

**“It’s the most important thing - I mean, the schooling”: Father involvement
in the education of children with autism**

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Funding acknowledgement

This research was funded by The Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship programme.

There are no conflicts of interest.

Word count: 8, 127

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Abstract

Father involvement in education has been shown to result in a range of positive outcomes for typically developing children. However, the nature of paternal involvement in the education of children with disabilities and especially autism has been under-researched and is little understood. This study aimed to explore the nature of the involvement of 25 UK fathers in the education and their children with autism, aged up to 19 years through the use of semi-structured interviews. Findings showed that fathers were highly engaged both directly and indirectly across several dimensions of their children’s education and schooling. Key areas of indirect engagement were involvement in administrative processes necessary for securing an appropriate educational placement; facilitating daily access to school and general support of children’s progress through attendance at school-based meetings and events. Direct support for learning occurred through homework assistance and working on school-related goals. Findings are discussed in relation to diversity and generative models of fatherhood. Implications for greater father inclusion in the education of children with autism are explored with reference to a gender-differentiated approach.

Keywords: autism, fathers, education, models of fatherhood

Introduction

Good parenting has been widely acknowledged as having a significant and positive impact on children's educational achievement (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003).

However, Kim & Hill (2015) highlighted that "the parenting literature is still largely focused on mothers" (p.919), based on an on-going belief that mothers are more closely concerned with their children's education (Goldman, 2005; Lamb and Lewis, 2010).

This gender imbalance represents a significant omission in the light of growing evidence linking positive father involvement to a range of beneficial educational outcomes. A meta-analysis of 24 studies concluded that father engagement was positively associated with fewer behavioural problems in boys and psychological difficulties in young women while also enhancing intellectual development and reducing criminality and economic disadvantage (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Jeynes (2015) reported father involvement to be significantly associated with enhanced beneficial academic and psychological outcomes for urban children. In the early years, positive pre-school father engagement has been associated with the development of cognitive/academic skills, pro-social abilities and self-regulation (McWayne, Downer, Campos and Robby, 2013) while father involvement in shared reading with two year olds influenced children's language, literacy and reading development (Baker, 2013).

Since fathers are not a homogeneous group, studies have examined the impact of differing paternal familial, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds on child outcomes. The positive involvement of non-resident fathers has been associated with better academic achievement, especially for younger children (Adamson and Johnson, 2013), for example and the engagement of fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds appears as a possible mediating factor in enabling children to avoid poverty later on (Blanden,

2006). Kim and Hill (2015) reported no significant association between ethnicity, paternal involvement and child outcomes in a meta-analysis of 52 studies.

Most research in the field focuses on fathers of typically developing children with little known concerning paternal involvement in the education and learning of children with disabilities. In a rare study, Zhang et al., (2011), reported that aspects of parental involvement predicted academic achievement in students with disabilities but results were not disaggregated by gender so that neither the specific nature nor impact of maternal and paternal influence could be determined. Regarding patterns of educational involvement, Towers (2009) found that fathers sought further involvement in the education of their children with intellectual disabilities, identifying timing of meetings as a significant barrier to greater engagement with schools. Twenty fathers of children attending special schools in the US reported involvement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) although a number expressed dissatisfaction with the process (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Even less is known concerning the educational engagement of fathers of children with ASD, with one study of seven fathers reporting insufficient time, knowledge, and the general intensity of other parenting responsibilities as barriers to greater participation.

Fathers of children with and without disabilities are additionally under-represented in terms of service use across health, social care and education (Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Olley, 2012). Pfitzner, Humphreys, & Hegarty, (2015) referred to the general adoption of a “gender-blind” approach where providers “often conflate parent with mother without understanding the gendered aspects of engagement” (p.9). Cullen et al., (2011) ascribed the failure of UK, school-based parent support advisors to engage fathers, to just such an omission. Ghate, Shaw, & Hazel, (2000) argued that ‘a gender-differentiated’ strategy is needed where providers recognise and address potential

differences between mothers and fathers in terms of service needs and preferences for service support.

