Engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in children's early educational transitions: A UK perspective

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Abstract
Findings presented here relate to the evaluation of an innovative one-year pilot project in an area of multiple deprivation in the north of England, the goal of which was to engage fathers and male carers in their children's transition from an early years setting to formal schooling to enhance children's enjoyment, achievement and learning at this critical early stage of development. The project was successful in engaging men, recording 76 male attendances at activities during the project period, 19 of which were recorded at school-based activities, following transition. Strategies found to be effective in engaging men at a strategic level were partnership working with an expert agency on male inclusion and the use of a highly gender differentiated approach. At an operational level, successful approaches included the use of a highly individualized, strengths-based, empowerment orientated approach, within a partnership context, implemented by an extremely skilled Fathers Transition Worker, complemented by intensive follow-up contact via mobile phone, the use of male orientated activities and the engagement of mothers, as well as fathers.

Literature review

Father involvement and child outcomes

Marsiglio et al. (2000) commented on the increasing research and policy focus on father involvement in their children's upbringing which has emerged in recent years. Reasons for such a trend are beyond the scope of this article but relate largely to the increased presence of women in the workplace (Stanley, 2005) and a rise in the notion of the 'child-centred' family, predicated on the notion that children require particular types of support from parents in order to grow and develop (Huari and Hollingworth, 2009).

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There have been various attempts to define and operationalize the concept of involvement in relation to fathers over the years, one of the first and most influential of which was provided by Lamb et al. (1987). They introduced three dimensions to try to capture the notion of involvement, namely 'interaction', that is, time spent in direct interaction with children, 'accessibility', relating to the general availability of fathers to their children, and 'responsibility', as in being aware of the child's cognitive, social emotional and physical needs. As Lewis and Lamb (2006) noted, this early definition has continued to be used widely in research, especially in America, despite acknowledged limitations, such as a focus only on observable aspects of fathering and a lack of reference to other important aspects of the fathering role. There have been attempts to develop a broader conceptualization of father involvement through the enumeration of a wider range of roles which fathers undertake with children. Palkovitz (1997) identified 15 such dimensions, including father involvement in play, instruction and guidance, whilst Hawkins et al. (2002) expanded on this number introducing a 'Father Involvement Inventory' which lists 43 possible types of involvement, grouped within nine areas which assess both direct and indirect effects, as well as behavioural, cognitive, affective, moral and ethical aspects of involvement. Despite such progress, there remains an extent to which more needs to be done in relation to capturing the complexity of fathering within a diverse range of contexts within a framework which allows consistent measurement for purposes of research (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004).

Issues of definition notwithstanding, there has been a significant growth in the number and range of studies exploring the nature of the impacts of father involvement on children's lives during the last 20 years. There is now compelling evidence that the positive involvement of fathers promotes better child well-being and outcomes in a number of key areas. Following a meta-analysis of 24 studies, Sarkadi et al. (2008: 157) concluded that father engagement:

> reduces the frequency of behavioural problems in boys and psychological problems in young women; it also enhances cognitive development while decreasing criminality and economic disadvantage in low SES areas.

Especially relevant to the current study, father involvement in the early years has been found to be correlated with later educational achievement. Flouri and Buchanan (2004), for example, found that father involvement at age 7 predicted educational attainment at 20, independently of the involvement of mothers. In addition, there is now important evidence to demonstrate that father involvement in children's learning can be an important factor in enabling children from disadvantaged backgrounds to escape poverty later on in life (Blanden, 2006). However, and of particular relevance here, it appears that fathers from a lower social class are less likely to be involved in children's out of school learning and education (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003), partly due to the increased likelihood of men experiencing greater literacy difficulties than women (Fletcher and Daley, 2002).

In a recent study exploring the values and beliefs of fathers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, Huari and Hollingworth (2009) found that white working-class fathers were less likely to view supporting their children in education as a significant part of their role.

Engaging fathers: An overview of UK national policy and practice

Due to the increased awareness of the importance of fathers in relation to child outcomes, a large number of recent UK government legal and policy frameworks have required service engagement

with fathers, such as The Childcare Act (2006), The Gender Equality Duty (2007) and the 'Think Fathers' campaign (2009). Such a sharpened policy focus on fathers has parallels internationally, although the reasons for such a development vary. In Europe, for example, the growing focus on fatherhood has, to some extent, to be seen as a response to the changing role of fathers in families, occasioned by the sharp increase in the number of mothers in the workplace (O'Brien, 2004). In Scandinavia, Swedish policy aimed at promoting the father's role in families seems to be more specifically related to a desire to increase gender equality (Lero et al., 2006). In the United States, however, the increased focus on fatherhood in the mid-1990s sprang from a concern about increased levels of father absence and associated financial implications for federal governments (Lero et al., 2006).

