

## **RESEARCH – You Can Prove Anything**

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### **‘Standfirst’**

Richard House cautions against accepting at face value the simple ‘headline’ reports of research into the EYFS – favouring, instead, a sceptical view which teases out the ‘politicised’ interests involved in such research, and the taken-for-granted assumptions about reality that inevitably underpin any research methodology.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Articles on research methodology in early-childhood professional magazines are highly unusual, with the vast majority of early-years practitioners probably have little if any exposure to arguments about what constitutes legitimate and appropriate research methodology in the field. Research results as presented in both the media and in academic literature are, I will argue, often far from what they seem, as there is commonly a much more complex and ‘messy’ story underlying research process and product than ever comes across in the simplistic, tabloid-headline way in which ‘findings’ are routinely presented. In short, research findings can often be misleading, and even grossly distorted - especially when either the researchers’ paymasters (e.g. government) or the researchers themselves have some vested material interest in the reported findings.

Conventional quantitative empirical research also tends to encourage uncritical acceptance of the myth of detached ‘objectivity’, whereas in reality, all research necessarily entails material or vested *interests*, along

with what are often *unconscious, unarticulated assumptions* about reality - and which it is then the task of critical thinking to unmask. The title of this article is actually borrowed from one of the best critical books on research methodology, *What's Behind the Research?*<sup>1</sup> - which brilliantly describes the taken-for-granted assumptions that underly *any and every* research methodology in the social sciences. One of my core arguments, then, is that ***the making explicit of research assumptions is essential if we are to be in any position to make an informed and rational assessment of reported research findings.***

It's easy for an academic writing about research to come across as mystifying or patronising - yet my goal here is to help empower practitioners to gain a critical sensibility towards the often daunting output of research 'experts' who claim a monopoly on assessing the subtle and complex work you do with young children. Contrary to current preoccupations with so-called 'evidence-based practice' and 'objective' empirical research, I believe that every individual practitioner is a researcher whenever they work with children - and that the *actual experience* of practitioners yields 'research findings' that are potentially just as valid as the results of sophisticated empirical research projects.

This latter view embraces the *assumption of uniqueness*, which holds that every relational experience between adult and child(ren) is a unique one which can never be repeated, nor 'measured', in all its subtlety and complexity. This kind of view, championed by qualitative or so-called 'phenomenological' researchers like Max van Manen,<sup>2</sup> contrasts markedly with more conventional, so-called 'positivistic' research, that claims to discover generalisable, universal cause-and-effect relationships between 'variables' which are, *from the outset*, assumed to be distinct and mutually excluding, and accurately quantifiable and measurable.

Most practitioners are probably (and appropriately) so involved in their work with children that they understandably have little or no time to engage with the complexities of research methodology - making it all the more important that they can develop tools for taking a robustly critical view of research findings - especially when it can so easily be *politicised* (that is, used, and even distorted, for political purposes).

## **THE EARLY YEARS FOUNDATION STAGE (EYFS): A TALE OF TWO PIECES OF RESEARCH**

I will declare an interest from the outset, as I am directly involved in the ‘Open EYE’ Campaign for Open Early Childhood Learning, which, since last November, has been challenging certain aspects of the EYFS framework. *EYE* magazine has been very generous in reporting on the campaign and its aims, and this is not the place to rehearse Open EYE’s *raison d’être*. Rather, here I wish critically to examine several pieces of EYFS research recently reported in the professional press. I will argue that far from proving what the headline findings claim, the research is methodologically flawed, and by no means proves what is being claimed by the researchers and/or its reporters.

In following the occasionally technical – but I hope reasonably comprehensible - argument through to the end, readers will hopefully then be equipped to take a more critical, appropriately sceptical viewpoint when they encounter the results of early-years research.

I will refer to two pieces of DCSF-funded research on the EYFS, termed the ‘Super Scale Points Project’, and which met with very different fates. To summarise, one piece of research led to findings which embarrassingly contradicted core aspects of the EYFS framework, and these findings were quietly ‘shelved’ by the Department, and were only released to the public via a Freedom of Information request by Shadow Minister Annette Brooke MP.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast, another piece of DCSF research was widely reported in the media and professional press<sup>4</sup> – and unsurprisingly, it was claimed that this particular research vindicated the EYSF framework. When looked at more closely and critically, I show below that this latter research did not begin to make the case for the EYFS that the DCSF was claiming it to make.

