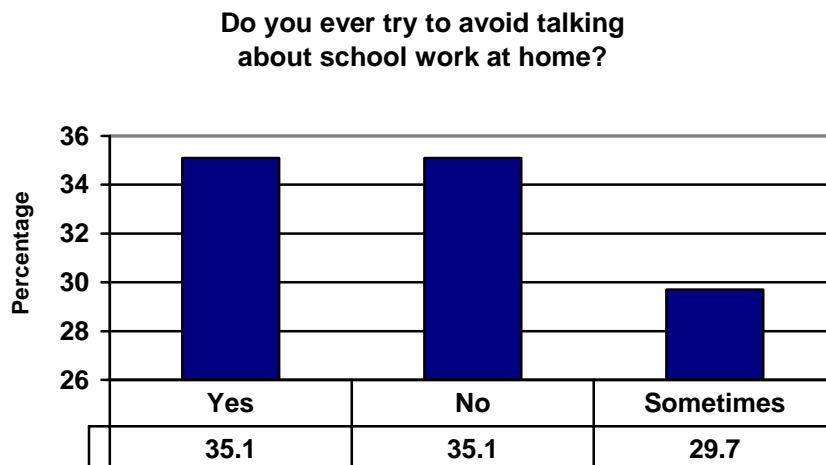
The school is located in an area likely to have low levels of literacy. Some reflections on the data regarding reading and literacy include the following points:

- One question asked about the reading of newspapers and books. Newspapers can often be read by people with a low level of literacy, while books may require a higher level of literacy. It may be that the results of this question are misleading.
- A high proportion of children report that they are not read to at home (65.5 per cent). This may be for two or more reasons. First, it takes more confidence to read to a child than to simply listen to them read. Reading to children may also become less common as children's ages increase and they become independent readers. The impact of age was explored through the data and there was a relationship between age and the extent to which a child was read to. However, within this data there were also children of all ages who reported that no-one read to them at home (eg 11/24 Year 3s and 20/32 Year 4s reported that no-one read to them at home).

- Many children report that they do not visit a library with an adult from home. This needs further exploration with the children so as to understand the situation in greater depth. Perhaps children already have lots of good books at home, or instead use the library at school?

Child’s control over interaction

As with previous research (Deslandes 2002, *in* Desforges 2003), children in the study exercise control over the extent to which adults in the home interact and discuss areas such as school work. Over a quarter of the children reported that they do not like adults at home asking about their school work. In addition, over one-third of children also reported that they try to avoid talking about school work at home. There was no significant difference found between boys and girls for this area.



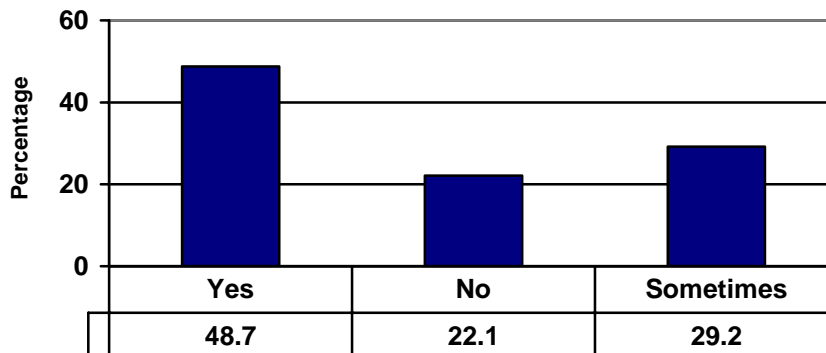
Physical environment and resources

A number of children in the sample lack an appropriate physical environment and resources for their school work. Children were asked about whether they had a quiet place at home in which to do their homework. Only 45.9 per cent of children reported that they had a quiet place at home in which to do their homework, 31.5 per cent reported that they did not have a quiet place, and a further 22.5 per cent reported that they sometimes had a quiet place to do their homework.

Support for learning

Children were asked about whether an adult at home purchased items and equipment to help them with their school work.

Does an adult at home buy you things to help you with your school work (e.g. pens,rulers, pencils etc)



Just under half reported that an adult at home did buy them equipment to support them in this way. However, over one-fifth of children reported no equipment being bought, while a further 29.2 per cent reported that an adult sometimes bought them equipment.

Other elements of support were also explored. Many, 90.2 per cent of children, reported that an adult helped them with their homework at least on an occasional basis. A significant group (9.8 per cent) reported no help. When asked about whether an adult at home checked whether they had done their homework, 61.9 per cent of children reported yes, 16.8 per cent reported that an adult sometimes checked, while 21.2 per cent reported that no one checked whether they had done their homework.

Perceived Levels of Interest

The questionnaire asked about perceived levels of interest of an adult in the child's school work. For example, children were asked whether an adult at home took an interest in what they did. at school. The vast majority reported that an adult took an interest on at least an occasional or regular basis (91.1%). A small but significant group (8.9%) reported that no adult took an interest in what they did at school.