However, despite an increasing recognition of fathers at policy levels in the UK, Page et al. (2008) found that there has been little or no acknowledgement of fathers within legislative and financial frameworks, with hardly any requirement to monitor and evaluate the levels and nature of father involvement within family support services. It is unsurprising therefore, that the study's survey of 46 local authorities in England concluded that:

> Father inclusive practice was not seen to be routine or mainstream in family services. (Page et al., 2008: 6)

Barriers to father engagement in family support services are significant and include the following: the feminized nature of early years and primary school environments; environments designed generally to meet the needs of mothers and children; a reluctance to work with men by some female staff; lack of sufficient training in working with men; and inappropriate timing of activities for working fathers (Goldman, 2005).

Specifically in relation to father engagement in primary schools, a study in the north of England, that is, found that little attempt had been made to 'accommodate and invite' men into the classroom (Clough et al., 2000). Furthermore, although teachers in this study supported notions of parental involvement in school, nevertheless, in general, they expected fathers to have little engagement with school and confessed themselves to be more comfortable talking to mothers rather than fathers.

Fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds: Levels of service involvement

The current study took place in an area of high socio-economic deprivation in the north of England. It is now widely accepted that fathers from such backgrounds have consistently been significantly under-represented in terms of education and family service use, despite the development of a number of area based initiatives in recent years, within the UK. For example, Ghate et al. (2000) found that fathers were rarely engaged in local family centres. Similarly, fathers were reported as 'hard to reach' in Sure Start local programmes (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2005), which were established in the 10 percent most deprived wards of the country to engage both mothers and fathers in family support services. In 2006, The National Audit Office reported that children's centres, formerly Sure Start programmes, were found to be 'less effective at meeting the needs of fathers' (p. 34).

In the current study, we are especially concerned with father involvement in one particular aspect of young children's educational experience, namely the transition from early years to mainstream school settings.

The importance of early learning transitions

The importance of the transition from early years to primary schools has been identified as particularly vital. Fabian and Dunlop (2006) stated:

> The start of primary schooling has been perceived as one of the most important transitions in a child's life and a major challenge of early childhood. Initial success at school both socially and intellectually, leads to a virtuous cycle of achievement. (p. 2)

Due to an increasingly sharp focus on targets and league tables within the UK, it has been argued that there is now pressure on children to settle quickly into school and to begin to develop educationally, in addition to developing a new identity as a pupil with a classroom context (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007).

A number of approaches have been found to be important in helping young children to negotiate this critical transition successfully, including the use of transitional activities and the active involvement of all of those involved including children, parents, early years and school settings (Sanders et al., 2005).

It is interesting to note, therefore, that despite the increased emphasis on the importance of fathers in children's lives at a UK policy level, there is very little explicit reference to fathers in research and/or reports on parental involvement in early years transitions. For example, the government-sponsored report 'Transitions from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1' (Sanders et al., 2005) makes 382 references to 'parents' and only five to fathers.

The policy framework *Aiming High for Children* (DfES, 2007) states:

> The very word 'parent' in relation to services can have the effect of excluding fathers – both because fathers often perceive the term to mean 'mothers' and because this can be reinforced by the approach of practitioners whose habits of working mainly with mothers are deeply ingrained. (2.81)

This omission then in terms of explicit mention of fathers is unfortunate given that we know that by far the most effective way to recruit and retain fathers, especially those in areas of disadvantage, is through use of approaches specifically and explicitly tailored to the needs of men (Goldman, 2005; Lloyd et al., 2003; Potter and Carpenter, 2010).