A more fundamental, attitudinal explanation for a lack of father inclusion relates to negative assumptions concerning paternal abilities in nurturing children (Kim et al., 2015). Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) identified a ‘deficit model’ of fatherhood in which “fathering is seen as a social role which men generally perform inadequately” (p. 3). While some progress has been made in recent years regarding father inclusion in research and practice (see Fletcher et al., 2014), the concept remains relevant, with a major review of father engagement concluding that “policy frameworks underpinning family-based interventions are often predicated on a father deficit model”, (Panter-Brick et al., 2014, p.1190). Such undermining approaches exist in relation to fathers of children with disabilities, where stereotyped beliefs concerning traditional parental roles have resulted in men experiencing difficulty in asserting their involvement with professionals working with their children (Carpenter, 2007).

A move towards a “generative” approach was proposed by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) in which men are conceptualised as willing and capable of nurturing the next generation. Their model identified four dimensions of positive paternal practices: *ethical work* – to respond to children’s needs and wants; *stewardship work* – to provide resources and opportunities; *development work* to maintain supportive conditions for children’s development and *relationship work* – to facilitate attachments between key people in their children’s lives. The on-going under-representation of fathers in research and practice, especially in the field of disability, indicates that such a conceptual shift has yet to be realised.

Braunstein et al., (2013) contended that the under-representation of fathers of children with autism in research could negatively affect both developmental

outcomes for children and professionals' ability to work effectively with families, due to a lack of evidence on how best to understand and enhance father contribution. The scarcity of research concerning father involvement in education is particularly concerning since children with autism experience a range of extremely complex and challenging learning difficulties in the areas of social interaction, communication and flexible thinking which significantly affects their ability to learn (Lord and Bishop, 2010). Thus the unexplored benefits potentially conferred by father engagement appears especially worthy of exploration. This study aims to address this omission by exploring the role which fathers of children with autism play in their children's education, together with challenges associated with that involvement. Research questions were:

1. What are the parenting roles and practices of fathers of children with autism in relation to their children's formal education?
2. What barriers do fathers experience in relation to greater involvement in their children's education?

Method

Research design

Data for this paper is drawn from a wider mixed methods study. The first phase was an online cross sectional survey of fathers of children with autism and the second 25 semi-structured interviews to explore issues raised in the survey in greater depth.

Participants and procedure

Sampling

A convenience sample of 306 fathers was recruited to an online survey of fathers (biological, adoptive, foster or step-fathers) of children with autism, autism spectrum

disorder or Asperger's Syndrome, aged up to 19 years and resident in the UK. Fathers were recruited through e-mails to local autistic societies, major autism charity websites, an advert in an autism specific publication and leaflets to specialist schools. See Table 1 for characteristics of the survey sample.

Within the survey, 185 fathers agreed to be interviewed. The research design specified a maximum sample of 25 interviews, in the light of time and resources available, factors recognised as important practical realities in qualitative interview studies (Robinson, 2014). A purposive sample was chosen to explore diverse paternal experiences with regard to age, socio-economic, ethnic and educational background, as well as differences in children's age and ability (see Table 1). Not all fathers chosen for interview from the group of 185, however, remained willing/able to be involved, necessitating further purposive sampling until 25 interviews had been agreed.

Attempts were made to recruit more fathers from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds to the online survey, involving collaboration with a major autism charity. However, success was limited, thereby reducing the number of fathers from BAME backgrounds who could later be interviewed.

Procedure

Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and occurred over a five month period at a convenient time and place for men. Fathers were asked questions on involvement in caring, parenting demands and coping strategies (see Potter, forthcoming) and pertinent here, to discuss their involvement in children's formal education and learning and any associated challenges.

Gendered aspects of the interview dynamic were considered, since the process whereby women interview men (as in this case) can present complex challenges (Allain, 2014). Pini (2005), however, noted that social attributes other than gender can affect the

nature of the research relationship. In this study, prior disclosure of the researcher's former teaching experience in the field of autism, was believed to mediate the subsequent interview to some extent.

