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The 'Disengaged' and 'Underachieving' Boy?: Boys Early Educational Experiences of Pedagogical Practices

Introduction and Rationale

A considerable amount of research evidences a problem with educational underachievement, particularly in literacy and reading with boys in comparison to girl's achievement, not only in the United Kingdom but internationally (Marshall 2014: 106). Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Germany, France and Japan all express concern over boys faltering educational achievement with particular attention given to literacy (Gurian and Stevens 2005: 22; Weaver-Hightower 2009: 1). Unfortunately there has been less focus on achievement in early years and primary education in comparison to secondary education, not only in England but other countries also (Warrington & Younger 2006: 2).

League tables for primary education in England were published in 1996, 6 years after the National Curriculum was made compulsory in education, and this is when 'boy's underachievement' hit the media headlines and continues to dominate current educational policy (Mills et al 2009: 41). It was not until some 17 years later that statistical data was published for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage profile and again it was recognised boys were performing less well than girls across all areas of learning (DfE 2014).

Upon analysis of statistical data released for 2013 / 14 by the DfE (2014: 5) girls outperformed boys by 17% within the Early Years Foundation Stage profile with 69% of girls achieving a good level of development in comparison to 52% of boys. Nevertheless the data for 2015 showed a slight decrease in the gender achievement gap with girls achieving a good level of development at 74% and boys at 59%; a decline of 2% (DfE 2015: 4). The statistics for 2015 evidences both boys and girls have increased in achievement but boys at a faster rate (DfE 2015: 1). It remains to be a concern though that, boys continue to perform less well than girls in all areas of learning and not only mainly in literacy and reading. It is reported the biggest gaps are also in reading, writing, exploring and using media and material, being imaginative and managing feelings and behaviour (DfE 2015: 5), therefore literacy and reading remain to require attention within the achievement gap in early years.

If professionals working with young children do not provide appropriate pedagogical experiences during children's early education, then the achievement gap may continue and disengagement in boys may be apparent from the outset, and impact on the rest of their school life. This research aims to address the gap in knowledge and develop current research of 'The 'Disengaged' and 'Underachieving' Boy?: Boys Early Educational Experiences of Pedagogical Practices'. This paper will present an analysis and evaluation of the pilot study conducted to test out the methods of data collection to be undertaken with boys aged between 3 and 5 years old.

The specific aim relating to the pilot study is:

- Identify experiences of young boys pedagogical experiences and how these influence engagement in learning and development

The specific research question relating to the research is:

- What are boys experiences of pedagogical practices from Nursery (EYFS) to the end of year 1, key stage 1 (National Curriculum)?

The research aim and question are at this stage initial thoughts. They will become more focused, narrowed and revised as the research study develops (Flick 2014: 113) and an increased understanding of the study is addressed (Agee 2009: 432). These have been supported through the pilot study.

Theoretical Background

Pedagogical Practice: Play-based Learning versus Formal Learning Pedagogy

It is argued there is a lack of continuity in pedagogical practices between children in their early years and those in key stage one of primary education, resulting in a 'disjunction' in 'educational experiences' (see White & Sharp 2007, Fisher 2009; 2011). Key stage one has a formal approach to learning with lots of teacher direction (Fisher 2009: 131) whereas the Early Years Foundation Stage has a child-initiated play based learning pedagogical approach (White and Sharp 2007: 87). Research undertaken by White and Sharp (2007: 99) compared pedagogical practices. They came to the conclusion that children related to the play-based approach where they were active in their own learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage, whereas children in key stage one related to a work-based approach that was directed by

adults. Children 'regretted the loss of opportunities to learn through play'… and some worried about their ability to cope with their work-load in year 1 (White and Sharp 2007: 99). Children need to be ready to learn with the correct pedagogical practices in place and currently high on the political agenda is 'school readiness' (Neaum 2016: 239).

Neaum (2016: 247) relates to 'selection, sequence, timing and pace of learning' being required in order to ensure that pedagogical approaches are aligned with children's school readiness and preparation for this. These are associated to a 'performance pedagogical model' where pre-defined knowledge and skills are acquired for teaching and learning with children in their early years and very much controlled by the teacher (Bernstein 2000 cited by Neaum 2016: 247). A 'competence pedagogical model' is a contrasting model to that of the latter and emphasis is placed on a range of experiences by which the child has control over (Bernstein 2000 cited by Neaum 2016: 248). The expectation of this model is that learning can take various pathways within specific contexts and relationships (Neaum 2016: 248). These discourses are both very different pedagogical approaches and cause conflict and tension for those working in the early years sector, who are attempting to prepare children for school (Neaum 2016: 248).

