

A CASE STUDY TO EXPLORE THE PERCEPTION
OF PRACTITIONERS TO ASSESSMENT AND
TESTING WITHIN THE EARLY YEARS

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Abstract

This case study uses the interpretivist paradigm to explore practitioner's perceptions of assessment and testing within the early years, highlighting the benefits and challenges that the practice, practitioners and children might face, as a result of the implementation of current policy. Ethical approval was gained through the Newman University Ethics Committee, and ongoing written informed consent was sought from all practitioners. Purposive sampling was used to gather the 7 participants for this study, from a school in an urban area of England. The participants comprised of practitioners with different required positions such as deputy head, assistant head, phonics manager, classroom teachers and learning support workers in the early years sector, therefore providing the opportunity for triangulation of professional perspectives to the research. The data collection tool used was semi-structured interviews, which were tape recorded. During the thematic analysis of the data, the research found that there was a significant difference between the rhetoric and reality, in terms of practitioners understanding of the purpose of assessment and testing within the early years. Practitioners believed that assessments and tests were beneficial to planning and acknowledging gaps in children's learning, but were also aware of the Government's agenda behind the implementation of the current policy. The study also found that practitioners felt de-professionalised in the way the current policy is implemented and children were potentially at harm, as a result of the current formal assessments and tests.

Key Words: Assessment; Testing; Early years; Practitioners; Phonics;

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Common Abbreviations

- **KS1** Key Stage 1
- **LSP** Learning support practitioner

Introduction

Furseth and Everett (2013, P.132) suggest that the aim of the introduction is to provide an outline of the purpose of the study, and provide an insight to how the following chapters will unfold. Winstanley (2009, P.44) adds that the introduction should provide background and a justification to the chosen topic. Swetnam (2004, P.75) reiterates this by informing that the introduction should provide an explanation of what prompted the study, then adds, it should state what the research questions are, and where the study will be located.

This chapter will provide a brief outline of the research and introduce the aims of the study. It will then justify the chosen topic, and provide an insight to the background of the study. The following chapters will be the Literature review, Methodology, Data and Analysis and finally the Conclusion.

Throughout the researchers Early Childhood Education and Care Degree studies, there was a central focus on the uniqueness of the child, which made reference to the different rates at which children learn and develop. In parallel to this, the current policy agenda appeared to contradict this philosophy of individuality. This sparked an interest within this area leading to the chosen theme for the study.

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological approach (Lindon, 2012, P.43) all children are unique and grow at different rates. Bronfenbrenner believed that children do not develop in isolation, that many factors play a part such as: Family, peers and friends; Different settings, such as school and places of worship; Experiences and social structures such as education and economic structures and cultural values

(Lindon, 2012, P.44). This suggests that children will not always be at the same level of development as their peers as they progress through school, due to the influence of these factors. There are currently many policies in place throughout the early years sector in the UK designed to assess and test children against a standardised norm for development. An example of this is the current Phonics Screening Check (DfE, 2016). With the debate around the new Baseline Assessment (Clark, 2017) at the point of entry for children in reception, issues were raised around the purpose and motives of these assessments and tests within the early years. Moss (2007) argues that early years practitioners are becoming more disengaged and disinterested with politics, causing the gap between early childhood and politics to widen. He argues that in order to have an effective workforce that can meet the various needs of children in the early years sector, professionals need a way to openly express their beliefs and opinions in regards to policy, to help provide them with a voice. This study aims to do this, as it allows practitioners to anonymously express their opinions and views around the assessment and testing policy in practice.

Academics are also engaged in the debate around the values and purpose of assessment and testing within the early years. This can be seen through ongoing campaigns such as the Too Much Too Soon campaign (Too Much Too Soon, 2017) and the More Than a Score campaign (More Than a Score, 2017), which challenge the rhetoric around these testing and assessment processes.

Ang (2014, P.7) points out that although the phonics screening check came into place in September 2011, England are still behind in reading compared to other nations, such as Finland, Shanghai and Korea. This shows that there are other

countries that use different ways of assessing and testing within the early years, that might be beneficial to the UK. Campbell-Barr and Nygard (2014) add that with the continuing level of international competitiveness rising around the globe, the Government are focusing more towards getting higher results, and as an effect are losing sight of the child.

The aim of the study was to investigate practitioner's views and perceptions around assessment and testing within the early years. The subsidiary questions being addressed were:

- What are the practitioner's views around the current policies in relation to assessment and testing within the early years?
- What are the potential benefits of assessment and testing in the early years?
- What affect does the focus on assessment and testing have on the practitioners and children?

The questions were designed to gather information from early years practitioners around the current policies in place surrounding assessment and testing within the early years. The questions were also created to highlight the potential benefits and challenges that practitioners and children might face, during the implementation of these.

This case study used the interpretivist paradigm and through purposive sampling was able to gain access to 7 participants from a school located within an urban area of England. The research method used to collect the data was Semi-structured interviews.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the aims and purpose of the study, providing a rationale for the chosen research question. It then went on to outline the research methods used. The following chapter will be the literature review, where the current literature surrounding assessment and testing will be explored.

Literature review.

This literature review intends to engage in a comprehensive exploration of the literature surrounding assessment and testing within the early years (Aveyard, 2010, P.1). Its aim is to tackle the main issues raised within the research, whilst trying to provide a balanced and fair discussion (Winstaley, 2009, P.48-49). It is important to carry out a literature review as it will help to shape and inform practice and ignite discussion (Coughlan, Cronin, and Ryan, 2013, P.1). It is essential to carry out a literature review as it helps to provide the relevant knowledge needed to have an in depth understanding about the topic, without it, the researcher will not be able to address the issues within the study (Hart, 1998, P.1). It also allows the researcher to find a gap in knowledge, surrounding the subject. This literature review will be organised into themes, briefly examining assessment and testing, then exploring the challenges and benefits of assessment and testing in the early years, then moving on to discuss the effects assessment and testing have on children and practitioners.

Assessment and testing

Brodie (2013, P.52) states that assessment is a reflection on what has been observed within the setting, but feels it should not be a form of tick boxing. She believes it should be used to understand the potential of each child. Howard et al, (2013 P.101) agrees that assessment should be a way of gathering information and evidence about a child, to help create judgements about their learning. On the other hand, testing has been defined by Knoester and Au (2015, P.7) as a way of measuring, sorting and ranking students. This suggests that testing is something that is used to provide children with a grade, to enable comparison with other

children, whereas assessment is a process that is done over time to explore areas where children may need extra support. This suggests that assessment and testing is something that may interlink.