The development of rapport with fathers was considered an important ethical and methodological issue. Identifying mutual experiences or interests, referred to as 'common grounding' (Bell, Fahmy, & Gordon, 2016) was attempted and humour seemed effective in enabling some fathers to feel more at ease (see Williams, 2009). The use of an attentive, respectful and empathetic approach was considered ethically important, since fathers were often discussing challenging aspects of parenting a child with autism. Men could choose to move on to other questions where narratives referred to stressful experiences but none did so.

Participants

Most fathers completing the survey were white (95%), aged over 40 (80%) and married (79%). The majority were in full-time paid employment (62%), with just over half (52%) educated to degree level or above.

Demographic characteristics of the survey sample appear in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Characteristics of the interview sample appear in Table 2. Most fathers were white (n=24), aged 40 or over (n=19) and married (n=23). Seventeen men were educated to degree level or above. Most children were boys (n=20) and 15 were aged 10 years or below. Eight children had a diagnosis of autism, 12, ASD and five, a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim with copies sent to participants as a means of checking the trustworthiness of the data (Robson 2011). Aspects of a grounded theory approach were employed in data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998.) where the development of theory is “inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon which it represents” (Ezzy, 2002, p.12). This involves ‘constant comparison’ which Dey (2004) argued supports the generation of insights, by systematically identifying patterns of similarity or difference. NVIVO 10, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software programme (CAQDAS) (Bazeley & Richards, 2000) was used to aid this process. Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, (2010) note that while a CAQDAS programme cannot replace the interpretive ways in which researchers approach analysis, it can enhance the handling and organising of large amounts of qualitative data by facilitating the rigorous sorting, matching and connecting of data, which leads to the formation of thematic categories and sub-categories. Some aspects of analysis were informed by a priori conceptual frameworks in the literature, a recognised approach in grounded theory (see Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). Influential here was that proposed by Westergård & Galloway, (2010) who discussed direct, active modes of parental involvement in education (such as listening to children read) versus indirect participation (such as attending school meetings). Other themes emerged inductively from the data such as attitudinal and administrative challenges experienced by fathers in relation to educational engagement.

Ethics

The research received ethical approval from Leeds Beckett University. Participants in the online survey were informed of research aims, assured of anonymity and confidentiality and were made aware that survey completion would be taken as consent.

Fathers agreeing to be interviewed received additional information, concerning their right not to answer questions and their ability to withdraw at any time without consequences. None did so. To confer benefit, fathers completing the survey could request a summary of findings and 80% (n=245) did so. In addition, some men explicitly welcomed the opportunity to discuss their parenting experiences during the course of their interview. Such expressions resonate with Jack's (2010) reflection that the experience of being listened to can benefit research participants. In this study, giving voice to a group of parents who are rarely heard was an important, ethical driver for the research.

Findings

All names used are pseudonyms and each father was assigned a unique numeric code: (F1 = Father 1) etc to make visible the spread of perspectives being reported.

Indirect support for children's education

Securing an appropriate educational environment

Half of fathers had been significantly involved in formal procedures to obtain a 'Statement of Special Educational Needs' and/or appropriate placements for their children. "Stateminting" was introduced in the UK by the 1981 Education Act to identify children's learning difficulties and outline support to be given, following a statutory assessment. Since September, 2014, these have been replaced by 'Education and Healthcare Plans', details of which are provided in the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014).

Eight fathers discussed the difficulties in gaining a statement which they recognised as essential to obtaining an appropriate educational placement: "until you get a statement he can't go to the school that he really needs" (F17). Engagement with this

process was stressful, requiring considerable determination and persistence. Fathers discussed a range of significant obstacles to gaining a statement in good time. Six men identified local authority positions as problematic, with one commenting: “We had to fight to get a Statement done, because [our council] doesn’t like doing Statements” (F16). Two fathers referred to schools’ reluctance to offer help. One said:

“[the school] insisted that they could educate Matt, when it was quite obvious they couldn’t... We went for a Statement. The school told us ‘Oh, you’re wasting your time.’ We got no support from them at all.” (F3)

