

Positive beginnings? The role of the Key Person in Early Years adult-child relationships

Submitted by Marcos Theodore Lemos to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational Psychology in Educational, Child and Community Psychology in May 2012.

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

(Signature)

.....

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank both of my research tutors, Brahm Norwich and Shirley Larkin, for the support and guidance that I have received during the process of this research.

I would also like to thank the Educational Psychology Service in which I am based for their encouragement, support and flexibility during the course of my research.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank; the settings, the children and their parents, my friends and family, and all those who have offered guidance, support and encouragement during the past two years.

Overview

This research project aims to explore the role of the Key Person in Early Years preschool and nursery settings. The Key Person role is specified in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidance, and aims to provide an adult figure with which the children can form a positive and productive learning relationship. The present study originated from previous research conducted in the same authority which looked at the experiences of children in day care settings (Day, 2010). Day (2010) identified children's attachment needs in day care settings as being an avenue for further research, and it was from this that the present study developed.

The current study seeks to understand the role of the Key Person in terms of how relationships are formed with children in Early Years settings, and what those relationships look like on a daily basis. This is an important line of enquiry, as an understanding of Early Years, adult-child relationships can help inform effective future practice for Early Years staff, as well as enable outside professionals (such as Educational Psychologists) to design more effective means of early intervention for the children who may need additional support.

The theoretical foundations for this research lie in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), following the language used by the Government Guidance on the role of the Key Person. Attachment theory is used here as a basis for understanding early adult-child relationships, and the review of the literature looks at research that has explored the impact of children's attendance in day care settings.

The project is divided into two linked research papers. In the first paper, the role of the Key Person is explored through surveying and interviewing a sample of

Early Years staff. In doing this, the following research objectives were addressed:

- To examine the approaches that Key Persons use to form relationships with the children in their care.
- To explore Key Persons' perceptions of their role within the setting and the challenges they face.
- To examine the awareness and impact of the current government guidance on Key Person practice.
- To examine how settings organise and evaluate the Key Person role.

In the second paper, the relationships between the Key Persons and the children they care for are explored through a series of case studies. This was in order to address the following research objectives:

- To explore the relationships between particular children with adults in Early Years settings through intensive case studies.
- To examine the Key Person-child relationship by comparing Key Person-child interactions with interactions with other adults in the setting.
- To compare cases of Key Person-child relationships between children who have identified social or emotional needs and those who do not.

The findings from paper one indicated that Key Persons do not generally seem to use the Government Guidance as a primary influence on the way they build positive relationships with their Key Children. Key Persons seemed to base their practice on experiential knowledge. Furthermore, the organisation of the role in most settings seemed to indicate a more administrative focus than a focus on building specific relationships.

Paper two showed that Key Persons generally had more interactions with their Key Children than other adults had with the same children. Differences were found in the types of interactions children experienced with different adults. Relationships were reported to be close with both groups of children, with Key Persons reporting more conflict with the children identified with social or emotional needs.

It is hoped that the findings of the two linked papers will inform EP practice in relation to Early Years settings, particularly in terms of developing early intervention. From professional experience, there seems to be a large amount of diversity in the way EP services work with preschool-aged children and the professionals who support them. Perhaps further uses for the findings in this research could be to inform future collaborative working, as well as areas to which EPs can contribute their body of research knowledge.

The following document presents each study separately as individual papers, each with appendices which contain additional information on methods and data analysis. The papers are followed by the literature review, university Ethics form and the bibliography for the entire study.

Contents

Section	Page
Overview.....	3
1. Paper One.....	11
1.1. Abstract.....	11
1.2. Introduction.....	12
1.3. Methodology and Aims.....	19
1.3.1. Research Aims and Objectives.....	19
1.3.2. Epistemology, Ontology and Methodology.....	19
1.3.3. Design.....	20
1.3.4. Sample.....	21
1.3.5. Materials.....	22
1.3.6. Data Analysis.....	23
1.3.7. Ethical Considerations.....	24
1.4. Findings.....	24
1.4.1. The approaches that Key Persons use to form relationships with the children in their care.....	25
1.4.2. Key Persons' perceptions of their role within the setting and the challenges they face.....	29
1.4.3. The awareness and impact of the current government guidance on Key Person practice.....	33
1.4.4. How settings organise and evaluate the Key Person role.....	36
1.5. Discussion.....	39
1.5.1. Summary of findings.....	39
1.5.2. Strengths and limitations of the research.....	43
1.5.3. Implications for practice.....	45
1.5.4. Opportunities for further research.....	46
1.5.5. Conclusions.....	47
1.6. Appendices.....	48
1.6.1. Data Collected.....	48
i) Sample of quantitative data.....	48
ii) Sample of transcribed interview.....	50
1.6.2. Details of Procedures.....	56
i) Distribution of surveys.....	56
ii) Selection of interview participants.....	56
iii) Interview procedure.....	57
1.6.3. Details of Data Collection.....	58
i) Development of questionnaire and interview questions...	58
ii) Key Person Questionnaire.....	60
iii) Key Person Interview Schedule.....	64
1.6.4. Details of Data Analysis.....	66
i) SPSS survey analysis.....	66
ii) Coding of interview transcriptions.....	66
1.6.5. Additional influential factor codes.....	70
1.6.6. Ethical Considerations.....	71
2. Paper Two.....	72
2.1. Abstract.....	72

