Chapter 3

Research strategy, study design, data collection and analysis

3.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore the experiences, perceptions and views of relevant professionals with regard to consultation with children under the age of five, within early years settings. In this Chapter, the research strategy, study design and methods of data collection and analysis used in this study are described. The reasons for these choices are explained. Ethics and project planning issues are also discussed.

3.2 Research strategy and study design

In selecting a research strategy, the nature of the perceived connection between theory and research implied by the research question, as well as epistemological and ontological considerations, will be influential, as quantitative and qualitative research strategies differ greatly in each of these respects (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research takes an inductive approach in which theory is generated from research, as opposed to the deductive approach in quantitative research, in which research is used to test theory. The two strategies represent differing epistemological positions. Qualitative research comes from an interpretivist perspective and is therefore concerned with interpreting and understanding phenomena through the meanings that people attach to them (Greenhalgh, 2001). In contrast, quantitative research is associated with a positivistic approach. Positivism, a traditionally 'scientific' approach, holds that objective knowledge can only be derived from direct
observation or experience (Robson, 2002). Thirdly, they hold differing ontological positions, in that qualitative approaches are constructionist, an approach which understands reality as being socially constructed (Robson, 2002). This means a belief that social phenomena and their meanings are created by social interaction between individuals. Quantitative approaches are objectivist in their ontological position, meaning that social phenomena are believed to exist independently of individuals (Bryman, 2004). Given these considerations, a qualitative research strategy was selected for this study, as the study was exploratory in nature and therefore fits with an inductive approach emphasising the generation of theories, rather than testing current theories. The nature of the study, with its focus upon understanding the views and experiences of early years practitioners in relation to their own practice with regard to consultation with young children, is consistent with an interpretivist epistemological position and a constructionist ontological orientation.

The research design of a study should also stem from the research question. As De Vaus (2001) argues “the function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible” (p.9). This study aimed to explore current practice and the experiences, perceptions and views of a sample of professionals who work with children under five years old, with regard to consultation with young children. The research was therefore based on a cross-sectional design. This design involves the collection of data on more than one case, at a single point in time (Bryman, 2004). While a cross-
sectional study design is typically associated with quantitative research, it is also often employed in qualitative research, evidenced by the use of semi-structured or unstructured interviews with a number of participants (Bryman, 2004). Indeed, De Vaus (2001) argues that there is no reason why quantitative or qualitative data are more appropriate for the logic of cross-sectional design. In a recent review of articles based on multi-strategy research, Bryman (2006) found that the use of semi-structured interviews within a cross-sectional research design was prevalent among the qualitative research articles.

A potential limitation of cross-sectional research design is that it can be difficult to attribute causation due to the lack of a time dimension, as data is collected at just one point in time, and also the lack of a randomised control group (De Vaus, 2001). However, this is an exploratory study and is not concerned with measuring change over time or establishing causal relationships. Rather, the study is interested in exploring current practice and the related issues. Therefore the research design will allow the current practice and views of a sample of early years practitioners, with regard to consultation with young children, to be explored.

A grounded theory approach to data analysis was used for this study. Grounded theory studies aim to generate theory from the data that is collected during the course of the study (Robson, 2002). Grounded theory can be described as “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process ... data collection,
analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12). This approach is especially useful in new and applied fields, in which there is little theory or concepts currently available to describe and explain a phenomenon (Robson, 2002). However, many studies follow the style of a grounded theory approach but do not rigidly “follow the detailed prescriptions and terminology” of it (Robson, 2002, p.492). The extent to which a grounded theory approach was followed is discussed in more detail below.

3.3 Sampling strategy

Sampling is linked with the external validity, or generalisability, of research findings, considered high in probability samples which allow results to be generalised from the sample to the population (Robson, 2002). However, qualitative researchers are more likely to choose non-probabilistic sampling methods as their interests lie in understanding social processes, not achieving statistical representativeness (Mays & Pope, 1995). For example, purposive sampling, or theoretical sampling, are often used in order to allow the researcher to focus on the particular area under study. Often the sample is not pre-defined but an iterative process is followed, as in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It could be argued that this flexibility can increase the validity of findings. Mays and Pope (1995) argue that samples generated in these ways, while they are not representative statistically, are relevant to the research question and theoretically informed. Øvretveit (1998) states that qualitative research methods can actually provide more valid data than
quantitative research methods, in investigating such things as the meanings people attach to their experiences.