Benefits of assessment and testing.

The current body of literature shows that there are many benefits to assessment and testing within the early years. Ang (2014, P.5) suggests that it helps to monitor and evaluate what children have learnt. She develops this by discussing how assessment and testing can help practitioners understand a child's learning progress, and help to measure the effectiveness of the curriculum. Ang (2014) also believes that assessment and testing are positive tools to inform practitioners whether their delivery technique is working. This indicates that assessment and testing should only be used in the best interests of the child, to help them reach their full potential. Howard et al (2013, P.101) explores how assessment and testing is often used to create two judgements; firstly, using evidence to analyse what has been already learnt and secondly, for practitioners to interpret this information and decide on methods to move the child's learning forward. This is similar to what Ang (2014) suggests, as they both perceive the benefits of assessment and testing to be for the children and practitioners. Although a little dated, the work of Conner et al (1989, P.5) introduced the idea that assessment and testing is not just beneficial to the children and practitioners, but also the wider public. William (2010, P.2) develops this, suggesting that parents, tax payers, employers and the wider community are keen to see what students have learnt. This provides a utilitarian approach to assessment and testing, by suggesting that children need the right skills and knowledge in order to engage effectively within society and help contribute to the

economic growth (Campbell-barr and Nygard, 2014). These two pieces of literature (William, 2010 and Conner et al, 1989) suggest the opposite intention of what Brodie (2013) and Howard et al (2013) discuss, as they create an impression that assessment and testing is something that is competitive, monitored, and holds expectations, as they explain how the results might reflect upon the children's potential within society, which will encourage the children to try and get the highest score, and be the best. William's (2010) explanation also suggests that all individuals involved might have a stake in the outcomes, adding pressure for positive results not only on the practitioners, but also on the children.

Challenges of assessment and testing

When comparing the literature in this field, it is apparent that there are more issues around challenges of assessment, than the benefits. Various pieces of literature argue that standardised testing and assessment are not fair or neutral tools to use within the early years, as children are individuals and as such will have different individual outcomes. For the purpose of this literature review there will be a focus on the current phonics screening check, as this is currently the biggest and most controversial test within this field, and it would not be realistic to cover all tests within the early years. Jean Piaget would agree with the use of standardised testing as an appropriate tool to measure children's ability, as he believed that children developed through set stages throughout their childhood. He thought that children of a similar age, shared a similar understanding of things (Lindon 2012, P.34). On the other hand, Lev Vygotsky would challenge the appropriateness of standardised testing as he believed that children did not pass through set stages and that they developed at different times, under different influences (Lindon, 2012, P.37).

Upadyaya and Eccles (2014) and Clark (2013) all agree that the child's age has a huge impact on their outcomes and achievement. Evidence of this was seen in the first phonics screening check in 2012, where the results show that the pass rate for the oldest boys in the year group was 65%, whereas the youngest boys was 44% (Clark, 2013). Similarly, the oldest girls achieved a pass rate of 72% compared with the youngest at 51% (Clark, 2013). This suggests that age creates a huge inequality within standardised testing. Clark (2013) adds that the following year when the children were due to retake the test, as a result of failing, the positive outcome of a pass might be as a result of maturation in the children, as opposed to the further use of phonics materials. Furthermore, evidence shows that practitioners were not highly concerned about the impact of age. In a recent study looking at 940 year 1 practitioner's views around standardised testing, it was noted that inequalities surrounding the child's age was made little reference to (Clark, 2013a). This might be due to the perception of the potential impact of other inequalities within this sector and practitioners might feel age is not the most concerning problem, as other individual characteristics that children hold might be more of an issue. Other factors that Clark (2013) argues might have an impact on children's achievement outcomes are gender, socio-economic background, and heritage. The statistics from the Phonics screening check support this as it shows more girls reached a pass mark than boys, only 44% of children that were entitled to free school meals reached the benchmark and the lowest scoring groups were Travellers of an Irish heritage and those from a Romany background (Clark, 2013). Assi and Reid (2016) add to what Clark (2013), Upadyaya and Eccles (2014) suggest, with evidence in their research, that assessment and testing outcomes are influenced by the child's support from

home, their previous nursery provision, and their home circumstances, i.e., whether they are a looked after child or adopted. The study (Assi and Reid, 2014) reported that all of the 100 practitioners that took part emphasised that children's previous nursery provision and input from home made a huge difference to their level of understanding. In addition to these factors, Clark (2013a) discusses the findings from a research project that was carried out by Maggie Snowling, that investigated practitioner's beliefs surrounding the current phonics screening check. It was reported within the study that practitioners were becoming increasingly concerned with these types of standardised tests being carried out on children who spoke English as an additional language and who had special educational needs. They believe that these children are at a disadvantage compared to the other children taking the same test. All of these factors show that when it comes to assessment and testing within the early years, there is no 'one size fits all', and thus it would be unfair to use a standard test on all children that hold different inequalities, which may have an impact on their learning and assessment achievements.

Inequality is not the only challenge faced with standardised testing, as evidence has shown that by having these procedures in place it is costly, and time consuming for the practice. As high stakes assessments and testing is becoming increasingly common within the early years (Clark, 2015), schools are investing a lot of money on materials to help support teaching, to try and improve the overall outcome. A study was carried out after the introduction of the phonics screening check in 2012, to investigate how much schools spent on its implementation and introduction. Statistics show that schools originally declared the average cost was £400 to support the introduction and administration of the test, but later in the report it became

apparent that there was a bigger variation with costs ranging from zero to £5000 (Clark, 2015). The study's statistics might be misleading as it was uncertain what financial costs each school included, as it was down to their individual interpretation of the question, for example, some might not have added the extra cost in teacher time and supply cover. Furthermore, the study did not indicate if the amount spent on buying the commercial materials and staff training was included. This shows that it is costing schools to implement these assessments and tests, but there is no accurate figure of how much was actually spent (Clark, 2013a). In addition to this, the overall amount of additional time that was used to support the introduction of the check ranged from zero to 40 hours, similarly, the questions might have been interpreted differently and this might not be an accurate amount. However, this does show that to introduce and implement assessment and testing is putting a strain on the financial ability of the schools and taking up teacher's valuable time, which is significant if the test is not accurately reflecting children's ability.