In this respect, The Fathers Transition Project, under discussion here, is therefore both innovative and of particular significance, given the relative dearth of such work in the area of early learning transitions. In a companion paper, we have discussed fathers' perceptions of benefits of engagement in this project which included support for relationships between fathers and children and increased confidence for men in relation to their involvement in their children's play and learning (Potter et al., 2009). Other studies have explored father participation in various aspects of their young children's learning. For example, a UK-based study exploring the participation of mothers and fathers in their young children's early literacy development within the context of a family literacy programme (Morgan et al., 2009) found that most fathers were actively involved in this area with their children, in various ways, although overall they spent less time engaged in such activities than mothers did. In the US, Bauman and Wasserman (2010) discuss an Early Head Start programme which was successful in engaging 15 fathers from low economic backgrounds in their young children's early literacy by positively valuing the fathers' contribution, holding sessions in the evening, providing transport to and from the centre where sessions took place and providing a supper for the men.

Research aims

The overall aim of the pilot project was to increase the participation of fathers in their children's early learning transition from children's centre to reception class. The aims of this evaluation were to find out what the nature and level of father involvement in the Fathers Transition Project was and to discover which strategies were most effective in recruiting and retaining fathers' participation in the project. Specific research questions most relevant here were as follows:

- What was the level and nature of father involvement in the target children's centre and school before and after the project?
- What did children's centre and school staff perceive to be the benefits and the challenges of involving fathers?
- What were father perceptions of engagement in the project?
  - What did they believe to be the benefits and issues associated with involvement?
  - To what extent and in what ways did fathers believe that involvement has helped them to become more engaged with their children's learning?
- Which strategies were most effective in engaging fathers?

Research design

This study took place in an almost exclusively white working-class area of significant and multiple deprivation in northern England. The aim of the project was to involve fathers and male carers in the crucial period of their children's transition from an early years setting, namely a children's centre to a reception class (both on the same site). Prior to the project, there was little structured engagement of fathers/male carers in children's learning in either the early years or the school setting.

The project took place over nine months, a relatively short period for such a challenging area of work, largely due to funding constraints. The impact of the project was assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively by analyzing attendance data at all project activities in terms of numbers of male attendances and numbers of fathers and through focus groups and interviews. It is important to report specifically on paternal attendance data since information on parental attendance is rarely disaggregated, thereby giving little or no detailed information on the level of father engagement.

In order to gain the views of staff, we ran three focus groups with a total of 11 family support staff from the target children's centre, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with children's centre management level staff, four with key school based staff, and six interviews were undertaken with staff working for the expert agency taking the lead in delivering the Transitions Project.

To gain the views of fathers and male carers, we recruited a convenience sample of five fathers and two grandfathers from the 14 fathers/male carers who were regularly involved in the Fathers Transition project activities. Fathers were recruited to the research study through The Fathers Transition Worker. The worker was provided with a 'script' with introductory information about the study for fathers that introduced notions of confidentiality and anonymity which were followed up by the researcher at the start of each interview. We interviewed all men who expressed a willingness to be involved. Although the sample size appears small, it is widely accepted that fathers and male carers from such socio-cultural backgrounds are 'hard to reach' in both practice and research terms (Daly, 1995; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004; Mackereth and Milner, 2009) and that therefore

relatively little is known about what such fathers think and believe about a wide range of issues as opposed to mothers (Lupton and Barclay, 1997).

We conducted seven telephone interviews with the fathers and male carers in our sample. This approach is accepted as effective in gaining the views of fathers who are reluctant to engage in research (Kirsch and Brandt, 2002).

Data analysis

All face-to-face interview and focus group data were transcribed and summaries were sent to each participant as a means of checking the trustworthiness of the data (Robson, 2002). We employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), carrying out data analysis in three stages. In the first stage, we coded general themes, for example: the nature of activities provided; the skills and abilities of the worker; recruitment and retention practices, moving on to code several second order themes within these broader categories which drilled deeper into specific aspects of the skills and abilities of the project worker, the particular strategies which were found to be effective in relation to recruitment and retention and so on. Themes were identified as representative according to the frequency of their appearance within the data. For example, every father/male carer within our sample talked about the skills and abilities of the Fathers Transition Worker in relation to their experiences within the project. Finally, we chose representative quotations from each second order theme to provide illustrative examples of the views of staff and fathers. In the findings below, father quotations are numbered to indicate the range of opinions (F1, F2, etc.).

Findings

Level of father engagement during the project

The project was led by a part-time dedicated Fathers Transition Worker, hereafter to be referred to as 'Peter' (pseudonym) who developed and led an activity programme which consisted of seven trips during the children's centre phase of the project, that is, before the transition to mainstream primary school, and three school-based activities after the transition to reception class had taken place. The trips were open to both fathers and mothers although they were specifically designed to appeal to men and were mostly attended by men. For example, there were bus trips to a lead-mining museum, a lighthouse, a museum; a roman fort; a family fun day and one trip to a forest to make a den. School-based activities included the construction of a bird box and making papier-mâché planets.