It is argued that the child-centred play-based pedagogical approach within early years practice is moving more towards a formal schooling pedagogical approach (Robert-Holmes 2014: 303). This relates to Neaum's (2016) argument of differing pedagogical approaches causing conflict and tension in early years practice. Relating the argument of school readiness and appropriate pedagogical practices back to 'Boys Early Educational Experiences of Pedagogical Practices', the Telegraph reported, 'A major gender gap is emerging by the age of five, figures showed, with just 52 per cent of boys deemed to be prepared for school compared with 69 per cent of girls' (Paton 2014). The research project will deem to draw upon the preferred pedagogical practices of boys, which offer opportunities for boys to engage in their early years learning and development. Classical and contemporary child development philosophers and theorists will also be considered in the final research thesis.

Methodology

Interpretative qualitative methodology is the chosen epistemological stance for this research project; I have a real interest in exploring thoughts and perceptions of others and

interpreting meaning, which clearly relates to this paradigm (Holloway and Biley 2011; May 2011). My early research career is finding I quite naturally fall into the constructivist-interpretative epistemological positioning, which is seen as having a subjective approach, as the 'knower' and 'respondent' co-creating understanding in the natural world, known as 'naturalistic' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 24). Flick (2015: 25) relates to how the constructivist approach assumes that realities are studied through social interactions and achievements; there is understanding and interpretation within the relationship (Lee 2014: 407). I want to make a difference to practice and in order to do this I will need to build trusting relationships with my participants, which includes children, early years practitioners and teachers. The research relates to social research with a phenomenological approach.

Methods

Various methods of qualitative data collection will form and shape the research and for the actual research project it is my intention to work with practitioners and teachers in one statutory setting (school) that has nursery provision, reception & year 1 class and also a private nursery / pre-school. The latter will allow me to compare differences in pedagogical practices of the private nursery / pre-school and nursery school and experiences of 3 year old boys. Research undertaken in the reception and year 1 class will allow me to compare pedagogical practices used when planning for the Early Years Foundation Stage in reception class and National Curriculum in year 1. I also intend to follow the participant boys transition from reception class to year 1 in order to measure their engagement from play-based method of learning to a more formal approach. The methods to be deployed are:

- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and early years practitioners

- Walking tours and focus groups with 4 boys in each of the following learning environments: PVI nursery, school nursery, reception class and year 1 class

- Observation of pedagogical practice in the learning environment and the relationship between the teachers / EYP's and boys

It is predicted that the research will be undertaken over the period of one-year.

Pilot Study Methods

For the pilot study I tested the walking tours, focus groups and observation methods with boys in a private day nursery aged 3 years and boys in a year 1 class aged 5 years old. The walking tour included the boys showing me around their learning environment and talking about their likes and dislikes, whilst taking photographs that were used in the focus group that immediately followed on from the walking tour. This technique is related to the mosaic approach; 'a methodology that brings together verbal and visual tools to reveal young children's perspectives' (Clark and Statham 2005: 45). Due to the young age of the boys the walking tour and focus group needed to take on elements of play and creativity so the boys did not become disinterested and their focus maintained; asking them only questions may have disengaged them. The use of the photographs and having visual cues to prompt discussion was a useful aid to maintain concentration during both of the activities. It is considered that research methods involving children should take on innovative approaches, and the use of photographs to capture children's conceptions of their world is one (Einarsdottir 2005: 525). The method of observation proved successful during the pilot study therefore these will not be analysed and evaluated in this paper.

Pilot Study

Prior to carrying out the pilot study, it was decided that I would test the research methods proposed with the children, as these methods are new to any previous research I have conducted; it was therefore imperative to test these methods with the children. Children can also be very unpredictable, so I needed to not only test the research methods but also practice developing relationships with the children and managing their behaviour and expectations. Power relationships needed to be considered, as it is often seen that within the child: adult relationship, the adult holds the power (Einarsdottir 2005: 525). Nevertheless, because of the chosen innovative research method of using photographs Einarsdottir (2005: 525) argues that, this type of 'child-friendly' approach will allow the child to feel more at ease with the adult researcher. The children were also in small friendship groups for the walking tours and focus groups therefore this may have alleviated the child: adult power relationship, as they were comfortable with the support of their friends. It was however important to acknowledge each child and allow opportunity for each individual to

contribute to the discussion, as some children may dominate (Mukherji and Albon 2010: 51). This was managed through careful observation of the children and professional expertise in the field of working with children and learned strategies to deal with this potential issue.

Before the pilot studies were conducted three participant boys (3 year olds) were selected by the owner of the private day nursey and three participant boys (5 year olds) selected by the year 1 teacher in the school. Informed consent was sought prior to the data collection being carried out (please see ethics section below). The first pilot study was undertaken with the 3 year old boys in the nursery setting, followed by the second pilot study with the 5 year old boys in the school setting, approximately 4 weeks later.