The effect of assessment and testing on children and practitioners.

Studies show that assessment and testing has an impact on children's self-esteem. Kousholt (2016) argues that assessment and testing allows children to see themselves as objects, such as, clever; slow; gifted; and disadvantaged. Evidence of this was seen through observation within his study when a girl expressed that, she was always the last to finish in tests because she's not very clever. Although Upadaya and Eccles (2014) pointed out in their study that one of the positive effects testing and assessment can have on children, is that they gain higher self-esteem with positive outcomes, Kousholt highlights that it will have a negative impact on children's self-esteem that don't pass, which he argues holds more serious

consequences. Upadyaya and Eccles (2014) also found that within assessment and testing conditions, children will self-conceptualise what practitioners tell them about their achievement, for example, if a child does well in a test, they will be given praise, whereas, children who do badly will receive pity, and will interpret this feedback as them being less competent. Children view assessments and tests as a capable method of measuring their competence (Kousholt, 2016), and therefore, will not challenge or criticize the feedback. This shows that children don't see the test as the problem, but will direct the blame to themselves.

Children also see tests as competitions, and this can sometimes lead to false assumptions, such as believing they have beaten another child because they finished first, whereas, in reality, they might not have answered the questions correctly (Kousholt, 2016). There was evidence of this happening throughout Kousholt's research as children were comparing what questions they had and how many they had answered. This might have a negative effect on children, as they will believe they have done well, whereas in reality, when they receive their feedback they might become confused if they have scored low. By being a part of what they see as a competition, they will again brand themselves as successes or failures. Shaping children's self-esteem and self-perception are not the only factors that are influenced by assessments and tests, as they also cause pressure and stress on children. In the research report carried out by Clark (2013a), it was clear that children were becoming distressed and uncomfortable under the pressure of their phonics check, to the point where the test had to be stopped on multiple occasions. There was also signs of stress within Kousholt's (2016) study, as children had a lack of control under the testing conditions, causing them to become concerned about when the test was

likely to finish, and how many questions they had to complete. Assi and Reid (2016) would argue that by putting children under these conditions, it removes the idea of a child-centred approach to assessment which, as Howard et al (2013, P.101) and Brodie (2013, P.52) both pointed out at the beginning of this chapter was the most important benefit to testing and assessment. Therefore, the conditions and circumstances that these tests were being carried out in, were not fully benefiting the child.

Testing and assessment also has an impact on the practitioners. By following the Government's frameworks, practitioners have their freedom to follow different approaches to teaching which they feel will benefit the child removed (Clark, 2013). Within Assi and Reid's (2016) findings, practitioners stated that by following these procedures to collect data about the children's ability they felt it was de-professionalising, as they were not allowed to follow their professional instinct. The study also highlighted that the practitioners were concerned that testing and assessments were adding strain on their time and resources. Practitioners felt they had to focus a lot of their attention on supporting children to try and get a pass. Within the research teachers were concerned about the results of tests and assessment, shaping their perceptions of children. They believed it would cause lower expectations and increase the probability of labelling the children. Upadyaya and Eccles (2014) support this idea as they suggest teachers assume the children that are high achievers, are putting more effort into their school work, when in reality, there are various influences that children might have, that have an effect on their results, causing a labelling effect towards children who score lower assuming they 'don't try'. Although assessment and testing can help to identify areas where

children need extra support, the research report carried out by Clark (2013a) suggested that practitioners felt the Government tests didn't provide any more information that the teacher assessments didn't already pick up on. It also raises concern that, although the tests do highlight which children need extra support, there isn't any prescribed course of action in place, as a result of the assessments and tests, to help support these children. Through questionnaires and interviews practitioners also raised issues around the 2012 phonics screening check, which suggested that the test results were not very informative, as the results had to be relayed back to the parents and school quickly, which meant that the practitioners could only provide a response around whether the test was a pass or fail and could not provide an in depth break down within the feedback in regards to what the children had actually done. This raises concerns about the purpose of these tests, as the evidence shows that data is not being collected to help the child improve, it is being used to provide a body of statistics (Clark 2013a). Overall these studies provide evidence that children and practitioners are affected by the implementation of these assessments and tests, as more pressure is added, and the outcomes and feedback are helping shape what the practitioner think about the child and what the child thinks about themselves, and reiterates issues about the purpose of these tests, and creates a debate as to who these tests are actually benefiting.

Summary

This literature review has started by exploring the aims of assessment and testing, which suggested that they are put in place to benefit the child and practitioners to help them reach their full potential. The chapter then went on to look at the benefits of assessment and testing, finding that the main benefit is to gain an understanding

of what the child has learnt, but also reflecting upon the effectiveness of practice. It then went on to look at the challenges faced with assessment and testing, finding that, they aren't neutral tools to use on children, as they don't take account of inequalities that may impact on children's ability to meet the benchmark. Finally, the chapter then began to unpick some of the effects that assessment and testing has on the children and practitioners. This discovered that not only does it have a negative effect of their self-esteem and self-perception, but they also add pressure and stress onto them at a young age. It also became apparent that the practitioners felt their professionalism was removed under these circumstances, and they were becoming increasingly concerned that the results were influencing the process of labelling. It was also discussed that during the implementation of these assessment and tests it was a drain on finances and resources. It then closes by influencing more thought on what the real purpose of assessment and testing is in today's society.

The literature in this chapter suggests that there is not enough evidence within this field, that involves talking to practitioners about whether they see testing and assessment as beneficial or a barrier. This shows there is a gap in knowledge, making space for this study. The next chapter will outline the research design, looking at the approaches adopted for this study, the sampling strategy and the data collection tools.

Methodology

This chapter will provide an in-depth analysis, and justification for the chosen research design. Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.1) inform that when undertaking research, the researcher must provide a justification as to why the methods chosen were the most appropriate and effective for that study.

