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Childhood defined by utility: the impact of agency in primary education practice.

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29th March 2011

Background



- Ongoing ethnography in an urban primary school for EdD studies
- Purposive sampling: 4 teachers and 2 TA's
- Observation and interviews
- Interest in practice with fathers

Father involvement in education



- A growing consensus that fathers have an important role to play in children's education and care (Lamb, 1987; 1997; Ryan, 2000; Flouri, 2005; Dunn, 2008)
- Correlation between positive father engagement at six years of age and IQ aged seven (Gottfried et al, 1988)
- Fathers involvement with their children's learning and school is predictive of a number of positive educational outcomes, for example, in enhancing literacy (Clark, 2009) and in supporting good behaviour in school, educational progress and attainment and aspirations (Goldman, 2005; Blanden, 2006).

There is no doubt

- Of the positive mediating effect of father closeness and involvement on a child's overall development including for esteem, emotional and psychological adjustment, locus of control and the ability to establish and maintain relationship (Fagan and Inglesias, 1999; Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; Lamb, 2004; Pleck, 2004; Flouri, 2006; Geddes, 2008; Sarkadi, 2008)
- That father involvement is indicative of educational and social mobility (Amato, 1993) with such positive educational outcomes particularly significant for children from low income families (Yeung, 2004).

UK policy and legislative framework



- 'Every Child Matters' agenda (HM Government, 2004)
- National Family and Parenting Institute review (NFPI, 2005)
- Guidance to teachers and schools to encourage engagement of father's in their children's education as a means to enhancing attainment (DfES; 2004, 2006, 2007)
- need to involve fathers in their child's development and education as a means to improving attainment, social mobility and poverty reduction (DCSF, 2007; DCSF/Department of Health, 2008)
- Indeed the need to involve fathers is enshrined in legislation, for example, in the Childcare Act 2006 and the Equality Act 2006 as amended by the Equality Act 2010.

Most recently



- ‘We will however make available information on best practice and ‘what works’ for improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and I am clear that a valuable use of the [pupil] premium would be schools investing in ways to encourage parents, including of course fathers, to engage in the education of their children.’

Sarah Tether, Minister for Children and Families, to the Fatherhood Institute on 23 March 2011

Fathers experiences

- Many perceive barriers to their involvement in their child's education or school with concerns including; 'clashes with work commitments', 'having to rely on the mother to pass on information' and 'too many women involved' (Henderson, 2007).
- The then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families also spoke of his own experience as a father going into school when he 'admitted that dads could feel left out. "I've been to a Friday morning music assembly and been the only dad. Once you're there it's fine, but when you walk in it feels a bit intimidating to be honest."' (BBC News Online, 07/05/08).

Male practitioner's view

- *When they come in and it's all nice pink pastel colours and flowers and women are walking around everywhere, middle class women, the children, all 26 children are screaming, and they're all painting and paint brushes everywhere ... I got to think that this guy has worked 20 years in shipyard, he's just become unemployed. I know his child's on free dinners. What is in it for him at the center? [sic] In that situation there is nothing ... he's gonna feel threatened you know. There's nothing for him when he does come. He's not gonna feel comfortable.*

(Warin, 2006, p. 527, cited by Honig, 2008, p. 670)

Analytical gaze



Researcher:

- Personal
- Professional
- Political

Teachers'

- Agency
- Social structures
- Cultural

Miller and Russell 2005

Kitzinger (1995, p. 302) adapted



- *Highlight the respondents' attitudes, priorities, language, and framework of understanding;*
 - *Research participants own analysis of common experiences;*
 - *Variety of communication from participants-tapping into a wide range and form of understanding;*
 - *Open conversation about embarrassing subjects and to permit the expression of criticism*
 - *Operation of group social processes in the articulation of knowledge*
 - *Ideas and experiences that might be otherwise left underdeveloped;*
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- *To help to identify group norms and cultural values.*
- Inspiring tomorrow's professionals

Highlight the respondents' attitudes, priorities, language, and framework of understanding



- P1. *Working with dads... hmm... in a general way a lot but not in a specific way. Maybe not so much.*
- P2. *Dads, I don't meet many. [Pause]. Except the one's who want to confront you.*
- P3. *I have a few dads who work in the classroom. Well... a granddad!*
- P4. *I haven't had much to do with working with dads. I see them when they come to pick the kids up.*
- P5. *I've not worked with dads in particular.*
- P6. *My main contact with parents? Not a lot.*

findings

- Father's were not very visible in school and there was no active or unique policy or practice orientated to achieving effective father engagement.
- Openness to father involvement is insufficient - need to be proactive (Macleod, 2000).
- By elimination if dads have minimal contact with school then this space is occupied by mothers. Mothers are the significant parent in relation to their children's schooling (Reay, 1998; Crozier, 1999).
- Father contact mediated through mother preference (Palm and Fagan, 2008) thus reinforcing normative definitions of parents and father role
- a narrow consideration of father as a biological relationship