Walking Tours and Focus Groups Reflection: Private Day Nursery (3 year olds)

The first hour in nursery was spent getting to know the children so they felt comfortable in my company. There were 12 children in the pre-school room and during the first hour most of them had talked to me, asking who I was and seemed to be happy with me being around. At around 10am it seemed a good time to get the 3 boys together in the 'quiet corner' to explain what activity we were going to do. I explained that I wanted them to show me around their nursery and talk to me and take photographs of their nursery (learning environment). Before starting the walking tour I asked them what they liked to play / play with at nursery and all three stated names of superheroes including PJ Masks and Power Rangers. When I asked if there was anything they did not like, two boys did not answer and one boy stated, 'sand'. Unfortunately, whilst I was asking questions we were constantly being interrupted by other children who wanted to participate. This did take focus away from the participant boys therefore on reflection we should have found an area where there were limited distractions and interruptions.

We moved on to the walking tour, but the interruption and distraction continued from the other children and they all became very excited and wanted to use the camera. This resulted in very little focus on what I was attempting to achieve and data that had very little meaning. Due to the research method being tested taking an unexpected turn, I decided to cease the activity, but continued to allow the children to play with the camera, as they were engaged in their play and learning. Flick (2014: 341) advises that the researcher needs to

manage the use of a camera and integrate it, attracting the least possible attention. Clark and Statham (2005: 48) also make reference to a research study that used cameras and walking tours with 3 to 4 year olds and these approaches were considered effective. On consideration of these points, had I visited the setting prior to the pilot study taking place, I may have been in a position to use the camera with the children and the novelty of a new 'toy' (the camera) may have become part of their everyday play, and the data collection method may have worked better.

Walking Tours and Focus Groups Reflection: School, Year 1 (5 year olds)

As with the first pilot study I spent approximately the first 2 hours in the classroom getting to know the children so they felt comfortable in my company. I had made the decision to carry out the walking tour and focus group whilst the children had their 'play-time' outside, and kept the three participant boys inside, so there was minimal distraction. This was because of the distractions in the first pilot study. On this occasion the data collection method was effective and worked well. I used a voice recorder, camera and camera on the iPad, and started by explaining to the boys what I wanted to do with them and explained what the voice recorder and camera were for. Initially, two of the boys were a little hesitant and said they did not want to be recorded so they played with the voice recorder for a couple of minutes, then said they were happy to be recorded. During the data collection the boys were focused and very relaxed, whilst taking photographs and talking about what they liked and disliked. After they finished taking photographs we sat at a table away from the other children, as they had returned from 'play-time', and completed the focus group discussion. This was particularly effective and we looked through the photographs whilst the boys talked to me about their likes, dislikes and experiences. Some examples of what they were stating included, 'I don't like writing my name 6 times and writing the short date', 'singing is boring and I don't like to be on the sad cloud and want to be on the shooting star' (reward chart) and 'don't like reading, it's too hard, I hate it'.

Upon evaluation of the method, I was able to select key words such as' 'hate' and 'boring' and also relate areas of learning environments the boys generally liked and disliked. At one point two of the boys related to their reception class experience of playing on the computer and how they liked to play 'Dangermouse' in reception class, but could not play this game

on the computer in class one, therefore no longer liked the computer. This method of data collection was effective with the 5 year old boys therefore will be used for the actual research with this age group.

Ethics

The research undertaken in this pilot study predominantly involved young children who are classed as being 'vulnerable' (BERA 2011: 6; ESRC 2012: 8) therefore it was imperative their vulnerability was considered, in order to keep them safe from harm. It was deemed necessary to get permission from children's gatekeepers (ESRC 2012: 9) who were their primary carers. Informed consent was gained from the participant boys parents and they were provided with an Information Sheet, explaining the research project and how their children would be involved in the data collection. It was also important that the children were made aware that they were participating in a research study and they had a choice as to whether they wanted to participate (Greig, Taylor and MacKay 2007: 174; BERA 2011: 6). Prior to the data collection activity the children were made aware through verbal communication, of their right to withdraw (in a child-friendly manner).

Final Thoughts

On reflection of the pilot studies it is apparent that different data collection methods may need to be used with 3 year olds in comparison to 5 to 6 year olds. The walking tour, photographs and focus group were much more effective with the older boys, in comparison to the younger boys. Nevertheless when the actual research commences and more time is spent with 3 year olds developing relationships and playing with a camera prior to data collection taking place, then this method may be effective, therefore I will try it again. Observation methods were effective with 3 year olds, hence this data collection method will certainly be used. The walking tour, photographs and focus group data collection method with 5 year olds will also be used. The pilot study has given me the opportunity test out the specific research aim and question, related to in the introduction and to test some of the data collection methods (Robert-Holmes 2011).

Research which involves young children is seen as being imperative for understanding their lives (Clark and Statham 2005: 45; Graham et al 2013: 13) and since the late 1980's it has become more accepted that children should be able to represent their own viewpoints from

their own perspective (Mukherji and Albon 2010: 48). Referring to this Reichert et al (2009: 60) states 'If you want to tell it like it is, you have to hear it like is', when discussing problems of boys education and this is exactly what I hope to achieve.

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