To begin at the beginning: Several months ago, the Campaign heard about some DCSF independently-commissioned research which contradicted aspects of the EYFS framework which Open EYE had previously been challenging. Once released under the FoI Act, the *Guardian* then reported on this apparently suppressed research,<sup>3</sup> which, they maintained, ‘runs counter to ministers’ curriculum plan’.

One has to question, first, the motivation driving the decision not to make this research report public. If this research had yielded results which had *supported* the government’s policy framework, the DCSF would have

probably trumpeted its results from the rooftops – merely confirming the suspicions of those who believe that research of this kind is inevitably and unavoidably ‘politicised’ in nature.

A close perusal of the released research report indicates that the research was conducted in an impeccably rigorous way, according to the standards and procedures of such research. We are told that (quoting from the report) ‘Schools were chosen that were distributed throughout England and which represented a range of demographic situations from urban to rural settings.’ Furthermore, ‘FSP practitioners were themselves chosen by recommendation from Early Years specialists in various authorities’; and ‘internal data checks were made within the data sets looking for obvious inconsistencies that would cast doubt on the validity of the rest of the data.... [This] rigour severely reduced the total number of data. [Some] 202 matched records were suitable for the statistical analysis.’ An independent statistician then assessed the data’s validity and suitability. Thus, this is clearly high-quality research whose findings certainly deserve to be taken seriously. Nor should the comparatively small size of the sample necessarily be seen as significantly detracting from any research findings. The Scottish study so often cited by ‘synthetic phonics’ supporters was also very small-scale, yet the policy influence it has had has been enormous – perhaps because its findings just happened to coincide with what politicians were wanting to do anyway....

More damning still is the fact that the results obtained *directly contradict* key aspects of the EYFS framework – thus comprehensively undermining the Department’s reported claim that it was ‘inconclusive’. Thus, the suppressed research discovered that (again quoting from the unpublished report):

- In every aspect of attainment at KS1, DA 8, ‘maintains attention and concentrates’, was a distinguishing factor in final attainment;

- Overall the data suggest use of spoken language is important to becoming an accomplished writer;

- Two scale points did *not* seem crucial... to high performance at KS1. These were LSL8, ‘attempts to read more complex words, using phonic knowledge’ and W8, ‘begins to form captions and simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation’;

- The following scale points *did* show an association with performance at KS1:

- ✓ **DA8** ‘Maintains attention and concentrates’;

- ✓ **SD6** 'Understands that there need to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups....!';
- ✓ **ED8** 'Understands what is right and wrong and why';
- ✓ **CD4** 'Sings simple songs from memory';
- ✓ **CD7** 'Uses imagination in art and design, music, dance, imaginative role-play and stories. (emphases added)

These extraordinary findings strongly support Open EYE's advocacy of an informal, story- and play-based early learning milieu, with strong emphasis on naturalistic and artistic learning experiences; whilst the government's emphasis on pre-school cognitive learning (e.g. in literacy) is at the very least thrown into considerable doubt. Indeed, these findings could easily be used to make a strong case for shifting the start of formal schooling to 6 or 7 years of age.

Then, in July, the Department did choose to release research findings which, they alleged, supported its EYFS framework. The DCSF analysis compared the results of a 10 per cent sample of Foundation Stage Profile assessments in 2005 and Key Stage 1 in 2007, and found 'a direct link' between the two sets of results. Thus, those children who achieved well in reading, writing and spoken language in the Foundation Stage Profile were *statistically* very likely to continue to do well in primary school. *Nursery World* reported that 'Clear evidence has emerged that shows that children who do well in assessments at the age of five are more likely to go on to continue to achieve in primary school'; and that there was 'a strong connection between the CLL assessments "linking sounds and letters", reading, and writing and KS1, reading, writing, maths and APS scores'.<sup>4</sup>

The assumption seems to be being made that it is the EYFS learning goals *per se* that are somehow *causing* higher performance at KS1 several years later - and so by extension, if you simply make sure that the goals are somehow reached at age 5, then *ipso facto*, you will increase (or should I say 'drive up') educational standards at age 7. Thus, children's minister Beverley Hughes was quoted as saying, 'Of those children who achieve at least six points in all the personal, social and emotional development and CLL scales, a very high proportion go on to achieve the expected level and above in KS1 maths (99 per cent), reading (98 per cent) and writing (97 per cent)' – as if this says anything meaningful or useful whatsoever about the efficacy or otherwise of the EYFS!