The research aims to investigate practitioner's opinions around assessment and testing within the early years. Silverman (2013, P.122) suggests that the purpose of methodology is to outline which methods were chosen for the study and provide an explanation as to how they were used. Taylor and Bogdan (1984, P.1) imply that the purpose of the methodology chapter should be to investigate the ways in which problems are approached to seek answers. Punch and Oancea (2014, P.16) add to this by defining methodology as the source that lies behind the different approaches and methods of inquiry within any study being carried out. This chapter will start by outlining the research approach, it will then go on to explain the sampling strategy and the research methods used. Finally, it will provide a summary of the chapter.

Research approach

The research used the interpretative paradigm (Walliman and Appleton, 2009, P.52). The approach selected for this study was qualitative. McMillan and Weyers (2014, P.89) describe qualitative research as being rich in descriptive data as opposed to non-numerical data. Stake (1995, P.41) suggests that the qualitative approach should be used when research relates to cases, phenomena, and when seeking patterns of unanticipated and expected relationships. Qualitative approaches can be very useful when examining complex information which needs to be un-picked in

order to make sense of it. This might be individuals: Feelings, values and opinions; Interpretations and responses from participants; Patterns in behaviour and case studies including critical incidents (McMillan and Weyers, 2014, P.127-128). This relates to the research as the opinions, perceptions and feelings towards assessments and testing within the early years was investigated.

When investigations are being carried out with individuals, a group, an institution, a community or even a resource, the case study approach is used (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, P.101). Within this research, the opinions of a group of early years practitioners were investigated, therefore the case study approach was the most appropriate. Stake (1995, P.16) suggests that case studies seek to provide a greater understanding of the uniqueness and complexity of the area being studied.

Furthermore, Silverman (2013, P.142) adds, that within case studies, the core purpose is to provide a detailed investigation to develop a fuller and richer understanding. This relates to the research study as a deep investigation was carried out to help the researcher understand the practitioner's views and opinions around assessment and testing within the early years. Stake (1995, P.12) suggests that for case studies to be effective the researcher needs to be patient, reflective and willing to see another point of view. He develops this by adding that in order to catch the complexity of the case, all presumptions must be ignored by the researcher in relation to the practitioners every day, ordinary pursuits (Stake, 1995, P.1). A limitation of using the case study approach was that the data cannot be generalisable. Bassey (1999, P.32) argues that although case studies are not generalisable, they can be reliable in particular situations. Overall, the case study approach was the most beneficial to the study as it helped provide the researcher

with an in-depth understanding surrounding the views, and issues in relation to assessment and testing within the early years, in its everyday format, from the practitioners point of view.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was chosen for this study. Sarantkos (2013, P.177) describes purposive sampling as a form of choosing subjects, who in the researcher's opinion, are the most relevant to the study. In this research, the participants needed to be working within an early years setting, therefore purposive sampling was the most appropriate. Silverman (2013, P.148) supports this method as he reiterates that when carrying out qualitative, research many researchers employ purposive sampling, as opposed to random sampling, as it seeks out relevant groups, settings and individuals, where the processes being investigated are most likely to occur. Within this, the snowball sampling approach was adopted. Silverman (2013, P.203) describes snowball sampling as a way of gaining access to other possible participants by using the social networks of current informants. Sarantkos (2013, P.179) reiterates this by explaining that snowball sampling is the process where the researcher selects a few respondents, and asks them to suggest other individuals who might fit the criteria of the study, and might be willing to participate. He adds that it is beneficial if the population is unknown. Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.240) suggest the snowball sampling approach is a useful method if the participants are 'hard to reach'. Therefore, snowball sampling was the most appropriate for this research as practitioners were able to suggest other possible participants within their field that they worked with. It also helped the researcher gain access to more senior professionals in this sector, such as the deputy head teacher, who might have been

hard to reach due to the high demand of workload. By gaining access to practitioners who were working at different levels within the sector, a triangulation of multi-perspectives and views were represented (Stake, 1995, P.108). Taylor and Bogdan (1984, P.68) support this as they believe that using different levels of perspectives helps to eliminate bias, because the researcher can overlook the data and pick out the main themes from the respondents, making it easier to identify individual bias. Sarantkos (2013, P.105) also agrees that this helps the research to become more valid.

The sample size consisted of 7 participants from a school in an urban area. This study will therefore not be representative of the population as a whole, but McMillan and Weyers (2014, P.130) suggest that this is not an issue as the value of qualitative research is formed through the authentic and case-specific detail that it entails. They add to this by describing how the information collected can be richer and deeper within small scale qualitative research, than that being described through numbers and statistics, as it takes advantage of the many subtle approaches of using language to express opinions, experiences, and feelings (McMillan and Weyers, 2014, P.130). Within the time frame provided to carry out the research, McMillan and Weyers (2014, P.143) suggest it is very rare to be able to research every individual in the population or space in which the study focuses on. Punch and Oancea (2014, P.47) suggest that it is better to carry out small-scale studies well, than to carry out a large-scale study insufficiently. They add that small-scale studies are valuable for the contribution to knowledge and insight to professional practice, as a small-scale study can go into more depth with a smaller sample, which might possibly open the door to a greater study (Punch and Oancea, 2014, P.47).

Therefore, this study is beneficial to the body of knowledge, as it provides a small-scale, yet in-depth study, that is not generalizable, but raises awareness around this area, which could possibly open doors for larger studies.

Research Methods

Interviews were used to collect data within this study. Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.149) describe interviews as a method where one person asks questions to individuals or a group of people, with the expectation of gaining answers and understanding to a particular question or elaboration of their views regarding a particular topic. Punch and Oancea (2014, P.182) explain that interviews are the most effective tool in qualitative research, to try and understand others. They believe that interviews are a positive way of investigating individuals perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructs of reality (Punch and Oancea, 2014, P.182). Taylor and Bogdan (1984, P.88) reiterate this by suggesting that qualitative interviewing unlocks what is important in the minds of the participants, such as their: perspectives, meanings, definitions and how they perceive, categorize, and experience the world. Therefore, this was the most appropriate way of collecting the data within this study as the purpose of the research was to explore early years' practitioner's views, opinions and reality regarding assessment and testing. Seidman (2006, P.9) also supports the use of this data collection tool within the study as he believes that the root of interviews is to understand the lived experiences of others and what meanings they make of that experience. Stake (1995, P.64) adds that interviews are the main road to understanding reality.

