



Dr Rita Chawla-Duggan
Lecturer, Department of Education



The Research

In the UK, Rita's research focuses on father involvement in young children's learning and how an understanding of this might be used by practitioners to better support that learning. Internationally, she has conducted research on how to support young children's learning through quality education.

The Engagement:

The key 'publics': Fathers; Children; Local authorities; Politicians; Schools; Think Tanks; Charities

The type of engagement: Collaborating with 'publics' to help shape research and to maximise its impact.

Rita has been proactive in drawing different stakeholders together to help inform research proposals. In one case, Rita had a research interest in investigating home learning environments utilising visual methodologies. To refine her thinking, she identified a range of stakeholders and invited them to join a research proposal advisory group:

"I gave careful thought to who could influence my research and who might be influenced by it. As such, I recruited a broad spectrum of stakeholders including representatives from: the Fatherhood Institute, Parliament, charities and local authorities."

In making her approach to these stakeholders, Rita was careful to first investigate their priorities within the broad area of young children's learning and then to reconcile these with her own research interests:

"In my approach to stakeholders, I aimed to demonstrate how engagement in and with my research could help provide a solution to some of the things they were interested in."

For another piece of research, Rita worked with Dr Susan Milner (from the Department of Politics, Languages & International Studies). They successfully utilised media (an online film and a blog) to disseminate findings about a piece of research focused on 'Fathers' Friday', a local authority initiative wherein schools and early years' settings opened their doors to fathers on a Friday as a means to create awareness of the importance of father involvement in education:

"We found the film had the most 'affect' on people, demonstrating how home and school environments could be pushed closer together in support of children's learning. And the blog generated more than 1000 comments!"

Using such engagement methods broadened the reach of the research findings; for example, a national charity used the film as a case study.

Right: A moment of affectionate interaction between a father and his daughter as part of the Father's Friday project in conjunction with Dr Susan Milner.



The Motivation:

Rita is pragmatic about her main reason for engaging – to generate funding for her research:

"Funding is a competitive environment. I think the act of engagement demonstrates to funders that you can reach out to people and generate impact from your research, and that appeals to them."

For Rita, impact from research can be fostered by giving careful consideration to stakeholders (those who might influence the research and / or be interested in it and use findings) and in doing so, maximising the likelihood that the research has relevance to them:

"I'm keen for my research findings to be disseminated in the form of popular ideas, books, articles, presentations and the like. To make the dissemination fruitful, I think about who would be interested in reading those things, through what avenues and in which format."

The Professional Development:

The process of engagement has really made Rita think about how she presents herself professionally as a researcher to different stakeholders. She considers her 'pitch' and how it might be tailored to differing audiences. Getting this pitch right has an impact on how a targeted stakeholder receives her message and whether they give time to her research:

"I have fostered good relationships with stakeholders. My next concern is how can I go about sustaining these and utilising them for future research?"

Engagement has led to high visibility for Rita's research. Through drawing upon her partners' networks, she has been able to disseminate her research widely and in doing so, has gained credibility amongst interested stakeholders.

"In working closely with stakeholders, I'm able to increase the likelihood that my research will have relevance to them; that enhances its impact."

The Learning:

In her research area, Rita has learned to undertake thorough study of her stakeholders' individual priorities for father involvement in children's education. In so doing, it has helped her to tailor her initial approach (via letter) in which she orientates her research in a way matching her potential partner's priorities. Her first contact with a partner is therefore well thought through and, because of this, usually leads to follow up conversations and meetings.

Rita and her co-researcher Susan were thrilled by the interest that was generated in 'Fathers' Friday' research through an online film and blog but, whilst there were many positive responses, there were also a number of negative ones. These came from a school that had been running a similar scheme for a number of years but who had not been part of the research and so who subsequently felt left out. Ironically, if the research hadn't received such wide-scale exposure, the school may have never have found out about it! Ultimately, as a researcher, Rita still felt it paramount to get their data out there:

"Even though one school was aggrieved, our responsibility as researchers was to share our findings and to indicate that they were drawn from just one example of an initiative that was also run elsewhere."

"In engaging, you need to be willing to reconcile your research interests with those which other people view as important and valuable."

Top tip:

"Planning your engagement is crucial. It's best to think about how you plan to engage right at the beginning of your research rather than at the end. Contextualise your engagement plans within the broader development of your research."