Nine fathers commented on the challenging process of obtaining an appropriate educational placement. These narratives referred to long delays, especially worrying where children’s current educational experience was stressful. Two fathers reported frequent exclusions from mainstream schools while awaiting a more appropriate setting, with one stating:

He [went] to mainstream school, and that was a disaster... It just didn’t work. It got to the point where he was only there two hours a day..[they said] ‘...we can’t have him for the full day because we simply can’t manage.’ (F17)

Such struggle-based narratives resonate with findings reported elsewhere although not from the specific viewpoint of fathers. For example, Lamb (2007) researching parental confidence in the UK SEN system, referred to “warrior parents” battling to have their children’s needs recognised and addressed.

Facilitating daily access to school

Fathers’ often central role in getting children ready for school emerged as a key theme. In the survey, 50% (n=172) of fathers reported that they were “equally” or “mainly”

responsible for their children's morning routine (Potter, in press). In the interviews, **fourteen** fathers discussed their significant involvement in this area, often describing in detail the nature of their caring practices. The number of routines to be completed within a short time period resulted in stressful mornings for parents and children with autism, who often experience difficulties with transitions between activities. (Palmen, Didden, & Verhoeven, 2012). One father said:

It does feel a bit like the clock ticking in the background... just to make sure everything's ready to get on the bus... (F7)

The importance of consistency, structure and predictability to reduce children's stress was a key feature of ten men's accounts. One father of a five year old observed:

We have a good routine for him ... we use picture symbols to get him up. And he knows his routine and so he's fine.... (F7)

Another father discussed his strategy for helping his son to dress, which had been developed to take account of his child's needs and interests:

We'll do... a bullet-point list, where we say 'No. 1. Get to the end of your game, No. 2, upstairs to get dressed'. He's got a fascination with numbers... You can't just drag him off suddenly to get dressed, he has to be prepared for it, even though it's something he does every day. (F1)

Eight fathers were highly involved in ensuring that their children were nutritionally ready for school by providing breakfast. Again, they had adopted specific approaches to take account of children's sometimes rigid preferences:

It has to be a certain goats' milk, either from Waitrose or the Tesco's...But if you go and use anybody else's it's a definite no-no. It's like his cereals have to be a certain selected cereal and put into a bowl in a certain way. (F4)

These findings illustrate the extent to which fathers showed themselves to be skilful,

sensitive and responsive to the needs of their children, adopting individualised nurturing practices to reduce children's anxiety during busy morning routines. Such highly structured approaches have been widely accepted as best practice for children with autism in terms of facilitating learning and stress reduction (see Parsons et al., 2011). Bøttcher, (2014) identified effective individualised practices as particularly important during morning routines for children with disabilities since they facilitate access to another important developmentally enabling context, namely school.

Attendance at meetings

Survey data showed that a third of fathers (n=101) had attended meetings at school several times during the previous year while one in five (n= 62) had done so “many times” (Potter, in press). Fourteen fathers interviewed did so, often adjusting employment patterns to facilitate involvement, a practice previously identified by Towers (2009) in fathers of children with intellectual disabilities. Key factors influencing attendance emerged as: father commitment; the nature of employment patterns and the flexibility of employers. Fathers who were retired, self-employed or part-time/shift workers were better able to access meetings while the flexibility of employers appeared particularly important in enabling fathers in full-time work to attend. Factors impacting employer flexibility were: ethos of the employing organisation, flexibility of individual managers and technology. A father working in a public sector service commented:

I work ...in young people's services, so we're very much young people focused, and very much about supporting parents. So if I go to my boss and say 'Look, I need...' [It's] 'No problem. You do it.'" (F15)

Another father employed by the health service reported:

I've got a computer that allows me to access the network from anywhere, so there was no problem, even when I was working full-time, saying 'I've got a meeting with school for this afternoon...' (F14)

School governance and volunteering

A minority of fathers were involved in school governance. One man was head of his school's Parent Teacher Association and two others were governors. Five fathers volunteered in their children's schools, most being either self-employed or working part-time. One man recounted building a sandpit for his daughter's school; another accompanied children on school trips and a third had established a school-based play group while a step-father took an active role in fund-raising.