The type of interview selected for the study was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews provide a guide of questions, where departure from the guidelines is not seen as an issue, allowing the interviewee to set the pace (Silverman, 2013, P.204). Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.152) explain how one of the benefits of using semi-structured interviews is that flexibility is allowed. This enabled the participant to say what they wanted, in the way that they felt most comfortable with. This was therefore beneficial to the study because it allowed the researcher to move away from the guidelines when they felt another area could be explored with the participant, within the topic that would be beneficial to the findings of the research. It also allowed the interview to flow more naturally and allow the participant to feel more comfortable.

Sarantkos (2013, P.296) explores some of the advantages of using interviews. He describes that the flexibility is beneficial as it can meet the needs of diverse situations. He also suggests that by using interviews you can gain a higher response rate. Easy administration is another advantage that Sarantkos (2013, P.296) points out as it does not require the participants to have the ability to read or handle complex documentation or long questionnaires. He adds that by carrying out interviews the researcher is able to observe non-verbal behaviour, which is a disadvantage when using questionnaires. Another advantage is that the researcher has the capacity to correct misunderstandings (Sarantkos, 2013, P.296). This was crucial within this research study as the opinions and experiences of practitioners were explored, therefore it was important for the researcher to ensure they were interpreting the information correctly to create an informed and accurate analysis of the data. Sarantkos (2013, P.296) also believes that an advantage to using

interviews as opposed to questionnaires is that the researcher is provided with the opportunity to record spontaneous answers. This is due to the respondents not having as much time to think about the questions, meaning they might answer in a more honest and open way. On the other hand, Sarantkos (2013, P.296) suggests that a disadvantage of using interviews is that it can be an inconvenience to the participants and the researcher. To avoid this within the research, interviews were planned ahead with the participants, ensuring that it was a convenient time for both the participant and the researcher. Sarantkos (2013, P.296) adds that another disadvantage of using interviews is the lack of anonymity, and sensitivity. Within this case study, all information recorded was kept anonymous, and questions being asked were not those of a sensitive nature. Punch and Oancea (2014, P.188) develop this by suggesting that interviews can also be very time consuming, and there might be practical implications as to where and when they will take place. Before the interviews were carried out a suitable, quiet and secure location was chosen, and the interviews were carried out at a time that was suitable for the participant and the researcher to ensure that the length of the interview did not become an issue for both parties. Seidman (2006, P.12) reiterates this by explaining that interviews can be very time consuming, as the researcher will have to finalise the study, gain access to the setting, make contact with possible participants, carry out the interviews, transcribe the data and then analyse it. In order to avoid running out of time, a detailed time table was created and reviewed each week to ensure the project was on track. Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.150) support this as they believe that other methods such as questionnaires can be more time efficient, but they do not provide the rich information that interviews create. McMillan and Weyers (2014,

P.160) add to this by stating that although interviews are time consuming, the face to face situation that they are set up in produce a more considered response from the participants.

The interviews were tape recorded. Taylor and Bogdan (1984, P.103) suggest that by tape recording the researcher will be able to capture more data than what they would from memory. Silverman (2013, P.208) explain how the advantage of tape recording is that you can play it back, and the researcher will not have to write notes down throughout the interview. This allowed the researcher to make eye contact with the participant and monitor body language. It also allowed the interview to flow better. On the other hand, by using a tape recorder, some participants might have felt self-conscious (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, P.102). To prevent this the researcher tried to minimise the recorder's presence, even if the participant didn't mind being recorded, allowing the participant to feel more confident and comfortable. Another disadvantage of using a tape recorder is that it might be muffled when being played back, or it might stop recording (Seidman, 2006, P.114). To avoid this the researcher tested the recorder beforehand to ensure it was audible and, a few minutes into the interview, discretely checked it was still recording.

Many ways were considered to ensure the interview created the most efficient and truthful response. The questions were open ended, and the researcher ensured leading questions were not used to avoid bias. Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.161) suggest that by asking warm up questions at the beginning of the interview the participant will feel more at ease. McMillan and Weyers (2014, P.160) add to this by suggesting that by asking simple questions such as what their role entails will make the participant feel more comfortable. By implementing this within the semi-

structured interview design, the results were more likely to be rich, honest and valid. Taylor and Bogdan (1984, P.94) also suggests that the researcher should ensure they do not come across as judgemental. A way of preventing this was to ensure the researcher communicated their understanding of what the participant was explaining and showed empathy to their responses. The researcher also ensured that they expressed patience, and allowed the participant to talk, even if they were off track, preventing the participant from closing up or feeling their opinion was invalid (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, P.95). The questions were piloted with a member of staff before carrying out the interviews. McMillan and Weyers (2014, P.133) suggest that this will help to identify any weaknesses or inconsistencies, and will iron out any problems, such as time and order of questions. The pilot interviews found that the questions were clear and understandable and little changes were made.

Ethical considerations

All research studies must be characterised by protection of the human rights, dignity, health and safety of researchers and participants (McMillan and Weyers, 2014, P.193). All parties have the right to be protected from harm (Seidman, 2006, P.61) therefore this study gained ethical approval through the Newman University College's Ethics Committee, before any contact was made with the participants. This minimised any risks to the participants and researcher in regards to their welfare, during the implementation of the research. All participants were provided with an information sheet, to inform them about the nature and purpose of the study. This provided a detailed explanation about the aims of the research and how the research would be conducted, the nature of the questions in the interview and how it would be recorded (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, P.150). The participants were also

informed about their right to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality (Sarantkos, 2013, P.17). The participants were made aware of the possible breach of confidentiality if information was shared that was deemed to be a risk to themselves or others. All information recorded was stored anonymously, and kept secure for future reference and evidence. Written informed consent was gained from all participants. This was gathered and documented appropriately and all participants were aware of their right to withdraw at any point (Sarantkos, 2013, P.17). The researcher also ensured at each meeting with the participants that the consent was ongoing and genuine (Punch and Oancea, 2014, P.66). The participants were debriefed when the findings were concluded.

Summary

This chapter has provided a detailed explanation and justification in relation to the methods and approaches that were selected for this study. It has explored the use of semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, tape recording and ethical considerations. The next chapter will explore the findings and analysis of the research.

Findings and Analysis

Stake (1995, P.71) suggests that analysis is the process of underpinning data, which begins straight away, when carrying out the research. He adds by pulling data apart and placing it back together, the researcher will be able to make the data more meaningful (Stake, 1995, P.74). Mukherji and Albon (2015, P.262) describe the process of analysis as summarising common patterns and themes.