Research participants own analysis of common experiences



- *I think dads are a bit frightened of coming in. We are an all female staff and they think education is a female role. The other thing is we tend to come across a bit scary. We are assertive. (P1).*
- *The dads who come in are the ones we can rely on most, we don't make an effort with others (P4).*
- *The males in school aren't as reliable as the female helpers. They're not always sure what day they can come in they're just there when they're there. It's the commitment week after week after week. (P3)*

findings

- Staff teams develop an environment that reflects the experience and culture of that team and consequently set the rules and norms within that environment (Palm and Fagan, 2008, p. 752).
- Performativity
- Entry this environment is likely to be on the basis that involvement and motivation is socially acceptable (Macleod, 2008).
- Practice wisdom – ‘the learned and shared assumptions that regulate people’s behaviour, such as communication styles and levels of co-operativeness’ (Hanson, 1995, p.210)

Power!



- *Dads, I don't meet many. [Pause]. Except the ones who want to confront you. (P6)*
- *Dads almost like to intimidate you and harass you. They want to stand over you [pause] to intimidate you. (P5).*
- *We could have more positive relationships with men not confrontational. (P5).*

Power!!

- Personal component?
- Teaching is much more than a cerebral process
- OFSTED inspection. These are extremely stressful events and more over associated with a loss of control and power on the behalf of teachers (Perryman, 2007)
- availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) - the tendency of people to take into account over other potentially relevant issues, those matters which are called to mind most readily within a situation

Variety of communication from participants-tapping into a wide range and form of understanding



Dads as problematic:

- *Not as interested in how they (their child/ren) are doing (in reception / key stage one) dad tends to be at the home visit (prior to entry to school) particularly if behaviour is a bit of an issue. (P3)*
- *When children have gone to stay with their father over the weekend the behaviour can be difficult on the Monday. It can take a whole day and a half to settle down / (Child) is frightened of his dad / Dad can indulge them for two days / When a new person is on the scene the children can have a problem. (P4)*
- *(Child) has issues when he can't see his dad. (P2).*
- *If you question her (pupil) she goes into shock he (father) questions her so much. Dad is so pressurizing. If you talk to her about it she goes into her shell. (P5).*

- the first time when colleagues from across the school had come together to specifically discuss the issue of father involvement and to listen to their range of thoughts and experiences.
- ‘naive dichotomy’ (Saracho and Spodek, 2008, p.832)
- One illuminating feature was the uncomfortable silence that followed the question, “what does the school do to promote positive images of men and dads?”

Open conversation about embarrassing subjects and to permit the expression of criticism



- *You do like the men coming into your room! (P4 to P3 in response)*

The discussion turns to father's day cards

- *I am amazed we ask the kids to make mother's day cards and not father's day cards. I guess it is because lots of them don't have a dad. (P4).*
- *I don't celebrate father's day. When you've lost a father like I have (pause). . . it's selfish I know. (P3).*
- *It's so PC. We think "what about kids who don't have a dad?" but (child) doesn't have a mum. (P5).*

- biological definition of 'father' and not one also grounded in wider social and cultural relationships
- much more than a cerebral process - emotions, prejudices, personal biases and distortions can impact upon practice (Smith and Nursten, 1998)
- cultural sensitivity versus cultural relativity

Operation of group social processes in the articulation of knowledge



- Two of the teachers in particular (P.1 and P.3) said more than the others
- represent the most senior staff (in terms of experience and role)
- KS2 and KS1 respectively
- Culture within a culture (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1996)
- P1 and P2, KS2, talked over P6, KS1.
- P3 feeling redundant
- Revealing tensions, censorship and internal power relations

Ideas and experiences that might be otherwise left underdeveloped



- Demographic and social trends
 - *It's a social thing. The situation is changing. More mums are working.*
 - *More mums drop off in the morning and more dads pick up in the afternoon.*
 - *A lot of step dads are coming to pick up the kids.*
- Father impact on learning and behaviour
 - *Quite a lot of fathers do homework with them (the children). The children enjoy that.*
 - *They do like it when they do things with their dad.*
 - *They do like male approval.*
 - *When the children were listening to his voice on the tape the noise levels went down.*

Ideas and experiences that might be otherwise left underdeveloped



- Ideas to enhance engagement
 - *The men in school like working in the environmental garden, they don't want to work in the classroom scenario. Maybe we could do more activities.*
 - *We get some coming on trips and dads are involved in football*
 - *Maybe we could do something with our bar-be-cue*
 - *We could try to make some events non academic based, there's the Spring Fair and. the bar-be-cue. It's when it's not about the child's work or behaviour.*

Group norms and cultural values



Many alluded to:

- Performativity
- Gender
- Communication
- Power
- Practice wisdom
- Normative definitions
- Stereotypes

— *...when dad's come in they like the attention they get. I put the kettle on and make them a cup of tea. (P. 3).*

For discussion: Is childhood defined by utility?