Direct support for children's learning

Half of fathers were directly involved in supporting their children's learning, through providing assistance with homework or school-related goals.

Homework support

In the survey, 38% of fathers (n=115) reported helping their children with homework "many times" during the previous year (Potter, in press). Eight fathers interviewed referred directly to providing homework support, five discussing challenges involved in doing so. While fathers were very keen to support children, for some, engagement in home-based learning represented an additional difficulty, in the light of other major parenting challenges. One man talked of the need to "pick your battles" (F4) in relation to homework while another reflected: "I would imagine it works a lot easier in school rather than home." (F17). A third observed: "you know the parents have enough on their hands without having to be a teacher at home" (F25).

Working on school-related goals

Three fathers discussed working on school-related goals. A father of a child with limited verbal ability funded his own training in PECS, the Picture Exchange Communication System, introduced by his son's school. Another man recounted partnership-working concerning the use of Social Stories (Gray, 2003):

Whatever social story they were doing in school we got a copy of it, so we could go through the whole story with Mark at home as well. (F2)

Supporting children's reading

Five fathers discussed reading with their children, highlighting associated difficulties, sometimes demonstrating considerable insight into children's specific literacy problems:

...he still needs considerable support with [reading]... Mark has a very good memory...And the problem with that is... he's not actually reading the words, he's just telling you the story...his reading is very suspect.
(F2)

Two other fathers identified their children's attentional problems, one noting:

I do try and read to him at bedtime and that, but it's very hard to get his focus with reading, very difficult. I've never given up... (F7)

The impact of direct versus indirect parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities has been rarely explored. In one longitudinal study, parental involvement in the home-based learning of 13, 176 children with disabilities was found to be positively associated with educational achievement while indirect activities, such as attending meetings or volunteering were not (Zhang et al., 2011), although such

involvement was found to reduce maternal distress in children with autism (Benson, 2015).

Diversity in father experience

In the online survey, 287 men identified themselves as biological fathers, 13 as step-fathers, 2 as foster fathers and 4 as adoptive fathers while 23 fathers were separated. In an attempt to capture diversity of experience, one father from a BAME background was interviewed, two step-fathers, one father who was non-resident and four fathers who identified themselves as being on the autism spectrum.

It was apparent that both step-fathers were highly involved in aspects of their step-children's education. One was solely responsible for supervising homework and discussed his own role compared to that of the child's biological father:

I do the homework...[but] it's always been dad that's gone to parents evenings... you know, when it's face to face, proper - parent time it's very much [my partner] and his dad that are part of it..as it should be.

A non-resident father emphasised his determination to remain involved in his children's education although following separation, he had encountered difficulties with service providers:

At one point I had to write a pretty sharp letter to all of the professionals involved... because I just wasn't getting information through... I was using phrases like 'discrimination', because they weren't sending me letters... (F5)

Fathers identifying themselves as on the autism spectrum were extremely concerned about their children's social and psychological experiences at school, having encountered difficulties in these areas themselves. One father said:

he was struggling with school, he was struggling with friends... it was heart breaking for me and... the more I saw what was happening to Simon... it was my childhood. It was me... being repeated. And I kept saying to [my wife] 'This isn't right, and I'm not going to have this for him... (F6)

Two fathers discussed how their own educational challenges enabled them to support their children's academic/social learning. One hoped that his personal insights might inform the teaching of his teenage son in a mainstream school:

I've spent quite a lot of time in meetings... trying to coach teachers with teaching methods..that really really work for very able students who happen to think differently. Because I went through all that. (F9).

While some studies have explored diversity of father experience in relation to typically developing, such research in the field of childhood disability is extremely scarce (Giallo et al., 2015). The perspectives reported here indicate that diversity of experience can significantly affect the contribution, challenges and needs of fathers of children with autism.