A purposive sampling method was used for the study. This is a deliberately non-random method of selecting participants for research, which allows individuals to be selected because they have knowledge relevant to the research (Bowling, 2002). Therefore, early years practitioners working within a sample of local Sure Start settings were invited to participate in the study. This aimed to ensure that participants were currently working with children under the age of five, as that is the focus of Sure Start settings.

However, an initial attempt to recruit participants by contacting local Sure Start programmes directly was unsuccessful. At this point contact was made with a strategic level manager within Sure Start who had previously demonstrated an interest in the topic of consultation with young children. This individual sent an e-mail to the managers of various early years settings with which she had contact, including several local Sure Start programmes, Children's Centres, and a family centre. It was hoped that this would help to persuade potential participants of the legitimacy of the research and of the credentials of the researcher, as managers would therefore be more likely to authorise the research (Denscombe, 2003). The e-mail gave approval for the study and asked that managers allow their staff time to participate if they wished to. A participant information sheet was attached to the e-mail. A copy of this is provided in Appendix B. The participant information sheet outlined the purpose of the study and what participation would involve. It had a tear
off reply slip which interested practitioners could use to indicate that they wished to take part in the study and that they gave their consent to be contacted by the researcher. Options to return this slip by post or e-mail were provided, as well as the option of contacting the researcher by telephone.

In total a sample of nine early years professionals were recruited for the study. Participants recruited were working within Sure Start Children’s Centres and one voluntary sector run family centre, as well as professionals working within a range of different early years settings as part of their role. In terms of the professional roles of participants, the sample consisted of a nursery manager, a nursery worker, an outreach development worker, a project worker, an early years consultant, two pedagogues, a speech and language therapist and a health visitor. Therefore the sample reflected the range of different professionals present in early years settings, including practitioners from the different disciplines of education, health and social welfare. Furthermore, the sample of early years professionals included practitioners and managers, including managers with strategic responsibility. Sampling for the study had aimed to capture diversity of professionals within the early years settings. It did not claim to be representative of each profession as the sample was small, but intended to access a range of views and experiences, from practitioners from within a range of different professional backgrounds, as represented within the early years setting in the current climate of multi-professional practice.
3.4 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative research methods are useful in providing a way of "capturing the complex and fluid stream of events taking place" in services involving people (Robson, 2000, p. 63). Qualitative data collection methods were used in the study in order to explore the experiences, perceptions and views of the participants in relation to consultation with young children within the early years settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the sample of early years practitioners.

The potential benefits and drawbacks of using triangulation in an effort to increase the validity of the research was considered when planning the research. Triangulation is a widely used strategy that aims to enhance the validity of qualitative research (Robson, 2002). Triangulation means using different methods to collect data on the same topic, thereby allowing findings to be compared and then corroborated or questioned accordingly. This increases confidence in the findings because consistency of results when different methods are used reduces the likelihood that the results were affected by the particular method chosen (Denscombe, 2003). The observation of sessions within early years settings was considered to compare with interview findings. However, initial contact with the ethics committee revealed that this would be unlikely to be granted ethical approval, or at least would prove highly problematic, due to concerns regarding the involvement of children, as a vulnerable group, in the research. Practical difficulties were also anticipated, such as problems gaining access to the early years settings, and the additional time that the arranging and
conducting the observations would incur. Furthermore, triangulation has been criticised by some as a means of validating research findings. As Silverman (2005) argues, "many of the models that underlie qualitative research are simply not compatible with the assumption that 'true' fixes on 'reality' can be obtained separately from particular ways of looking at it" (p.212). Given that the aim of this research was to explore the views, experiences and attitudes of early years practitioners with regard to consultation with children under five, interviews were considered the most appropriate and effective method for addressing this aim.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are a useful data collection method for enabling respondents to give detailed responses about complex issues (Bowling, 2002). Semi-structured interviews are flexible in process, allowing the interviewee's own perspectives to be explored (Bryman, 2004). In semi-structured interviews the interviewer has a list of issues and questions to be discussed but has some flexibility in the order of topics covered and can allow the interviewee to elaborate on the issues raised (Denscombe, 2003). Open-ended questions are used which define the area to be explored but allow the interviewer or interviewee to diverge so that particular areas can be followed up in more detail (Britten, 1995).