The aim of the research is to investigate practitioner's views around assessment and testing within the early years. This chapter will follow a thematic approach to presenting and analysing the data. The findings will then be located within existing research. After coding the transcripts, three key themes were chosen: The purpose of assessment and testing; The implications involved with assessment and testing and is testing and assessment necessary?

The purpose of assessments and tests?

When carrying out the research the respondents made a clear distinction between formative assessments and formal testing. The respondents implied that the purpose of assessment and testing is a subjective area as all practitioners had their own opinions and therefore there was not one collective definition. All participants provided examples of how assessments and tests were beneficial. The Nursery teacher said, *'It's to see where the children are at the current time when you're assessing them. To know what you've got to move them on to, and how to support their learning.'* This is supported by Brodie (2013, p.52) and Howard et al's (2013, P.101) definition of assessment and testing suggesting that it is to help inform practitioners of children's understanding and potential surrounding a subject. The

Reception LSP reported, *'It's to find where they're at, and band them so we can put them into groups.'* This explanation is similar to Knoester and Au's (2015, P.7) definition, suggesting it's to help practitioners measure, sort and rank children. The Phonics Manager added to this, suggesting that without having children in the right groups, there is no chance of progression. This clearly shows that testing and assessment is an important aspect for supporting the development of children. The Assistant Head Teacher saw the purpose of assessment and testing from a different perspective, by suggesting it is used as a *'diagnostic tool, to find gaps in children's learning'*, but added it's *'to measure teaching staff and to measure schools'*. This suggests that testing is not always there to benefit the child, it's also used as a tool to ensure effective teaching is being carried out. This is supported by Ang's (2014, P.5) idea that assessment and testing is used to help practitioners evaluate whether their delivery technique is effective. The Deputy Head Teacher implied that the only reason assessment and tests are used within schools is because the practitioners have no choice, and that the purpose of assessment and testing from the Governments point of view is very different to the practitioners. She said;

'The Governments purpose is to measure schools, and their progress and their standards, and to hold us to account. Also, to have something that forms the league tables, so that parents can see where a school is. From a teacher's perspective, it's a statutory requirement, something we have to do because it is imposed on us. So, we have to make the most of what it gives us. So, from a teacher's perspective it's about finding where the children are at, finding out what their gaps in learning are, and making sure that you plan from that in order to

address those gaps. So, it's finding what they can and can't do and tailoring the learning more closely to their needs and capabilities.'

This response is supported by Conner et al (1989, P.5) and William (2010, P.2) as they suggested that assessment and testing is a tool used by the Government to reflect what children have learnt back to the public. It is reasonable to assume that early years' practitioners have explained the rhetoric and reality of assessments and tests. The rhetoric being to help monitor children's progress and help them to develop their learning, but in reality, it is a tool for the Government to hold schools and practitioners to account if the children are not achieving. Another example to support this is the reception teacher said, *'I think a lot of it is to prove teacher ability, to justify the pay scale. I think sometimes it does come not as a benefit for the child, but a benefit for them to see how teachers perform.'* This is supported by William (2010, P.2) as he implied that the tax payers want a justification of how public money is being spent.

This shows that the purpose of assessment and testing within the early years is a contested area, as practitioners are unsure whether it's for the benefit of the child or the benefit of the Government, to justify public spending and to compare schools. It is also reasonable to assume from the detail of the accounts, that the practitioners further up the hierarchy are more aware of the Government agenda, compared to the practitioners in the classroom. The practitioners understand there is a link with assessment and testing to the Government, but did not provide as much detail within their response compared to the Deputy and Assistant head teachers.

The implications involved.

Many practitioners suggested that the use of assessments and tests are important to their practice. Many practitioners said it is important to their planning, to ensure that they aren't doing activities that are a waste of teaching time. The Nursery Teacher said;

'If I was doing an activity recognising numbers to 5, but I had got a child who could already count to 20, that's a waste of teaching for that particular child, so it's to support my planning, to know what I need to teach them.'

This is supported by Howard et al's (2013, P.101) theory of two judgements, that the practitioner needs to use evidence to find out what the children have learnt, then use this to decide on how to move the child forward. The Phonics Manager added that within their role assessment and testing helps to create continuity and flow throughout the school. She believes that assessments allow her to understand where children are, as they move up the school, and therefore can provide the best support. This is supported by Ang (2014, P.5) and the idea of using assessment and tests to monitor what has been learnt. The Deputy head teacher expands on Ang's (2014, P.5) idea as she explained how practitioners benefit from assessment and testing as it helps to *'underpin teacher judgement assessments.'* She added that it *'Does help to give a general picture of how they're doing with regards to the national curriculum, and whether they are performing at the expected level. So, it's just a small part of the bigger picture really.'*

On the other hand, many of the practitioners said implementing the assessments and tests is time consuming and stressful. The Reception teacher said,

'From the top level, you do have a lot of pressure on you to meet certain percentage gaps and you are under a lot of pressure constantly. You can't let it stress you out because otherwise you'd be working around the clock and it would get to you, and impact your teaching'

The Nursery Teacher agreed, *'It's very time consuming. In Nursery, I've got 66 children, so it can take time off me from doing observations and playing with the children.'* This suggests that the downward pressure on teachers is influencing their practice, implying that a lot of time is being spent on teaching and implementing the assessments and tests, stripping them away from other important ways of supporting the children. This is supported by Clark's (2015) work that found practitioners spent up to 40 hours extra introducing the phonics screening check.

The Deputy Head Teacher is aware of this challenge as she said,

'I think there is definitely two challenges. First one is the balance between teaching the curriculum and not teaching to the test. Making sure we keep a broad curriculum and teaching everything we should be. On the flip side, we have to prepare them for tests. So, your second issue is we don't want to disadvantage our children we've got to have some form of practice paper. If they're given a test for the first ever time and they don't know how to tackle that, or it is an unseen format, then they're not going to do their best. Finding that balance between not letting it narrow our curriculum, but equally we've got to give them some preparation, for a fair chance.'