During the period 1 July 2008 to 31 March 2009 the total number of father/male carer attendances across all project activities (seven trips and three school-based activities, as above) was 76. The total number of fathers registered through the Transition Project during this period was 42, particularly noteworthy as generally fathers are rarely registered for UK services. Most significantly, four fathers did become engaged in school based activities, with 19 male attendances being recorded at three school based activities, following transition. Two fathers engaged during the children's centre phase left the area before children transferred to reception class. These figures represent impressive results, especially given the high levels of disadvantage in the area in which it took place and the very limited timescales involved.

Given the extremely limited participation of fathers from such socio-economic backgrounds in their children's early educational experiences, it is important to review those strategies which appeared to be effective in engaging men within this project, at both the strategic as well as the operational level.

Strategic level: Contextual factors

Financial support. The Transitions Project could not have taken place in the form that it did without the financial support of a local authority in the north of England which funded the part-time dedicated worker's post and subsidized the cost of project activities.

Partnership working with an expert agency. The Transition Project was devised and implemented by an external charitable agency, expert in the field of male inclusion. The project was therefore able to draw on a range of in-depth knowledge and expertise developed by this agency over a 10-year period in engaging men in family support services.

A gender differentiated approach. Under the guidance of the expert agency, the project adopted a gender differentiated approach to working with fathers. In a review of how a number of family centres were working with fathers, Ghate et al. (2000) identified three models of practice. Some centres appeared to adopt a 'gender blind' approach in which they consciously set out to treat men and women 'the same', which was sometimes referred to within policy documents in terms of providing 'equal opportunities'. Other centres in the study adopted a 'gender differentiated' approach where it was explicitly accepted that men and women have different needs and interests and that these will need to be addressed differently. Finally, some of the centres appeared to adopt an 'agnostic' approach whereby staff did not seem to have considered how they were working with men and women in any explicit way. The gender differentiated approach is widely accepted as being most successful in engaging men within services and indeed is implicitly acknowledged as important within recent UK legislative frameworks. Specifically, The Gender Equality Duty (2007) requires that public services must 'proactively to address the individual needs of women and men in all their functions'. In relation to the provision of services for parents, as in relation to the provision of all services, a 'gender impact assessment' is required to assess if there is evidence of different needs between women and men and whether both women and men's needs are being met.

One possible criticism of a gender differentiated approach might be that men and women could be stereotyped with regard to their interests, needs and wants. Such a point has been well understood within fathers' work, where there is recognition that whilst some general approaches might be accepted such as the need to view the needs of men and women as different, nevertheless fathers do not form a single homogeneous group (Barlow et al., 2005; Lewis and Lamb, 2006). That issues of diversity must be not only acknowledged but addressed (Bayley et al., 2009; Featherstone et al., 2007; Lewis and Lamb, 2006).

Within the context of the The Fathers Transition Project, the starting point was the need to introduce a specific focus on the role of fathers and male carers in the transition process, with the dedicated worker in place to ensure that this focus was maintained and developed within a programme of activities specifically designed, in general, to appeal to men.

Factors successfully promoting engagement at an operational level were as follows.

Operational approaches

Skills and abilities of the Fathers Transition Worker. The single biggest factor identified by fathers, male carers and staff as crucial in the development of the project was the range of professional skills employed by Peter, the dedicated Fathers Transition Worker, as discussed below. It is important to bear in mind that most of the fathers/male carers who became involved in the project had not been engaged with any type of service before. A key issue to note here is that Peter grew up in

a similar social and cultural background as the people he was working with and this clearly had a significant effect in developing trust and mutual understanding, as will be seen below.