Children were asked whether an adult asked about the day at school. Many, 92.7 per cent, reported an interest on at least an occasional basis. A small but significant group (7.3 per cent) reported that no adults asked them about their day at school.

Joint activities

A number of questions asked about activities which take place either as a family or as a joint activity between adult and child. The majority of children report that an adult in their home takes part in activities with them as a family or with them individually. However, there is a small but noticeable group who

report a lack of engagement or involvement for many of the areas asked about. For example:

- 8.3 per cent reported that they did not go on outings and trips
- 15.3 per cent reported that adults do not join them to play a fun game.

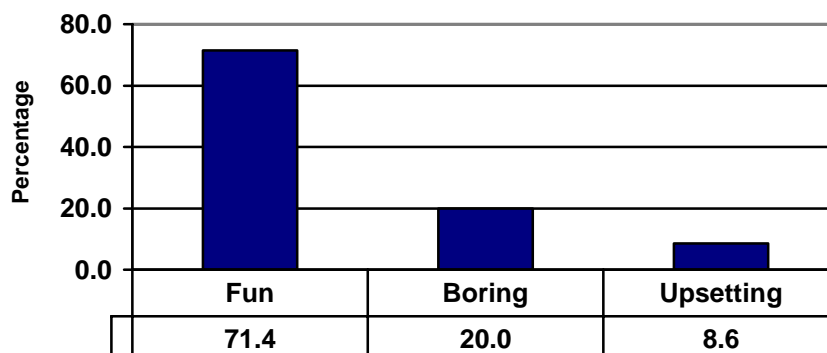
Experience of school

There were mixed results to the question that asked children about their perceptions of whether adults in their home enjoyed school. A fair proportion (41.8 per cent) of children reported not knowing whether adults in their home enjoyed their time at school or not. This may demonstrate that there are a fair proportion of adults who do not discuss school experiences with children in their home.

Feelings about the questionnaire

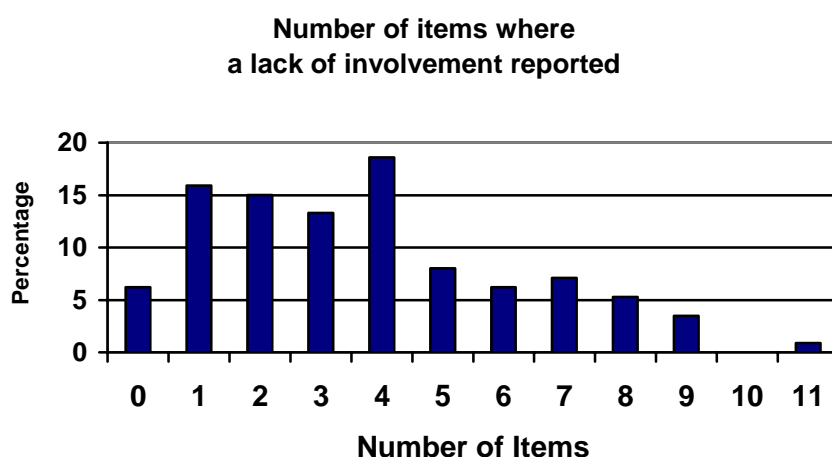
A question was asked about children's experiences of completing the questionnaire. There was no significant difference in the experiences of children according to gender or according to the perceived levels of interest reported by adults. The following responses were received:

Answering these questions was....?



It is positive that a large proportion of children found the questionnaire fun, but further consideration needs to be given to those children reporting that they found it boring or upsetting. The data showed a significant relationship between the reported experience of completing the questionnaire and age. Older children in the sample were more likely to find the questionnaire boring than younger children. Over half of all children finding the questionnaire boring were in year 6 (11/21).

A brief and preliminary analysis considered the number of times children reported that they had no engagement from an adult in their household. Just under 70% of children reported a lack of engagement in up to four areas. The remaining children reported a lack of interest in five or more areas. Further analysis would need to be done to establish what would stand as an appropriate or expected level of involvement. This would need to be informed by qualitative research about the reliability of each of the items under consideration.



Implications for practice

This section looks at the data that has been collected and reconsiders the research questions that were set out at the start of the report:

- How can we best capture the child’s voice as part of the integrated working agenda?
- How can we best measure parents’ involvement in their children’s education from the child’s perspective.

Methodology and data collection

Self-completion questionnaires were developed for use in the school to gain the perspectives of children on adult involvement. The benefits of this approach are noted below.

- Questionnaires were found to be an appropriate method of gaining children’s views. In general, children found it easy to understand the questionnaire. The use of clip-art and few questions per page proved useful as this served to ‘illuminate’ the text and locate the specific question they were answering. Some children needed another adult to write the responses to one of the open-ended questions. All support was

provided in a neutral way, allowing the children to answer as they wished.