This adds to Clark's (2015) research as it supports the idea that schools are investing a lot of time and materials to prepare children for tests. The Assistant head

reiterated this, *'But the tests are preparing them for the Government testing, which is what we have to do and what we do in the league tables. So, we would be foolish not to prepare our children for testing.'* This shows that, although practitioners might not agree with certain tests, as it is a statutory requirement, practitioners have no choice, and therefore have to use valuable time to prepare the children, in order to get positive results, as this reflects on the setting.

On the other hand, the Reception teacher said that one of the positives to formal assessment and testing is that it is unbiased. *'It can be a fair judgement, so I'm not involved because it's an outer party doing it, it's seen as fair.'* This shows that by having independent parties carry out the tests such as the phonics screening check, the results become unbiased. This suggests that it's confirming practitioner's professional judgements to the Government, to make the data reliable. However, it could be suggested that the practitioners are unreliable and their professional judgement cannot always be trusted. This is supported by Assi and Reid's (2016) findings that practitioners felt de-professionalised as their professional instinct is challenged.

Two practitioners also talked about how practical issues can also be a challenge when carrying out assessments and tests. The Phonics Manager explained how finding a suitable location that is silent is an issue, as there isn't a specific room, causing her to *'run in and out of offices where they're not being used.'* The Reception LSP agreed that the lack of space is also an issue for her, *'If you're stuck in a corridor then you've got the dryer going off, that's a challenge in its own.'*

The practitioners also discussed the affects assessment and testing can have on the children. Some said they can have a positive impact. The Phonics Manager explained how it allows children to be grouped correctly, ensuring the work they're given is not too challenging, but not under stimulating. Many of the other practitioners agreed, that the main benefit was that children could have differentiated learning that meets their needs. The Reception Teacher talked about how the children work on praise, *'They love getting their 3 stickers it makes them feel proud of themselves when they've achieved something... these children are only four, five years old, and I don't think they are quite aware of what a test is.'* Upadyaya and Eccles (2014) supported this point by suggesting that the praise from assessments and tests helps increase children's self-esteem and confidence. From the participants responses, it is evident that the practitioners ensure there is minimal harm to the children in the way that the tests and assessments are administered.

Later in the interview the Reception teacher contradicted this by saying,

'I had a girl in my phonics who was really good, she was on the same level with the other children in the group, but she lacked confidence and used to come to phonics and cry. We moved her down a group, where she felt more confident and comfortable, and she was fine then. She's 5 now, she's one of the oldest. So, she was more aware that when she was in a more pressured situation she had to perform and because she lacked confidence, she felt the pressure and cried.'

The response contradicts what this practitioner said earlier as it shows that children are aware of the pressure being put onto them, causing them to feel distressed and scared. The Assistant Head Teacher reiterated that assessments and tests made

children feel vulnerable. She said, *'They feel vulnerable and exposed and they don't want to get it wrong, and because it challenges them, the picture goes beyond what they're capable of, some children are very exposed by it.'* The Phonics Manager added *'Going into a whole new environment where they haven't been before, it's silent, and it is sit there, and it is the first answer they give. Some get nervous.'*

This explains how the testing environment can be scary for children, implying they might not perform to their best ability, suggesting that it will not be an accurate reflection of the child, potentially damaging their welfare. This is supported by Kousholt's (2016) research which suggests that assessments and tests allow children to see themselves as objects, such as failures, highlighting that the children's self-esteem can be negatively affected if they don't pass. The Deputy Head Teacher agreed,

'I don't think that the children receive any benefit from tests, in fact anything. I'd say it puts them through stressful situations, in particular, the younger ones. I'm not particularly a fan of tests in KS1. It's the Government's agenda really. Children who've worked really hard all year it's nice for them to have acknowledgement, but if they don't achieve it can be demoralising.'

This response also links with Upadyaya and Eccles's (2014) work that suggests practitioners sometimes assume that children only achieve if they put the effort in, when in reality research such as Clarks (2013) is evidence that other influences such as support from home can have a significant effect on the children's outcomes. This response supports the idea, suggesting that children might put effort in and still not get the result they hoped for, affecting their self-esteem.

Is it necessary?

All practitioners implied that formal assessments and tests were not necessary within the early years. The Assistant Head pointed out

'It informs children's next steps, but they'd probably know that without doing formal assessments. I know that assessments and tests are not right for small children. I go for the observational side and the teacher assessments, believing that your teachers are professionals and they can make judgements without a test.'

This suggests that the benefits gained from formal assessments and tests would not be lost without them, as practitioners already have a clear understanding of areas that children need support in, from their teacher assessments and observations. This is supported by Clark's (2013a) research which agreed that Government tests didn't provide any more detail than what teacher assessments already picked up on. All practitioners also agreed that the benchmark set for children within these tests are unrealistic, also supporting Clark's (2013a) research. The Phonics Manager also explained,

'I think it's set for middle class England, that have lots of work done at home, they go into reception already, nearly reading. Our children come out of reception, and if they can speak a sentence, we're happy. I don't think the benchmark set is at all realistic for a school like this.'

This supports research that suggest factors such as background and individual characteristics have an influence on achievement (Clark, 2013, Assi and Reid, 2016,

Upadyaya and Eccles, 2014). Many practitioners raised issues surrounding the location of the school. The Nursery teacher said;

'I think there should be different benchmarks depending on where the school is. At the moment, we have the same benchmark as a school in Cambridge, and the cohort here is very different. The parenting and support the children get are different. So, should our expectations be the same?'

This response implies that this issue should be addressed across the country and individual targets should be made accordingly. The Deputy Head Teacher suggested that bringing a measure such as the previous 'Value Added' framework would be more beneficial to schools, where the children are assessed at the point of entry and exit to the school. This way if the children are below the national average, schools could use this information to provide evidence of how much that child had progressed. This suggests that practitioners are held accountable with the children's outcomes, even if they feel it is not a fair tool to use.

The Nursery Teacher also expressed her concerns surrounding cheating in tests.

'The phonics screening check. We might well do it to the rules here. How do you know other primary schools aren't giving more support and cheating? You don't know if its comparable with other settings.'

The research carried out by Clark (2015) supports this as it suggested that schools are providing different levels of support for the phonics check. This suggests that the league tables created to compare schools might be unreliable, as the data being submitted might not be a fair reflection.