A number of qualities were identified as being important in enabling the worker to interact successfully with men, namely approachability, friendliness, a respectful approach, trustworthiness, persistence, patience, the ability to listen and to talk to people as individuals. The ability to make relationships with fathers from an area where suspicion of services was often in evidence, often at the first meeting, may well have been one of the most crucial aspects of Peter's role. Fathers and male carers were extremely positive about the Transition Worker's approach. One father commented on his friendliness and trustworthiness:

> He is a friendly lad and maybe people confide in him. . . he is a good socialiser – he gets people involved – he has time for people and I think that's what it is. (F6)

The worker's ability to communicate with people effectively was highlighted by another man:

> [He] is a good bloke. I found it easy. [He] explains stuff in English – in plain English. No offence against people who have been to college and university but some professional people do not know how to explain stuff to ordinary people. (F5)

A member of the school staff was impressed by the Project Worker's ability to engage easily with men in the very unstructured context of the playground:

> To have somebody out there on the yard who can have a bit of banter with the dads and get them to come from over the wall to into the yard to into the school has been absolutely wonderful.

Peter's respectful approach and dedication was also praised by staff, as well as his ability to interact easily with the local community:

> He's very respectful and expects respect back – he's a lovely genuine man but he's a man's man as well – so the community here would warm to him because there's nothing to be offended by.

It is well known that persistence is a vital ingredient in engaging and retaining fathers and male carers. Contact data provided above illustrate the worker's very high levels of perseverance. One member of staff commented:

> He was the type of person who gets knocked back; if 25 people say no to him, it won't put him off. He would say if I have lost 25 but I have gained one, that's ok.

It may be well argued that such qualities as those described above are also important in working with women, especially those who are under-represented in terms of service use and indeed it would be useful to explore what lessons could be learnt from such work in relation to mothers in similar socio-economic areas.

'Hook' and male specific activities. The project used male orientated 'hook' activities, specifically, bus trips as described above, to draw men into the project during the summer months with the aim of then encouraging them to take part in other activities which would become more school related later on, after the transition to the school setting. A 'hook' activity is one which is designed specifically to have a high interest content for men. Given the difficulty of engaging fathers from low

income areas in family related services, as discussed above, such 'attention getting' and highly male orientated types of activity are considered essential when first attempting to recruit men to services. Within the Fathers Transition Project, the strategy was successful in achieving this to some extent, with 19 attendances being recorded at school-based activities later on. As indicated above, in general terms, it is important to acknowledge diversity with the fatherhood population, in the sense that not all men may be attracted by such events whilst at the same time also accepting that some women may also wish to participate in such activities and events. Having said this, within the area where the pilot study took place, it was mostly the case that men were much more interested than women in the trips and activities on offer.

Fathers and their children clearly enjoyed these activities. Examples of comments on the museum trip were:

> I tell you what [the children] did enjoy – the museum - it had allsorts. Someone was playing games on the computers, someone telling a story. It was good. (F1)

> It was great. A lot of things that I have never seen so I am learning and the little one's learning. Interesting, and I know I keep repeating myself but it is a good time for me and the little one. (F6)

Examples of comments on a trip to a forest which took place after the transition to school included the following:

> It was learning to live off the land and things like that – I think the kids enjoyed that showing them what plants they could eat and trying the plants and stuff like that – it was canny good. (F3)

> It was fantastic – a beautiful day – he loved it! (F4)

School staff felt that that an emphasis on 'hands on, physical, outside type things' were important because it was then possible to present such activities as needing men to be involved, that men had something specific to offer on such events. One school staff member felt that this approach:

> Boosted their self-esteem of actually being needed, because a lot of these dads don't work for a variety of reasons, including disability, so I think that's probably where he's won that battle that we couldn't have won.

Such perceptions require some deconstruction, again in relation to possible issues of stereotyping. One might argue that it was not so much that men were needed within certain types of activities, so much as the skills and attributes which they might possess, which may, in turn, be a product of the ways in which gender roles have been constructed in the area in which the project took place. A wider discussion relating to the social construction of gender roles is clearly beyond the scope of this article which draws heavily from practice-orientated research in relation to male inclusion. From a practice point of view, it is widely accepted that, notwithstanding issues of diversity within fatherhood, on the whole, men are more likely to be attracted by practical kinds of activities (see Goldman, 2005, for an in-depth meta-analysis of principles of effective practice in including fathers).

Face to face contact: Valuing men. Many would argue that the most important aspect of engaging fathers is initial recruitment or 'getting them through the door'. The question of how to contact men in such a way that they will then go on to take part in an activity, often for the first time,

requires great skill, as well as a particular set of attitudes and beliefs about what men involved in the project have to offer as fathers. Peter stated that face-to-face contacts were by far the most effective. The use of leaflets in settings during the summer period, during the children's centre stage of the project, did not recruit a single father. Initial contacts with men were often made in the school playground as men were dropping children off at the early years setting. Peter emphasized the importance of an informal, conversational approach where he was asking fathers for their help. Putting the men in the position of being an authority on their local area resulted in a respectful approach where men felt that their opinion was being valued.