Challenges and father involvement in schools

Structural issues

In the online survey, timing of school meetings emerged as the most frequently cited obstacle to greater educational involvement (Potter, in press). Fathers interviewed discussed both structural and attitudinal barriers affecting their experience of educational engagement. Five fathers, all in full-time employment, were unable to access meetings during the working day.

Attitudinal issues

Nine fathers felt that parental views and experiences were not prioritised, especially regarding the impact of a child's stressful day at school on home life. One father related:

We kept saying to them 'If you say to Simon that X, Y and Z [will happen], but it turns out to be A, B and C, he will just be quiet and withdrawn... But when he gets home he will explode with us... And they couldn't understand that. They couldn't understand that. (F6)

Another father said:

...they don't recognise what you're talking about when you say, you know 'Tom does this at home.' 'Well, he doesn't do it in the class, we hardly know he's here...' (F23)

From a wider perspective, one father believed strongly that services generally did not understand or respect the experiences of families:

It is a huge issue and .. it's very, very typical of how an awful lot of people approach seeing a family with a child with autism in it. They look from a distance..at a snapshot, and they make assumptions. And they then make judgements on the basis of those assumptions, and then when you object they blame you for being difficult. (F12)

Several studies have reported significant levels of parental dissatisfaction with the special educational system. Lack of specialist professional knowledge in schools has been identified as frustrating for parents of children with autism (Iadarola et al., 2015) as has schools' willingness to listen to or take account of parental perspectives (Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014). At a systems level, parents have criticised

processes leading to statements of special educational needs in the UK (Lamb, 2009) and tribunals concerning placement decisions (Penfold, Cleghorn, Tennant, Palmer, & Read, 2009). However, it is difficult to compare levels of maternal and paternal satisfaction due to a lack of information concerning the sex of participants (as in The Lamb Enquiry) or because analysis has not been disaggregated by gender, (see Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014).

Father-mother roles

It was apparent that roles and responsibilities regarding educational involvement were closely negotiated between mothers and fathers. Thirteen men discussed this, with considerations such as employment patterns, the age and sex of the child with autism and the needs of other siblings, emerging as factors influencing responsibilities. For example, one step-father outlined the rationale for division of morning caring duties:

I'll dress her, I'll get her breakfast. Basically, I'm more involved with her than [my partner] because we've got a little boy, and he takes up more of her time (F14).

Mothers were often the first point of call during the school day due to fathers' employment status. One father man explicitly defined parental roles in his household:

I'm the main breadwinner. My wife doesn't have time to go to work... [she] is the first person to be going to things at the school. (F12)

A few parents' own professional backgrounds dictated patterns of involvement with their children's learning:

I'm very numerical, my wife's an English teacher... so she will do literature with him and I'll do number homework with him... We very much share the work. (F15)

A focus on negotiating roles has been identified as effective for parents of typically developing children (Fletcher et al., 2014) and Saini et al., (2015) argued that such a strategy is especially important for parents of children with autism due the nature of their children's more complex and challenging needs.

Discussion

Although father involvement in education is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes for typically developing children, very little is known about the involvement of fathers of children with disabilities in this area and still less in the field of autism. This study extends knowledge in this area by reporting on father engagement in the education and learning of children with ASD, together with challenges encountered. The high levels of paternal engagement reported here echo those discussed by Shave & Lashewicz, (2015) in research exploring the support needs of fathers of children with autism and those discussed by Towers (2009). In both studies, men undertook a wide range of responsibilities for their children, often within the constraints of full-time employment, as was the case here.

This study draws on Hawkins & Dollahite's, (1997) generative model to conceptualise father involvement, where the nurturing capabilities of fathers are foregrounded. Fathers' narratives demonstrated generative work across all of the model's four dimensions. Addressing children's personal care and nutritional needs appears as essential *ethical work* in facilitating children's daily access to school. Regarding *stewardship work*, many fathers demonstrated a determination to be available within busy working lives for a range of education-related purposes, from gaining appropriate educational placements to assisting with homework. *Development work* was manifest in supporting children's learning and championing their needs within school.