The researcher contacted the practitioners who agreed to take part, in order to make an appointment for an interview. Before the interview written
informed consent of the participant was obtained. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix C.

The interview schedule designed for the study is presented in Appendix D. Interviews focused on exploring the views and experiences of early years practitioners with regard to consultation with children under five. Areas covered included practitioners' understanding and perceptions of consultation with children under five within early years settings, their experiences of consultation if they had used it in their practice, and the possible barriers and facilitating factors in consulting with children under five within early years settings.

In contrast to original grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that the initial interview questions may be based on prior literature or experience. However, these original questions may be altered during the data collection process, to allow emerging concepts to be pursued (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process was followed during the study as some questions were adapted slightly and a question asking about parents/carers attitudes towards consultation with young children was added.

Wengraf (2001) states that semi-structured interviews are more difficult to conduct than fully structured interviews, as the interviewee's responses cannot be predicted and therefore the response of the interviewer has to be improvised, which requires mental preparation. Consequently, semi-
structured interviews necessitate careful preparation before the session, discipline and creativity during the session, and time to be allowed for analysis and interpretation following the interviews (Wengraf, 2001). This was all considered during the planning stage of the study and various skills were employed to conduct the interviews. For example, time was spent at the start of the interview to establish rapport, as the interviewer needs to develop an appropriate level of rapport in the interviewing relationship which can be a delicate balance (Seidman, 1998). During the interview, techniques such as probing for further information, requesting clarification, asking for examples and reflecting the responses of interviewees were used, each of which is considered a core skill of interviewing (Gillham, 2005).

There is a risk during interviews that some questions may make an interviewee feel awkward or defensive and in this situation they may respond with an answer they feel is expected of them, or an answer which reflects what they consider to be the researcher’s own viewpoint (Denscombe, 2003). Charmaz (2006) notes that professionals who are interviewed may “recite public relations rhetoric, rather than reveal personal views, much less a full account of their experiences” (p.27). This was a concern in this study because it was possible that the professionals interviewed may hold ideas about what they consider to be ‘correct’ responses with regard to current early years practice. This is one of the possible threats to the validity of qualitative research, summarised by Lincoln and Guba, cited in Robson (2002) as, reactivity (influence of the researcher’s presence on the people involved), respondent biases (influence of the respondent and the answers
they choose to provide) and researcher biases (influence of the researcher’s assumptions and preconceptions).

These issues can be addressed in part by the use of reflexivity by the researcher. Reflexivity means the researchers being aware of the effects of their “methods, values, biases, decisions, and mere presence in the very situations they investigate” (Bryman, 2004, p.543). Ahern (1999) argues that subjective awareness is actually useful for qualitative researchers because it allows them to be aware of common themes in the wider human experience. She makes the point that it is not possible for researchers to put aside feelings and preconceptions if they are not actually aware of them and so being able to put personal values aside can be considered a result of how reflexive the researcher is, not how objective (Ahern, 1999). Ahern (1999) advocates the use of reflexive bracketing which means identifying areas of potential bias using reflexivity and then bracketing them so that their influence is minimised. A reflexive approach was adopted for this research study.

Interviews were audio taped, with the permission of the interviewee, and later transcribed verbatim. This is considered to increase the validity of qualitative research findings, as it enables the researcher a valid description of what they heard during the interview (Robson, 2002). The interview transcripts were then analysed thematically and interrogated for information. The data analysis process is described in more detail in the following section.
3.4.2 Data analysis

The interview data was analysed thematically following a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is concerned with developing theory out of data and uses an iterative approach in that data collection and analysis proceed alongside each other and refer back from one to the other as the research progresses (Bryman, 2004). Therefore, the analysis of earlier interviews in the study may influence the focus of future interviews, should findings highlight issues considered to warrant further investigation. Interviews were transcribed and the transcript analysed as soon as possible after completion of each interview. This allowed any emerging findings to influence and shape future interviews.