- The items selected for inclusion were informed by previous research (Sylva et al. 2003). Content and response options were simplified to ensure comprehension and to improve ease of administration. This seems to have been achieved.
- Questionnaires were an effective means of collecting data. They could be easily administered in a school setting without taking too much time from the teaching schedule. Other benefits of using a school based approach was that data collection for a number of children could take place with ease. In addition, contact with parents regarding the study could be made through existing contact systems used by the school.
- Most children reported that the questionnaire was fun to complete. However, a different style of questionnaire should be developed for future studies for older children, as they were the age group most likely to say they found it boring.
- Explorations of adult involvement through parent self-report or through professional observations can be open to bias. Asking children directly about their perceptions of parental/adult involvement, although not free from bias, established the child as a key partner in allowing their views to inform discussion and contribute to a broad notion of integrated working that includes the child as a partner.

The tensions and limitations of choosing to use a self-completion questionnaire within a school setting to gain children's views were as follows.

- It was important to simplify questions for the questionnaire. In doing so, some questions and response options became overly simplistic, which can impact on the validity of the data collected. It is possible that children may have managed more complex questions, yet it was important to consider the age of the youngest children when designing the questionnaire. A cautious approach was followed, rather than risk losing data as a result of lengthy or more complicated questions or increasing the length of the questionnaire.
- The use of a quantitative approach was efficient and convenient but could not provide the depth provided by a more qualitative approach. There is a tension between listening to the child's voice and allowing them to give their views as part of an integrated working perspective, and then using a quantitative approach which predetermines the areas to be considered. The study aimed to take a first step in improving the opportunity for a child to comment on parent involvement, rather than as is usually the case, simply hearing the parent's views.
- Given the limited scope of the study, there was no opportunity to compare the findings with a school in a different area. There was not the

space for consistency checks or time for extensive piloting to see whether different children had the same interpretations of the questions. Further work would need to be carried out to see whether the approach taken would work in other settings (school or non-school) and cultures.

Other reflections on the process include the presence of teachers during data collection. This was useful in assisting the small number of children needing support, in addition to the researcher. The other advantage included managing general seating preferences and avoiding potential problems such as disruption or difficult behaviour. However, it is possible that the presence of teachers may create an 'observer effect' and influence the answers children give.

Ethics and consent

Ethics and consent were of utmost importance for the study given the children's ages and the sensitivity of the area under consideration. It was felt important that both parents and children were given a choice as to their involvement in the study. It was fortunate that the school was interested in both pursuing the issues and viewing this as a part of children's development. If the researchers had been completely external then this would have raised the need for a complete 'opt in' approach with consequent risks to the level of participation. Even where parents had given consent, children were also given an option about participating in the study.

Most children found the questionnaire fun. However, it is important to note for future studies the small number of children who reported finding the process upsetting. A qualitative approach might be beneficial and provide children with a greater opportunity to say if they were finding the questions difficult or upsetting.

Another area of importance relates to power relations between the researcher and the 'researched'. There is inevitably an imbalance of power between those designing and carrying out the study as adults, and the children who took part. The imbalance in power relations was further increased by the location of the research (within a school setting), where adults make the rules and are in control.

Integrated working

This study demonstrates the potential for the child's voice to be heard to a greater extent within the integrated working agenda. Discussions around integrated working can sometimes be limited simply to adults in their role as practitioners or as parents. Often missing from these discussions is the voice of the child which, through this study, has proved to be collectable, for this age group at least.

The study also demonstrates the scope for working together across different professional boundaries, for example, research and policy working alongside

educational psychology and teaching staff to explore an area of importance. The next stage for the research is to explore with the school how the findings might be applied to encourage parent and adult involvement as part of the home learning environment.

The study contributes to the continuation of integrated working which includes the child's voice in the next stage of the study. The dissemination of the results will be used as an opportunity to explore children's views, feelings and beliefs further. This is a necessary next step as this will provide important corroboration for earlier work – or challenge perceptions – about what benefits children most.

There is also potential for the lessons from the study to be applied as part of the integrated working agenda within the local authority. The study will help to focus attention on the importance of the home learning environment and the child as an able key partner in the integrated working agenda.

Conclusions

Few research studies to date have considered how best to measure parent involvement from the child's perspective. This study aimed to explore whether it was possible to collect information about parental involvement from the child's perspective and the extent to which children's voices can be included as part of the integrated working agenda. The study has provided a valuable opportunity as part of a practitioner-led project to consider issues in partnership with a range of others, so that knowledge might be generated to inform policy and practice developments in this area.

In conclusion:

- Children are an important part of the integrated working agenda and this study has demonstrated one way in which their views can be included.
- Although the potential for bias needs to be considered, children in the study were able to provide an insight on the extent of parental involvement they experience.
- This study provides a first step in considering how to include children's views as part of the integrated working agenda. Further research to explore this area needs to consider how the methods used here might be further developed, and the contribution of qualitative methods to this area of study.

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