Chapter 2

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline the main methodological approaches to evaluation, introduce illuminative evaluation and explore its strengths as the research design and justify the chosen methodological approach.

2.2 EVALUATION

According to Patton (1982), evaluation involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of a programme. Since evaluation is descriptive in nature it can be particularly useful to analyse an area of practice to provide information which may be used for future decision-making (Chambers, 1999). Within this research the primary concern was the description and interpretation of the foster carers’ experience of training to provide feedback to managers, inform and where necessary, plan modifications for future training. There are many different approaches to evaluation, however an emerging approach to the evaluation of educational programmes is that of illuminative evaluation.

2.2.1 ILLUMINATIVE EVALUATION

Illuminative evaluation is defined as a form of naturalistic enquiry (Patton, 1997). According to Sloan and Watson (2001), illuminative evaluation is not a standard methodological package but a general research strategy. Exploratory in nature, it uses both descriptive and interpretative data collection techniques in order to give a multi-perspective view through the triangulation of findings (Chambers, 2004). It emerged as an alternative approach in response to the perceived limitations of more traditional evaluation methods which focused on measurement or prediction. With its emphasis on description and interpretation, illuminative evaluation emphasises
understanding the complex inter-relationships between content, structure and context by providing a rich description of components integral to the intervention being investigated. It was initially used to evaluate small scale educational programmes (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). It has since been adapted by nurse researchers keen to investigate and understand the learning environment within a clinical setting sometimes referred to as “in reality” (Sloan & Watson, 2001).

Usually, within the healthcare context the purpose of evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of an innovation. However, the attachment training described is not seen as an instructional system as such, but is approached via its translation and enactment by foster carers. Therefore an illuminative approach was adopted since it is a particularly useful approach for exploring processes over time and issues that are complex and where disentangling complexities provides clues as to important relationships that shape the processes and outcomes of educational programmes (Parlett & Hamilton, 1987).

Parlett and Hamilton (1972) highlight that illuminative evaluation may come in diverse forms with no one method used exclusively as different methods combine to throw a brighter light on the investigation (Sloan & Watson, 2001). The purpose of this research study was to discover and take account of what it was like for a foster carer to participate in mental health training as well as measuring change over time within the organisational context of social care. Illuminative evaluation with its emphasis on understanding may facilitate the comprehensive nature of the data and confirm otherwise tentative findings. (Savage, 2000; Shih, 1998, cited by Sloan & Watson, 2001)

It was felt that illuminative evaluation as in other studies (Clemow, 2007; Ellis& Nolan, 2004; Sloan & Watson, 2001) may give an alternative but legitimate perspective on the phenomenon of foster care training. It aims to discover and document what it is like to participate in the programme. It aims to explore foster carers’ journeys through the experience of training. Crittenden (1978) identifies that illuminative evaluation stresses the uniqueness of each setting. A final strength of this approach is in the researcher’s ability to take into account the educational programme in the context of foster carers working within a wider social care
organisational context within which the training was delivered. An additional strength is that it enables the researcher to avoid passing judgement regarding the training but sharpens discussions, disentangles complexities and illuminates the significant (Sloan & Watson, 2001).

2.3 MIXED METHODOLOGY

This research study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to provide a comprehensive illuminative evaluation. It was envisaged, that by using multi data sources and capturing data at different time points, this would capture both the process and the impact of training against the complexities of the foster care experience (Gorard & Taylor, 2005).

2.3.1 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative research is defined by Bryman (2001) as the way in which the people who are being studied understand and interpret their social world and the meaning they attach to phenomena such as their actions, decisions, beliefs or values. This is achieved by exploring the data (usually consisting of words or actions of research participants) for conceptual definitions of how people perceive situations to provide explanations of why something happens in a particular way. Qualitative research also seeks to develop typologies or classifications of grouping of people (or situations) that tend to have common characteristics, opinions and experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Qualitative methods are used to address research questions that require explanation or understanding of social phenomena and their contexts (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Since the research question for this project is ‘What are the experiences of foster carers attending training programme’ it is an appropriate method to achieve explanation and understanding of foster carers’ psycho-social experience. A range of qualitative data collection methods have been used to explore the experience of the training programme as a whole through semi-structured audio-taped interviews of foster carers, recorded diary entries by foster carers, and observational notes made by the researcher of their initial thoughts when interviewing foster carers.
Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993), discuss the usefulness of combining different data generating methods which can enhance understanding of interrelating experiences of both process as well as evaluating meaningful outcomes (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972).