Coding is a key process in grounded theory, consisting of reviewing interview transcripts and labelling parts of theoretical significance, as the first stage in the generation of theory (Bryman, 2004). There is no general consensus about exactly how to do this coding, although there is a shared understanding among practitioners that it involves moving from generating codes that relate closely to the data towards more abstract conceptualisations (Bryman, 2004). Study designs may draw upon some aspects of grounded theory but not others, as for instance some researchers may find the coding process too restrictive for their purposes (Robson, 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate using three levels of coding, namely, open coding, axial coding and selective coding. However, axial coding has been criticised by some for ending the exploratory stage of coding too early in the process (Bryman, 2004). This study followed an approach described by
Charmaz (2006) which consists of initial coding, applying provisional codes that remain close to the data, followed by focused coding, in which the most significant codes are used to synthesise and categorise large amounts of data. A framework outlining the analytic themes and categories which resulted from this process is presented in Appendix E.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was used. This involves the comparison of new codes, categories and concepts as they emerge with those already existing, therefore ensuring that the developing theory remains grounded in the data (Denscombe, 2003).

A process of memo-writing was also conducted. Memo-writing entails writing informal analytic notes throughout the research process, and can be helpful in moving from focused codes to conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2006).

3.5 Ethics

Ethics committees are formal committees established by organisations or institutions in order to monitor ethical issues through the review of research designs and proposals (Oliver, 2003). The NHS Local Research Ethics Committee, namely the Cheshire Research Ethics Committee, was contacted during the planning stage of this research and confirmation was received that it was not necessary to obtain ethical approval for this study from that committee. Ethical approval for this study was therefore obtained from the School of Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee, at the
University of Chester. Copies of the letters received from each of these committees can be found in Appendix F.

The ethical issues inherent in this study include informed consent, confidentiality of information, and the anonymity of participants. Participant information sheets were provided to potential participants to explain the purpose of the study and what involvement would entail. Potential participants were given time to decide whether they would like to participate. Participation in the study was by voluntary informed consent, obtained by the researcher prior to commencement of the interview. It is increasingly required that researchers obtain written consent from participants, rather than relying on their verbal consent (Miller & Bell, 2002). Written consent was obtained from participants using a consent form which had been scrutinised by the ethics committee (see Appendix C for a copy of the consent form).

Confidentiality issues were addressed as part of the informed consent process, as details of how data would be kept confidential were described on the participant information sheet, in keeping with guidelines for best practice (Oliver, 2003). Data collected for the study were treated in the strictest of confidence. The computer on which data were stored was password protected and paper records were kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the researcher had access to the data. On completion of the study the audiotapes of recorded interviews will be wiped.
The anonymity of participants was protected as individuals were not identified at any point in the study. Interview transcripts were assigned a code which was then used when presenting transcript quotations in the report of findings. It can be difficult to ensure that anonymity is protected, so special care was taken to avoid including any personal information about participants, or use any quotations which may have made them identifiable in some way. For this reason the label of ‘early years practitioner’ was used for all participants, along with the code number taken from the interview transcript. It was considered that labelling participants by profession or job title may have made them identifiable as the sample was small and some participants were aware of others also taking part in the study.

3.6 Project planning

This project was carefully planned according to the time available to meet the deadline for submission of the dissertation at the beginning of October 2006. A copy of the project management schedule is provided in Appendix G. It was necessary at some points during the study to be flexible with the order of planned tasks and amend the project management schedule accordingly. For example, the start of the project was delayed because the NHS Local Research Ethics Committee took longer than had been expected to confirm whether ethical approval from the Committee was necessary. This time was used to complete the literature review, as it was not possible to begin fieldwork until ethical approval for the study had been obtained. At a later stage in the research process, some difficulties with recruiting participants
were encountered. This meant that the analysis and write up of the study had to be completed within a shorter time frame than originally planned.

3.7 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the current practice and the experiences, perceptions and views of a sample of professionals who work with children under five years old, with regard to consultation with young children. A qualitative research strategy was selected as appropriate for this particular research question. A cross-sectional study design was utilised and purposive sampling was used to identify potential research participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of nine early years practitioners. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was used for the study.