**The challenges and rewards of undertaking an international pilot study in an early childhood setting in Hong Kong.**

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As a third student on the Educational Doctorate in Early Childhood at the University of Sheffield, I undertook a pilot study in one specific early childhood setting in Hong Kong. The setting is a recently opened kindergarten and playgroup setting which provides sessions for children aged two to six years old. The setting follows aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach, and is situated in an affluent area which serves international families, as well as local families in the area. This made the setting a good place to start the pilot study as the Reggio Emilia approach indicated to the researcher that parents with a particular set of beliefs would want their child to attend this setting for specific reasons and their nationality may not be an indicator of values of beliefs.

The aim of the research was to gain wider information on parental values, as well as which values parents believe to be important in their child’s life and how these values influence parental choices for their children’s developmental and educational start in life? Hong Kong has a large variety of early childhood settings, so parents have a wide variety of choices within a relatively small geographical are to choose from.

Overall the purpose of the research was to find out more regarding which cultural, social and /or parental values have an impact on choices of early childhood setting for their children. Another aspect to research in conjunction was to gain understanding of which early childhood setting options are available to parents in Hong Kong and research if this has an impact on the choices they make for their child.

These topics and questions were chosen as they form the basis of a much larger research project which will form the basis of an EdD in Early Childhood thesis. The pilot study was hoping to support this further study and to see which challenges and opportunities lie ahead of the main research study.

**The reality of the study**

I started by discussing my ideas for my main thesis with my supervisor at the University of Sheffield and discussed that a pilot study might be a good way of finding out the possibility of a broader study in the future. We then discussed how to gain ethical consent for the pilot study project (Basit,2010). I was on a strict timescale as I had already booked flights to Hong Kong as I needed to be there for other business at a specific time. I completed the ethics form to the best of my knowledge. This however was returned on several occasions to be altered and for information sheets for parents to be produced. These were quite lengthy and gave in-depth information (Tolich,2016), which showed the parents and the setting what the aim and the purpose of the pilot study was and how information gathered would be used or even disseminated within the wider world. All of this took far more time than I had anticipated. To get the ethics form agreed and consent returned took weeks and weeks rather than a short period of time and this was the first of several challenges in this pilot study. The ethics were finally approved the day before I boarded my flight.

**Participants**

The participants of the pilot study were parents who came to visit the chosen kindergarten in Hong Kong during open days at this kindergarten. The study used questionnaires and intended to interview parents on an individual or group basis. Over the period of a week there were four sessions of open days which were mostly attended by parents with a diverse background, such as different socio-economic backgrounds as well as a variety of local and international backgrounds.

Upon arrival the parents received questionnaires, this method was chosen to enable parents to answer questions in their own time, and to enable me to gather as much information as possible in a relatively short period of time (Punch,2009 and Rapley, 2004). The questionnaires were handed out to all parents on a voluntary basis and parents were given a choice whether they completed these or not. The consent forms were attached to the questionnaires. The ethics form and information sheet were available to the participants at the reception desk, the reasons for this will be explained in a later paragraph. The questionnaires were handed out by a member of staff, rather than by myself, as the owners of the setting felt that this approach would ensure a higher return of the questionnaires at the end of the session which the parents attended, as the parents had spoken to this particular member of staff in the past and therefore a tentative relationship had been built with this staff member.

As the parents were new to the setting and were visiting to see if the setting was suitable for their child’s needs I decided not to make use of formal interviews, which had originally been chosen, as generally interviews have the ability to give a much more in-depth overview of answers and opinions which can be discussed in more detail. I decided that interviews would be too intimidating during a first visit. This was another challenge for the pilot study as I had been told before attending the setting that parents would be available, and the impression was given that these were established parents at the setting rather than parents who were new to the setting. Instead of formal interviews I spoke to individual parents during their visit and asked if they were willing to discuss their choices and values for their child, to be used in conjunction with the questionnaires to inform the pilot study. These parents were chosen at random and these informal discussions with parents were held during their visit to the setting and an explanation was given verbally by myself, as to why these discussions took place. An ethics form and information regarding the study were available to the parents.

This approach brought with it several challenges. The setting used for this approach was unhappy with the ethics form and information sheet which had been produced and checked for ethical consent prior to the research. The forms had been shared with the setting before the researcher arrived at the setting and initially during emails and telephone discussions, the owners of the setting had agreed with the forms. They agreed that ethics had been adhered to but felt that the information sheet was too cumbersome and gave too much detail, the reason for this concern from the setting soon became clear and the next challenge surfaced. It was agreed that the ethics forms and explanation of the reasons for the research would be available in the reception/entrance area of the setting and that this would be pointed out by a member of staff who spoke English as well as Cantonese and could clarify the information to ensure parents had understood fully why they were engaging with the questionnaire or the informal discussion.