The Phonics Manager explained that the informal phonics assessments carried out by staff are needed to group the children, but suggested that if the school has a good phonics teaching practice, there is no need for the check. This suggests that the current framework surrounding testing and assessments is not necessary in order to create effective support for learning. The Deputy Head Teacher reported,

'The children's assessments are not dependant on the results. It's actually the teacher assessments that are submitted to the Government. Therefore, if on the day there is a child that exceed the level, but it is a real one off, and they've never done anything like that before, if I say they are at that level when they are only just starting to function at that level, they will struggle in year 3. Then you've got the flip side, if you've got a child who's worried about it, if they were poorly on that day and maybe doesn't do their best, and you know you've got evidence in their books that they can do it and they are meeting the expected level, were not going to base our whole judgement around that, So, they can disregard what the tests are saying. Phonics is different, Phonics is just a pass or fail.'

This statement suggests that, with the KS1 S.A.T.S tests, the practitioners can override the test outcomes. Some of the implications to this might be that some schools may make the marks higher, to gain a better performance for the school. This also implies that the tests are not relevant, as the teacher judgements can finalise the result. On the other hand, it might be beneficial for the phonics screening check to have this procedure, as pointed out earlier, children might struggle to perform under the conditions, and therefore this might not be a true reflection of their capabilities.

Many practitioners expressed their concerns about how the tests don't reflect other areas that children might perform well in. The Reception teacher said, *'Sometimes the children are seen as a number, or statistic, rather than an actual child who is say, really creative, but because they're not good at reading and writing they're not seen as a person.'* This shows that there is growing concern about what it is that assessments and tests are actually measuring. The Nursery Teacher added, *'I think sometimes when you walk down the corridor and they hold the doors open for you, and say 'you're welcome', those social things are just as important as maths.'*

This statement summarises the idea that the skills being monitored under these assessments and tests might not be seen as the most important. 100% of practitioners believed that the best way to track children's progress and find gaps in knowledge would be through informal teacher assessments and observations, carried out in the child's everyday setting by a familiar face. As the Reception teacher stated, *'We know the children better than the test.'*

The evidence provided suggests that the current assessment and testing isn't necessary as some results can be overridden by teacher judgements, contradicting the purpose of the test. It also suggests that the league tables that results create is unreliable and not a true reflection of schools as some settings might cheat, and different inequalities within the cohorts might have an influence on the results.

Lastly it is evident that the information gained from assessments and tests do not pick up factors that teacher assessments don't already highlight. All practitioners felt assessments and tests were not necessary and teacher's judgement and assessment is the most effective way to monitor progress.

Summary

This chapter has presented and analysed the data collected from the study, picking upon the key perceptions surrounding assessments and testing within the early years. The key messages found were that practitioners felt de-professionalised when implementing these formal assessments and tests and children's welfare could potentially be harmed in the process. The research also found that the purpose of assessment and tests is a contested area. The next chapter will conclude the findings, drawing out the main points.

Conclusion

Furseth and Everett (2013, P.133) believe that the purpose of the conclusion is to reflect on what the study has achieved. Winstanley (2009, P.46) adds that the conclusion chapter should revisit the aims of the research reflecting upon this and evaluating how the research was executed. Swetnam (2004, P.92) suggests that the conclusion should summarise the results, point out what worked well, consider if there are any improvements that could have been made and suggest any further studies.

This chapter will summarise the key findings from the research. It will go on to reflect on the aims of the research and evaluate if the research questions were met. It will also provide a reflection on the effectiveness of the chosen research methods used.

The aim of the research was to explore the perception of practitioners in regards to assessment and testing within the early years. It aimed to investigate practitioner's beliefs about the current policy surrounding assessment and testing within the early years, and provide an insight to the benefits and challenges that practitioners and children might face as a result of implementing these in practice.

The use of the semi-structured interview research method was effective as it provided rich data as opposed to questionnaires which would not have provided the same in-depth information. The interviews were effective as following a pilot study the questions were more understandable and their design contributed to the validity

of the data. All information was recorded anonymously which helped the practitioners feel more confident to open up, and provide honest opinions around this area. The use of multiple-perspectives from the early years work force also provided the opportunity to triangulate the data, helping to make the findings more valid, and also allowing the researcher to pick out common beliefs amongst the range of professionals in the sector.

The study could have been improved with the use of more participants, including practitioners from KS1 who implement the current Phonics Screening Check.

The research found that there was a contrast between the rhetoric and reality in relation to the purpose of assessment and testing within the early years. The rhetoric being that formal assessments and tests are beneficial to the child and the practitioner, linking to what Brodie (2013, P.52) and Howard et al (2-13, P.52) define the purpose of assessment and testing as, which was to help practitioners to plan and support children, to help improve their learning and achievement. On the other hand, the reality being that practitioners felt formal assessments and tests were put in place to measure and compare schools, and to hold practitioners and settings to account if the children don't achieve. This links to William's (2010, P.2) suggestion that assessment and testing is being used to justify the public spending on education and to provide league tables to help the parents to compare schools. The study also highlighted that there was a link in regards to the more senior practitioners in this sector having a better understanding of the Government agenda surrounding the early years assessment and testing policy.

The study also found that formal assessments and tests are not only putting pressure on practitioners working within the field, but also the children. The practitioners pointed out that children become worried, stressed and nervous when it comes to assessments and tests, potentially harming their welfare. This links to Kousholt's (2016) research which suggested that children's self-esteem might be damaged as a result of carrying out formal assessments and tests.

The practitioners also highlighted that the current formal assessments and tests are not always a true reflection of the capability of the children. This implies that the results schools publish might not be reliable, undermining the validity of the league table system.

An overriding message that came through from the data was that practitioners felt a more effective and reliable way to monitor children progress would be through teacher judgements and informal assessments, as the practitioners felt they knew the children better than the test. This ties in with what Ang (2014, P.7) argued, that there are other ways that children progress can be monitored, and there is evidence of this from other countries.

A future study to build upon this research could be to gather the perceptions and beliefs parents hold surrounding assessment and testing within the early years.

As Moss (2007) pointed out, in order to create an effective strategy that will support children's diverse needs, when it comes to assessment and testing within the early years, the multiple-perspectives of practitioners need to be gathered. In order to do this, practitioners need to provide a voice for themselves, to expose the challenges

and potential harm it might cause to themselves, the practice and most importantly the children, to help close the growing gap between politics and the early years sector.

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