Relationship work was apparent when fathers talked about the ways in which they attempted to mediate or illuminate interactions between their children and others. It is important to emphasise that work across the four dimensions was most often undertaken in close collaboration with mothers. Fathers identified a range of challenges in relation to both indirect and direct involvement in their children's learning, relating to school practices and attitudes as well as children's own learning difficulties.

The commitment, contribution and in some cases innovation, demonstrated by fathers have implications for enhancing greater inclusion of fathers of children with autism in schools. At an attitudinal level, schools need to better understand, recognise and value the contribution which fathers make in the education and learning of their children with autism. At a structural level, greater flexibility in the of timing meetings and events is needed to ensure that fathers can attend or where such attendance is not possible, key issues should be conveyed directly to fathers to signal their on-going importance in the process. There is also a pressing need for schools to ensure a sensitive and respectful approach to parental concerns. Mueller and Buckley (2014) urged schools to take account of the perspectives of both fathers and mothers of children with disabilities regarding conflict of opinions, to enable more collaborative and consensual solutions to be reached. Given the association found between home-based parental involvement and outcomes for students with disabilities (Zhang et al., 2011), the provision of support for fathers in this key area would seem especially important, particularly since men are already significantly engaged in assisting children with homework.

In addition, there is a pressing need to consider gender in relation to how educational services seek to engage fathers. Panter-Brick et al., (2014) highlighted the "distinct expectations, constraints and experiences" (p1208) of mothers and fathers

which services should not overlook. To achieve gender inclusive approaches, Bergin, Wells, & Owen, (2013) argued that explicit links are required between macro, meso and micro levels of policy and practice. In the UK, legal frameworks and policy generally remain gender-blind. The statutory “Code of Practice” in the area of special educational needs (DfE, 2014) employs the gender neutral term “parents” throughout, with scant indication that gender-differentiated approaches will be necessary to engage fathers, given the numerous structural, attitudinal and administrative barriers identified as undermining father involvement (Goldman, 2005; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). At the level of targeted guidance, the detailed “National Autism Standards for Schools and Educational Settings” tool (<http://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/schools/national-autism-standards/>) developed by the Autism Education Trust, similarly fails to adopt a gendered perspective, with schools invited to rate the extent to which their setting “proactively engages with *parents* (our italics) and carers of pupils with autism...” (p. 24).

Such omissions are also evident at the level of intervention. This study found that several fathers were engaged in assisting with their children’s homework, an area where children with autism have often been found to experience difficulties due to problems with cognitive co-ordination (Hampshire, Butera, & Dustin, 2014). Endedijk et al., (2011) discussed a self-management approach for children and associated training for *parents* (our italics) in this area although the study omitted to report on the sex of the parents involved, thereby undermining the potential generalisability of findings. Furthermore, as reported here by some fathers, children with ASD often experience literacy problems (El Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014) but few, if any, parent-directed interventions adopt a gender-differentiated approach. This general lack of consideration of gender as a factor potentially influencing the effectiveness of parental

intervention programmes is unfortunate since several studies have shown that the needs and preferences of mothers and fathers in respect of models of service delivery and training may differ (Braunstein et al., 2013; Scourfield, Cheung, & Macdonald, 2014).

Having said this, interventions which facilitate the involvement of both fathers and mothers are likely to result in the largest gains, since recent comprehensive reviews in the field have highlighted the flaws in delivering an approach in which only one parent (almost always the mother) receives training in a particular strategy (Fletcher et al., 2014). Maynard, McDonald, & Stickle, (2016) emphasised the importance of “co-operative teamwork” for parents of children with autism who often encounter particularly challenging nurturing scenarios as a result of their children’s complex individual needs.

Findings reported here indicate that issues of diversity in fatherhood must be addressed. Fathers are not a homogeneous group and effective approaches will need to take account of a range of socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability and family background. For example, little is known concerning the on-going involvement of fathers of children with disabilities following separation nor the effects of levels of involvement on children’s educational progress, despite benefits observed when fathers of typically developing children remain involved (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Read (2012) outlined guidance for the engagement of non-resident fathers which includes a policy regarding how services will involve separated parents and separation aware administrative systems which will ensure that necessary information is communicated, problematic for a non-resident father in the current study. Regarding fathers on the autism spectrum, schools should endeavour to learn from their perspectives and experiences, in the light of the powerful insights shared by men here.