It is important to discuss these interrelating experiences in relation to this research study. The main data collection tool was a series of semi-structured interviews conducted before, during and after the training programme. In addition, foster carers were asked to keep a personal diary during the twelve week period after the training programme. This provided access to “their world” outside of the training programme, providing background and context to their everyday experiences. Zimmerman and Weider (1977) used diaries as the basis for intensive interviewing in their ethnographic study of the counter culture in America and they found they provided a more intimate record of a period of time otherwise hidden. The data from the diaries in this study were used in a similar way as the basis for the 12 week follow up interviews with foster carers who completed them. In addition, the researcher kept abreast of knowledge within the wider community, through the use of a reflective observational journal which outlined the organisational context of issues that arose during interview. The researcher also gained an awareness of political and organisational changes through an ongoing up to date review of the literature and statutory guidance for foster carers throughout the research study.

2.3.2 REFLEXIVITY

Crombie and Davies (1998) highlight the importance of reflection throughout the process of interview data collection. Pope and Mays (2000), discuss the importance of the researcher’s ability to be aware of their role in relation to the interviewee. I reflected upon the effect of my personal characteristics and my role as a nurse within CAMHS/LAC and explored the potential bias and made explicit the ethical issues. I realised that my position and role within the research as both a trainer and researcher could influence the interviews and thereby the subsequent shape and direction of the data collection. I therefore took the time to reflect upon my role as a nurse practitioner who had worked with foster carers and had already gained views as to the needs of the participants. I made some notes about how this might
influence my expectations of what foster carers might share. I also completed a sensitivity tool to aid transparency and acknowledge the bias that existed within me. A copy of the sensitivity tool is in Appendix 17. This enabled me to reflect upon ways bias may creep in by acknowledging my background and beliefs. It could be argued that themes would arise from this insider knowledge however, the Framework Approach was used as a data management method to provide transparency and an audit trail of decision making was completed so that other researchers can consider whether the findings are trustworthy (see Appendix 22).

I aimed to ensure that the interpersonal forces that operate in the therapeutic relationship were not used as a lever to secure participation (Sim, 1986, cited by French, 1993). Foster carers were fully informed regarding my length of practice specialising in this field with the aim of reducing the impact of pre-conceptions. I made it clear that I had developed and designed the training programme with my health colleague and we both provided and facilitated the training programme. I also made it clear that I collected the data and analysed the data and therefore transparency was crucial within this research. I am a mental health nurse by background and currently hold the position of an Advanced Nurse Practitioner with ten years experience of training foster carers. Care was taken through the process of data collection not to influence the foster carers in relation to their response. I aimed to be as neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of the data, given that I have extensive knowledge of the literature regarding children in care. Again my knowledge of previous research and terminology used was bracketed off in order to reduce any distraction from the data and in order to do justice to the originality of this research. Using training workshop group facilitators as researchers can lead to potential bias but can also help in terms of an increased awareness and understanding of the wider issues faced by foster carers who attend this training e.g. the pressures they face in relation to the children they care for (Golding & Picken, 2004). The limitations associated with potential bias are further explored in Chapter 5.
2.3.3 QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

Quantitative data is defined as “a formal, objective, systematic process in which numerical data are utilised to obtain information about the world” (Crombie & Davies, 1996). A secondary focus is upon the quantitative data gathered which provide numerical data to indicate perceived changes in the emotions and behaviours of the children (foster and birth). These data also indicate how the behaviour of children may impact upon various components of family functioning and indicate changes in knowledge and satisfaction of foster carers with the quality, content and organisation of the training. A copy of the questionnaires can be found in Appendix 5. Gaining insight into this training experience within a longitudinal design will examine further the journey of the foster carers over time (Sloan & Watson, 2001).

2.3.4 TRIANGULATION

The use of this mixed methodology can be referred to as triangulation and is described as a combination of methods which may increase the validity and credibility of findings and prevent reliance on a single data source (Denzin, 1994). In this way it can be used to compensate for the weaknesses of a single methodological approach. Rose and Webb (1997) define triangulation as gaining different perspectives from data, using them to give a fuller picture, which enhances the rigour of the research. Triangulation is proposed by Gorard and Taylor (2004), as a complementary combination of approaches; in this study multiple sources are used to provide a comprehensive and more complete account of what is experienced by foster carers through the process of training. The application of triangulation may be used as a way of gaining a more holistic view whilst adding depth and breadth of understanding (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). Due to the various debates regarding the usefulness of triangulation for confirmation or completeness it is important to be explicit regarding its use in this study (Adami & Kiger, 2005).

Within this study a ‘between method’ triangulation is used which involves the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches within one study to investigate the same phenomenon which in this study is foster carers’ experience of mental health
training (Denzin 1989). The main collection of data was through qualitative methods so as to gain naturally occurring data and illuminate the experience of the foster carers in their own words. A secondary focus is that of the quantitative data gathered to look at the impact of the training. This quantifiable data may be useful in triangulating the qualitative data and providing some explanation for what is observed (Bell, 2005). The process of triangulation may play an important part for qualitative researchers in the validation of findings as it provides diverse ways of looking at the same phenomenon whilst adding credibility by strengthening confidence in whatever conclusions are drawn (Patton, 2003).