2.2. Introduction.....	73
2.3. Methodology and Aims.....	79
2.3.1. Research Aims and Objectives.....	79
2.3.2. Research Objective Reformulation.....	80
2.3.3. Epistemology, Ontology and Methodology.....	80
2.3.4. Design.....	81
2.3.5. Sample.....	81
2.3.6. Materials.....	84
2.3.7. Data analysis.....	87
2.3.8. Ethical considerations.....	88
2.4. Findings.....	89
2.4.1. Correlations.....	89
2.4.2. Data gathered from scales.....	90
2.4.3. Observations.....	95
2.4.4. Interviews.....	104
2.5. Discussion.....	106
2.5.1. Summary of findings.....	107
2.5.2. Strengths and limitations of the research.....	110
2.5.3. Implications for practice.....	111
2.5.4. Opportunities for further research.....	113
2.5.5. Summary and conclusions.....	113
2.6. Appendices.....	115
2.6.1. Data Collected.....	115
i) Additional participant Information.....	115
ii) Participant requirements given to settings.....	116
iii) Examples of data.....	117
iv) Significant correlations.....	120
2.6.2. Details of Procedures.....	123
i) Setting-up and consent.....	123
ii) Naturalistic observations.....	123
iii) Focussed observations.....	124
iv) Scales and diaries.....	124
v) Interviews.....	125
2.6.3. Details of Data Collection.....	126
i) Development of the Naturalistic Observation Schedule... ..	126
ii) Example of the Naturalistic Observation Schedule.....	130
iii) Key Person-Child Interaction Schedule.....	132
iv) Key Person Attachment Diary and Scale.....	135
v) Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.....	143
vi) Student-Teacher Relationship Scale.....	146
2.6.4. Details of Data Analysis.....	148
i) SPSS correlations.....	148
ii) Excel spreadsheets.....	148
iii) Coding of Interview transcriptions.....	148
iv) Observations.....	149
2.6.5. Ethical considerations.....	149
3. General Procedure for the Whole Study.....	151
4. Executive Summary for Participating Settings.....	155
5. Literature Review.....	159

6. Certificate of Ethical Approval.....	180
7. Bibliography.....	184

Tables and figures

Paper 1

Table 1a. Factors influencing Key Person practice.....	25
Table 1b. Additional influences on Key Person practice.....	26
Table 1c. Descriptive accounts related to influential factors.....	27
Table 1d. Most important elements of Key Person daily practice.....	29
Table 1e. Key Person survey response frequencies.....	32
Table 1f. Aspects of the Guidance that Key Persons found most useful.....	34
Table 1g. Guidance response frequencies.....	35
Table 1h. Key Person practice response frequencies.....	38

Paper 1 Appendices

Figure 1. Variable view of SPSS data sheet.....	48
Figure 2. Data view of SPSS data sheet.....	49
Figure 3. Conceptual map.....	59
Figure 4. Nvivo nodes.....	67
Figure 5. Nvivo initial codes.....	68
Figure 6. Renaming codes.....	69
Table 1. Additional influential factors on Key Person practice.....	70

Paper 2

Table 2a. Summary of child participant data.....	82
Table 2b. Summary of adult participant data.....	82
Table 2c. Factors Key Persons reported as being the most important thing they do each day alongside the most frequent interaction type	

Contents

they had with their Key Child in the observations.....	105
Figure 3a. Scores on the KPAS Proximity scale for each child.....	91
Figure 3b. Scores on the KPAS Avoidance scale for each child.....	92
Figure 3c. Scores on the KPAS Resistant scale for each child.....	92
Figure 3d. Scores in the STRS Closeness scale for each child.....	94
Figure 3e. Scores on the STRS Conflict scale for each child.....	94
Figure 3f. Average number of interactions with adults in an hour.....	96
Figure 3g. Average number of child initiated interactions with and without the Key Person per hour for each category of need.....	96
Figure 3h. Average number of adult-initiated (AI) interactions and child-initiated (CI) interactions per hour for each need category with all adults.....	97
Figure 3i. The average number of Key Person initiated interactions and the average number of child initiated interactions with the Key Person.....	98
Figure 3j. Percentage of observed interactions during which appropriate eye contact was made, not made and made briefly/fleetingly with the Key Person and with other adults.....	99
Figure 3k. Percentage of interactions in which physical contact was made and not made with the Key Person and with other adults.....	99
Figure 3l. The percentages of interaction types with the Key Person for the children with no SEN.....	101
Figure 3m. The percentages of interaction types with other adults for the children with no SEN.....	101
Figure 3n. The percentages of interaction types with the Key Person for the children with social or emotional needs.....	102
Figure 3p. The percentages of interaction types with the other adults for the children with social or emotional needs.....	102
Figure 3q. Average scores for each section on the focussed observation, for each category of need.....	103
 Paper 2 Appendices	
Table A. Additional participant information.....	115

Contents

Table B. Example of the Excel spreadsheet for the child data.....	117
Table C. Significant correlations between inventory/scale variables and observation variables.....	121
Table D. Significant correlations between independent variables, scale and observation findings.....	122
Table E. Code definitions for interaction types.....	129
Table F. Comparative data for the Key Person-child interaction schedule.....	133
Table G. SDQ data from the normative study.....	144
Table H. SDQ data from the present study.....	145
Table I. Mean scores from Pianta et al (2008) alongside mean scores from the present study.....	146
Figure A. Data view of SPSS data sheet.....	118
Figure B. Variable view of SPSS data sheet.....	119

Abbreviations

EP – Educational Psychologist

EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage

KPAS – Key Person Attachment Scale

SDQ – Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

SEN – Special Educational Needs

STRS – Student-Teacher Relationship Scale