> You have to have the skill of being able to talk to people. You have got to show some interest in them. They have some value. . . so I am just making friends and asking for assistance and they appreciate that. So that is what I would do, asking them to help. (Fathers Transition Worker)

This focus on respect and making relationships at an individual level with fathers was believed to be extremely important in developing trust between the worker and the men. It was seen as the first step in persuading them that they might want to engage in an activity which Peter was running.

As we saw above, fathers did respond very positively to this approach:

> As a bloke he talks at my level anyway. When he is speaking to you, he doesn't speak down to you, he doesn't talk over the top of you, and he always has time to listen to you. (F6)

Peter also met fathers in the local community by walking around the housing estates and chatting informally to men as they washed cars or, in the Traveller community, worked on caravans or trailers.

Such an approach is clearly time-consuming and expensive. However, this kind of community development based approach is known to be successful in engaging those who may not have been involved with services before, or for whatever reason may be suspicious of them. One father we spoke to admitted to being reluctant about becoming involved at first:

> I was a bit wary at first. . . It's the way like dads are tret – you know what I mean. . . like they're an outsider – everything's for mams isn't it – you know there's nowt for fathers. (F3)

Having become involved, his attitude changed and he became extremely enthusiastic about the focus on fathers which Peter had introduced to him:

> I think it's fantastic – I said to [Peter] – how do I go about being a dad's worker? I want to be a dad's worker. . . getting involved in working with the children – getting the dads involved and that – I think it's brilliant. (F3)

The centrality of relationship building and trust with regard to engaging 'parents' who have been traditionally perceived as 'hard to reach' has been generally acknowledged (Barrett, 2008; Doherty et al., 2003; NESS, 2005). However, generalist parenting-related reports, discussing the need for such approaches, rarely distinguish between the potentially different skills and abilities required to develop such relationships between fathers as opposed to mothers, making it difficult to discuss in detail what the qualitative differences between such approaches might be. In relation to the current project, a small number of white fathers in an area of socio-economic disadvantage expressed opinions regarding those aspects of Peter's attitudes, skills and behaviour which led to the building of trust. It may well be that such a micro-analytical approach may be useful in determining what

skills, attitudes and attributes other fathers and mothers from similar or more diverse backgrounds may value in the personality and approach of practitioners elsewhere. What seems clear from the literature is that, on the whole, such trusting relationships with those most significantly under-represented in terms of service use, seem insufficiently in evidence, which may be due at least in part to the intensive nature of the support required, with its associated financial implications.

Retention: Keeping men involved. Once men have been engaged initially, there is then the difficult task of keeping them involved over time which can be an extremely challenging. Peter stated that a key strategy for maintaining involvement is to develop an ongoing programme of activities, so that as soon as one event has taken place, the next father-friendly activity is quickly in view.

Additionally, a strategy believed essential in ensuring that that fathers and male carers stayed in contact with the project, was the intensive use of follow up phone calls and texts. The total number of such contacts with men made by Peter over the nine-month period was 1360, an average of nearly 100 per father engaged in the project. Such a figure reveals the level of support and encouragement believed necessary to maintain male engagement in such a new area of experiences for local men.

Preparing fathers for the school environment. Peter explained that there had been some work to do in preparing some for the school setting, especially where fathers and male cares had had difficult experiences at school themselves. Problems with literacy might significantly affect their willingness to enter that environment. Peter discussed the kinds of barriers which he often encounters in trying to persuade men to become engaged with schools:

> You are working with dads fresh. They don't know who I am, and they have to put a front on – the macho stuff. Even if they don't even believe it. . . if they have a literacy problem, and they are frightened to come in the school because of that, they have got to find some way, another reason not to – they might say. . . that is not for me, that is for our lass. One bloke said 'I am not going there' – he said that to me but he has really a very low self-esteem. . . he is not very confident in his academic ability and he might think, these people look down on him. . . that is the state he has got himself into – what if someone asks me a question? He is defensive.