So-called 'positivistic' research of this kind, by its very nature, has severe methodological shortcomings<sup>5</sup> – to such an extent that one really has to ask what the point is of such research, with its essentially meaningless statements as quoted above. Presumably, its rationale can only be the

assumption that data on children's achievements at age 5 can somehow be used to ensure what their achievements will be at age 7, at Key Stage 1 – or why else do this kind of research at all? Yet to maintain such a view would entail completely fallacious assumptions. Most notably, what is being assumed is precisely what remains to be discovered! – that is, *how it is* that children reach their measured achievements at age 5. If the government is wanting to claim or imply that it was the 'delivery' of the Foundation Stage curriculum that led to the measured achievements at 5, then this simplistic empirical research doesn't even begin to show that.

Second, there is the issue of *causality*. The existence of a statistical correlation between certain achievements at ages 5 and at 7 tells us absolutely nothing about the learning dynamics and the trajectory of how children's learning progresses between those ages. It certainly cannot be assumed that simply making sure that the age-5 children can attain the narrowly measured profile competencies will necessarily then lead to healthily integrated and well founded competencies at a later age. Yet the very fact that this kind of research is being done suggests that this *is* the kind of crassly mechanistic assumption that the DCSF is making; for again, if not, then why do such expensive and resource-consuming research at all?

Finally, to place any faith in research of this kind, one has to assume that what is being measured is what the researchers *believe* is being measured (which it might well not be); and even more importantly, that it is possible to capture and then measure those factors which are most important in early learning. Yet many prominent authorities believe early learning to be a largely *unconscious*, sub-cortical process<sup>6</sup> – in which case it follows that research that only gives credence to what is measurable and quantifiable may well be grossly distorting, to the point of caricature, what it is claiming to measure.

That the results of such research are so sensitive to the way the research is set up and operationalised also means that if you repeat the research enough times in enough different ways, using varying specifications and populations, you are eventually *bound* to find at least one analysis that yields results that 'support' the assumptions you're seeking to justify. Yet such an 'EU Referendum'-type approach to research is dishonestly expedient and brazenly opportunistic, in that you cynically keep repeating the research using different specifications until you get the results you want, and disregard all the uncomfortable disconfirming findings in the interim. This is what appears to have happened in this particular DCSF research exercise.

## CONCLUSIONS

My strong wish from this article is *not* that readers will necessarily agree with my own sceptical ‘take’ on the DCSF’s EYFS research reported here – for as I made clear earlier, we all have our own particular interests in research and in how it is reported, - and I am by no means immune from that. However, if readers come away from reading and reflecting on these questions with a wish and a capacity to think more critically about what is routinely presented as ‘objective’ and ‘factual’ research findings – especially when there is a political agenda involved - then it will have more than served its purpose.

### Key Points

- Headline research findings are very rarely what they seem, and commonly mask all manner of unarticulated assumptions about reality.
- *Every* early-years practitioner is a researcher whenever they work reflectively with children; and we should empower practitioners by recognising this phenomenon, rather than condescendingly adhering to a false hierarchy of ‘knowledge’ in which personal experience is seen as being inferior to so-called ‘objective’, generalisable empirical knowledge.
- Officially commissioned government research on the EYFS yielded highly variable results, some of which were reported and some not – simply confirming suspicions that research of this kind is more ‘politicised’ than it is ‘objective’.
- Research inevitably entails material interests and unarticulated assumptions; and until both are questioned and sufficiently articulated, one’s ability to make mature and discerning assessments of reported research findings will be severely limited.

### References

- 1 Brent Slife and Richard N. Williams, *What’s Behind the Research?: Discovering Hidden Assumptions in the Behavioral Sciences*, Sage, London, 1995.
- 2 Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, SUNY Press, New York, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1997.
- 3 Polly Curtis, ‘Early-years writing lessons “do no good”’, *The Guardian*, 14 July; retrievable at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2290715,00.html?gusrc=rss&feed=8>
- 4 For example, Catherine Gaunt, ‘FS Profile assessments point to future success’, *Nursery World*, 24 June 2008.

- 5 Compare the cogent arguments in Richard Masters, 'The questions to ask', Letter of the Week, *Nursery World*, 10 July 2008.
- 6 See Grethe Hooper Hansen, Letter of the Week, *Times Educational Supplement*, 8 August 2008.

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