Limitations associated with this interview study should be noted. The sample of fathers cannot be said to be representative of all fathers of children with autism since participants had relatively homogeneous backgrounds in terms of marital status, ethnicity and educational level. Fathers educated to degree level were especially over-represented, a limitation identified by several other studies in the area (see for example, Cheuk and Lashewicz (2015) and Meadan et al., 2015), indicating the need for more inclusive recruitment strategies in future. In addition, the sample size is modest, although at least comparable with that of other father/parent interview studies in the field, (see for example, see Trottier, 2013) and is considered to be within the usual range for qualitative studies (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Conclusion

The needs and contribution of fathers of children with autism continue to be little recognised, valued or understood in research and practice. Such an omission is especially concerning in the field of education, given the acknowledged benefits of paternal involvement to the educational outcomes of typically developing children. Future research should further explore the direct and indirect contribution of larger numbers of fathers of children with autism, drawn from a wider range of cultural, educational and economic backgrounds. The impact of such involvement on educational outcomes must be considered alongside that of mothers, with a view to determining which kinds of involvement are most effective and how engagement may be better facilitated. Attempts to secure greater paternal involvement in the education of children with autism will need to embed a gender differentiated approach across arenas of policy, research and practice to maximise inclusion and effectiveness.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the 25 fathers of children with autism who took time out of very busy lives to take part in this research. Sincere thanks to Dr. Chris Whittaker for his unstinting support throughout the research project and in particular for his insightful comments on this paper. Thanks also to Roger Olley, M.B.E, Phil Hislop and Professor John Carpenter for their expert contribution to the verification group associated with the wider Leverhulme study.

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Table 1: Characteristics of fathers in survey sample

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
<i>Age</i>	
21-29	11 (4%)
30-39	51 (17%)
40-49	159 (52%)
50-59	77 (25%)
60-69	8 (3%)
<i>Number of children with autism</i>	
1	257 (84%)
2	40 (13%)
3	8 (3%)
4	1 (0.5%)
<i>Relationship to child with autism</i>	
Biological father	287 (94%)
Step-father	13 (4%)
Adoptive father	4 (1%)
Foster father	2 (1%)
<i>Marital status</i>	
Married	242 (79%)
Living with partner	34 (11%)
Separated/Divorced	16 (5%)
Single	5 (2%)
<i>Educational background (highest level)</i>	
Completed primary/secondary school	26 (8%)
Passes at GCSE/ A level	61 (20%)
Vocational qualifications	59 (19%)

Degree/ postgraduate qualifications	160 (52%)
<i>Employment status</i>	
Full-time	190 (62%)
Self-employed	42 (14%)
Retired/ Not in paid work	39 (13%)
Part-time	27 (9%)
 <i>Ethnicity</i>	
White	286 (95%)
Mixed heritage	6 (2%)
Black or Black British	5 (2%)
Asian or Asian British	2 (1%)
Chinese	1 (0.5%)

Tables: Characteristics of fathers in interview sample

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
<i>Age</i>	
21-29	2
30-39	4
40-49	12
50-59	7
<i>Number of children with autism</i>	
1	20
2	4
3	1
<i>Relationship to child with autism</i>	
Biological father	23
Step-father	2
<i>Marital status</i>	
Married	23
Living with partner	1
Separated/Divorced	1
<i>Educational background (highest level)</i>	
Passes at GCSE/ A level	1
Vocational qualifications	7
Degree/ postgraduate qualifications	17
<i>Employment status</i>	
Full-time	11
Self-employed	6
Retired/ Not in paid work	3
Part-time	5
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
White	24
Black or Black British	1

Area of residence UK

Scotland	1
North East England	9
North West England	1
Yorkshire and The Humber	6
East Midlands	3
West Midlands	1
South West England	4