In such circumstances, Peter explained that work had to be done to raise men's self-esteem and to prepare them for the school setting. Not only this, but there may need to be a discussion around the kind of language that needs to be used in schools around children. It was very important for some men that Peter was present in school activities to provide moral support within what may be for them a challenging context. The presence of Peter was also important for school staff also. A senior school manager commented that having him in the classroom working with fathers:

> Means that the staff are very safe and secure with leaving him to do that role.

Such a comment does raise some issues regarding the long-term sustainability of the approach, given that Peter's involvement was only funded in the short term. Project staff were aware of the need to embed a father-inclusive approach across the school and therefore a key aspect of the expert agency's input was to provide training both for centre and school-based staff, focusing on benefits of involving fathers and also key strategies for doing so successfully. In addition, it was hoped that as staff became more familiar with fathers in the classroom, that more trusting relationships would develop between fathers and school staff.

Working with mothers. Another important strategy in engaging fathers was ensuring that mothers were also involved in the process, an approach generally recognized as effective, as it is accepted that mothers can act as gatekeepers in relation to the participation of men in activities outside the family (Goldman, 2005). Peter explained:

> I would say [to the mothers], can you just fill it in and I will take it home. I would say these trips are on, and you will be invited as well. So I work through the mams.

Once again, information from engagement records shows the level of ongoing involvement with women, as well as men. Over the whole nine-month period, 1260 contacts were made with mothers. From the start, mothers were involved in the project in a number of ways. In the first place, Peter spoke to both mothers and fathers in and around the school playground, if mothers were present, to explain what the project was about. Over time, some mothers did provide an additional channel of communication between Peter and the fathers by passing on written information or messages delivered to them by text or mobile phone. Seven mothers did also attend some of the trips in the summer months with fathers and children. Such extensive contact with mothers served two key purposes. It helped to keep fathers involved and kept mothers informed of what was happening within the project. From Peter's point of view, there is a fine balance to be achieved between involving mothers by ensuring that they know what the project is about so that they are happy to have their partners take part whilst at the same time ensuring that the focus was on increasing father involvement. Whilst trips in the summer months were open to both fathers and mothers, activities based in the reception class in the autumn term were father exclusive, since from his long experience of working with men in low income, traditionally working class areas, his strong perception was that in relation to the school activities: 'if mums come, dads won't'.

Partnership working. Finally, a key factor in the development of a number of transition project activities was the enthusiastic engagement of both children's centre and school-based staff. A small group of children's centre staff had been engaged in the initial recruitment of fathers/male carers for the summer trips, prior to transition and in the delivery of the trips. In terms of recruitment, Peter commented on the skill of one member of staff in particular:

> She has really worked well with us. She is really good. I think the first time I went out [on the playground] she was with us, talking to the mams so that was good.

With regard to the summer trips of 2008, Peter commented that he had purposely involved some male children's centre workers as well as female staff. In the current study, Peter noted that one of the female members of staff had been particularly successful at recruiting men in the playground for the summer trips. He also praised the contribution of all children's centre staff involved in the trips, emphasizing the importance of the cultural understanding between staff and fathers:

> They are local people so that broke the ice and they just sang to the kids, all the way back – [the children's centre staff] made the trip – it was a good partnership.

In relation to school-based activities, Peter talked about the enthusiasm of the staff he was working with in the reception class for the work with fathers. Similarly, school staff recognized the importance of valuing each others' strengths in partnership working:

> It has worked here, because [Peter] has taken what we're doing anyway, worked with us, put a slant on where dads and men are needed.

One school staff member reflected that:

> Getting [fathers] early, getting them into what school's about, what learning's about, what talking to your child's about, would stay with them for a long time.

Discussion

The Fathers Transition Project can be said to have charted relatively new territory within the UK, in its successful attempts to engage fathers from disadvantaged areas during the crucial period of their children's transition from early years to the reception class. Whilst a number of other strategies and projects have been successful in engaging fathers from low income backgrounds in a range of early educational and family services (Bauman and Wasserman, 2010; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004; Morgan et al., 2009; Potter and Carpenter, 2008; Raikes et al., 2005), very few have focused on promoting father engagement during the crucial period of transition itself. The relative success of the project is promising in the light of research discussed above, demonstrating the importance of father involvement to later child outcomes (Flouri, 2005; Sarkadi et al., 2008), especially for children growing up in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