As I pointed out there was a further challenge, a high percentage of the parents who visited the setting did not speak English as their first language and although the early childhood setting itself is an English spoken setting the parents often had difficulty understanding the language. This created a big barrier for the research. Parents had various backgrounds from Chinese, French, Portuguese, Hong Kong etc. As an additional challenge, not all adults accompanying the children on the visits were the parents but some of them were carers/helpers employed by the parents and therefore they either did not understand the reasons why parents wanted their child to attend this particular setting or did not speak English.

The language barrier also had implications for the questionnaire which was available to all attendees to the open days. Although most people filled in parts of the questionnaire it was soon evident that certain language was not understood, for example the word ‘setting’ as in Hong Kong early years settings are most often classified by either the word kindergarten or playgroup. Further to this, the word ‘practitioner’ was not understood as in Hong Kong a person working with children is indicated by the word teacher. This wording was changed in the questionnaires for subsequent days which had an impact on the findings as consequently parents who completed the questionnaire in the following days did complete those particular questions. This had an impact on analysing the data at a later stage.

**Data analysis**

The data was analysed upon return to the UK, this brought with it some questions as some of the written material was difficult to read, some had been written in Cantonese and some participants had not understood the question, so their answers seemed at times random. Some obstacles were overcome by asking support with the translation from people who spoke Cantonese, but some answers had to be dismissed as they just didn’t seem to fit in with the research question (Verma and Mallick,1999). However, some of the questionnaires gave a good amount of clearly written feedback to work with. Overall for the pilot study the results were not important, as the study was used to understand if the research methods were appropriate for the study.

I then gave feedback to the kindergarten owner via email and WhatsApp messages as well as having a face to face meeting several months later, it was however not possible to give feedback to the parents even though some of them had asked for this, as no known email or contact address was given due to confidentiality. As the researcher, I had to rely on the owner of the setting to inform the parents. This is something I would change in the future by ensuring that there would be clear means of feedback set up, for example by indicating a date and time where I would be available to the parents or by gathering email addresses to feedback to.

**Rewards of the study**

The study took place over a week and this gave me the opportunity to attend an early childhood setting in Hong Kong for a whole week. During this time, I had ample opportunity to speak to members of staff regarding different approaches to learning and development as well as speaking with parents regarding their values and beliefs for their children. I also had the opportunity to informally observed children during this time (with parental and setting permission to do so). This gave me new insights into the early childhood systems in Hong Kong and encouraged me to undertake more of these visits to enrich my own knowledge (Robson, 2002).

**Summary of key findings/key implications**

Overall this was a very rewarding pilot study whereby a lot of new knowledge was gained which will certainly support the thesis research in the future. Challenges which seemed difficult were overcome or learned from. The main challenges during the pilot study were:

The ethical consent was far more in-depth and took longer than anticipated, this meant that I was concerned that I had to postpone my initial date of undertaking the pilot research, which when one undertakes research abroad has wider connotations of travel and time issues. Although the ethical consent was given on time on this occasion.

Although ethical consent forms were shared with the setting, upon arrival the owners discussed that they felt there was too much information for parents to read on the information sheet. This then led to an agreement that the forms and explanations would be positioned at the entrance desk for parents to read if they wished to do so.

Time to plan and undertake the research had to be packed into the time available to the researcher from their own point of view but also from the perspective of the early childhood setting where the research was undertaken, as they had to fit in with the plans and travel dates of the researcher.

The Language barrier had not been part of the consideration as the setting where the researcher was going was an English-speaking setting, however the participants often were not (English speaking), they had acquired a place for their children to support the child’s understanding of English rather than the parents speaking the language, so this formed a barrier.

The language barrier also impacted on speaking with the helpers as they were often of Filipino origin and did not speak English or Chinese, making the contact very difficult.

Shared values were one of the findings of the research, parents in Hong Kong have very similar hopes and dreams for their children.

The experience of speaking to parents and practitioners on the other side of the world and connecting our shared values and ideas on childcare and child development was a very rewarding experience.

Being able to observe and take part in daily activities in the kindergarten opened new perspectives for the researcher, as well as speaking to members of staff, who came from a wide international background.

Overall, although the results from the questionnaires and the inability to undertake interviews as planned did not impact on the overall experience of undertaking a pilot study as invaluable lessons were learned from this experience which will support further research in the future.

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