Of the several strategies and factors believed successful in engaging men, possibly the most important related to the skills and abilities of Peter, the Fathers Transition Worker. The fact that the worker grew up in a similar community to the one in which he was working, appeared especially important in enabling the development of trusting relationships with local men, a phenomenon which has begun to be recognized as important in the literature (Warin, 2009). The value of such mutual cultural recognition has implications for the approach to supporting parents adopted by successive UK governments in recent years which Edwards and Gillies (2004) contend, 'resonate[s] most closely with the values and ambitions of white, middle-class parents' (p. 631). This evaluation suggests that family support work undertaken by practitioners who have an intuitive understanding of local cultural beliefs and attitudes may well be more effective in areas of disadvantage, where parents, particularly fathers, have had little previous contact with family support services, although clearly more research is needed to further evidence this effect.

The preferred gender of workers engaging fathers has generated a range of opinions. There have been strong suggestions that male workers are more likely to be effective in encouraging father participation (Bryant and Henderson, 2002; Fletcher, 2001). However, other studies have found that it is the skills and abilities of the worker which is most important and that women also can be successful in working with fathers (Potter and Carpenter 2008, Turbiville et al., 2000). Interestingly, fathers taking part in a study in Bristol reported that they had no particular preference regarding the gender of the worker (Bryant and Taylor, 1999).

It was not only a sense of shared understandings which seemed to be important in the Fathers Transition Project, however. Another important and related characteristic of the approach was that it was explicitly strengths-based and empowering, rather than deficit orientated. A deficit model of fatherhood which views fathering as a role which men generally perform inadequately has long been current both in the literature and in practice (see Brod, 1987; Doherty, 1991; Gerson, 1993; Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997). Warin (2009) argues that the impact of such a deficit discourse on men from disadvantaged areas, with often poor levels of literacy, may well result in fathers also believing that they have little to offer their children within an educational context. The Fathers Transition Worker in the current study consciously sought to empower men by attempting to convey to them that they did have a contribution to make, that, in his words: 'they have some value'. This approach seemed effective in building confidence in the men engaged in the project and could be said to be located within a generative approach to fathering (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995; Snarey,

1993) which is predicated on an assumption that men are both willing and capable of nurturing the next generation. The generative approach described here is, in many ways, different from the model of expert help where the contribution of mothers and fathers appears little valued and which Bloomfield et al. (2005) argue has often been a defining feature of parenting support promoted by UK governments in recent years. In the early days of its ministry in 2010, the UK Coalition government highlighted the need to engage with the 'hardest to reach' families. This study and others (see Bauman and Wasserman, 2010; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004; Potter and Carpenter, 2008) would suggest that services which take a generative, strengths based approach in which there is an expectation that both provider and service-user have an important contribution to make to the process, may well be more successful in such an endeavour.

The intensive level of support required by Peter to recruit, retain and support a relatively small number of men during this project was another crucial aspect of the work. Given the unprecedented level of cuts to public services being undertaken by the UK government in 2010, it seems highly unlikely that ring-fenced funding of any significance will be forthcoming to develop fathers work in future. This seems unfortunate given the scale of what remains to be achieved in this key area of practice within the UK context. Economic imperatives and policy approaches internationally may differ and result in a continuing ability to invest in supporting fathers in their parenting roles. A recent UN report (2011) argues strongly that such an approach is needed globally:

> First and foremost a social policy environment is needed that stimulates and enables specific actions to promote fatherhood and the engagement of men by the media, services, civil society organizations and the private sector. (p. 74)

In relation to the limitations of this study, the work discussed here took place with a relatively small number of fathers ($n = 14$), of whom seven took part in the research study. Clearly further research is needed with a larger number of men to gain a greater understanding of which of the elements described are most important effecting engagement and to explore the potential impact of such strategies on fathers from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Vincent et al. (2008) note that even within identified social classes, there is likely to be significant heterogeneity, with a range of attitudes and beliefs emerging from the experience of living in different places, having different educational, occupational and family backgrounds. They went on to argue that we need to know much more about how social class interacts specifically with fathering practices (Vincent et al., 2010).

At a policy level, key aspects of successful work in including fathers in early years transitions need to be embedded within the policy and practice of early years settings. Such an approach would require changes in national policy and funding frameworks, linked to rigorous accountability arrangements. As indicated earlier, the need for services to engage fathers is currently advised rather than prescribed. This must change if children are to accrue the benefits which are known to flow from father involvement in their education and learning, especially during the early years.

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