Barbour (2001) however, advised researchers to be cautious in using triangulation in order to solely validate qualitative data or to improve the credibility of the findings as data collected using different methods may be difficult to compare. Within this research project therefore this mixed methodology is considered as a way of providing data that may provide complementary perspectives, allowing the research question to be examined from different angles (Richardson 1991 in Barbour 2001).

Gorard and Taylor 2004 outlined this approach to triangulation by discussing the importance of understanding triangulation in terms of a complementary combination of approaches. They suggested that if we assumed that neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches gave us a complete picture of our object of study as in Figure 1, both will be valuable in giving us a differing picture. Each perspective would give us evidence about the object under study. In this way qualitative approaches may give us evidence in A and C although it is possible that C may be empty or that C could represent the whole or part of the object of the study. Quantitative approaches give us evidence in B and C. In addition there may be findings that may be unrelated to the study or other valuable findings that we gather in the field which were unexpected. Once this complementary notion of triangulation of data is used, a discussion regarding the findings about what each approach generates separately A and B and then together in C will be important. This range and comprehensiveness of evidence through the process of triangulation demonstrates the powerfulness of combining methods through the triangulation of data. Findings and results from A, B and C are all valuable increases in the amount of evidence available.
This triangulation of qualitative data through the use of quantitative data, served a number of purposes; to provide insight into or explain inconsistencies in foster carers’ accounts; to provide an understanding of the range and severity of perceived emotional and behavioural problems within the children they care for; to assess the impact of caring for children in foster care upon various areas of family functioning; to assess changes in knowledge base of foster carers; to assess change or perceived outcomes from attending the group by administering the measures pre, post and twelve weeks follow up. This quantitative data is used to provide a more complete and comprehensive exploration of the experiences of foster carers which illuminate issues as they arise.
2.4 PROCESS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

An outline of the research design process can be found in Figure 2.

![Research Design Flow Chart]

**Figure 2: Research Design Flow Chart**
2.4.1 SAMPLING STRATEGY

A whole population sampling framework was used to include two cohorts of foster carers trained in 2009/10. CAMHS/LAC contribute to the City Council’s Foster care training calendar by offering two training groups for foster carers each year. The sample included the two cohorts of foster carers who attended the Attachment Training course entitled ‘Helping Children to Form Good Attachments’ in May (2009) and November (2009). The rationale behind using two cohorts came from the need to include all foster carers trained in the same 12 month period for comparisons to be made within and across the two cohorts. The two cohorts comprised of 21 foster carers in total and although the sample size was small, according to Erlandson et al (1993), this does not detract from the quality of the qualitative data which, if data provide rich distribution, can contribute to and provide better understanding.

2.4.2 RECRUITMENT

The researcher was not directly involved in recruiting the participants in order to maximise participation and avoid coercion. Instead, the Learning and Development Officer (LDO) for the Social Care, responsible for organising the calendar of training for foster carers, agreed to facilitate the recruitment process. She made direct contact with each foster carer who applied for the training to provide a brief introduction to the scope and purpose of the research. She also gave out a covering letter inviting them to take part in the research, an information pack which provided full details of the purpose of the research, including what taking part would involve and contact details of the researcher to ask for further details. A copy of the letter of introduction is in Appendix 6 and a copy of the Information pack is in Appendix 7. Foster carers who were interested were asked to sign the consent form and return it to the LDO who informed the researcher of their contact details. The researcher then contacted those interested in taking part by phone in order to answer any further queries regarding the research process and encouraged them to talk to the learning officer or other professionals within their network, such as their family placement worker or their child’s social worker, regarding the decision to take part in the
research. Participation in the research was not a pre-requisite to the training and this was made clear. They were informed that if they agreed to take part they could refuse to answer any questions, terminate interviews if desired and were free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. Before proceeding, a consent form was provided which outlined the title of the project, the name of the researcher and required confirmation that the participant had read and understood the information sheet, had had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the study, understood that participation was voluntary, and agreed to audio-recorded interviews and to take part in the study. If happy to proceed, a consent form was completed and returned by post in a stamped addressed envelope, to the researcher. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix 8.

2.4.3 PARTICIPANTS

The participants were foster carers (male and female) who were employed by Local Authority between 2009/2010. Foster carers are people employed by the local authority or private agencies to care for a child who is unable to remain with his or her birth parents.

In May 2009 (Cohort One) 17 foster carers attended the training and in November 2009 (Cohort Two) 13 attended. It was anticipated that 15-20 interviews would be needed in order to provide the richness of data needed to adequately explore the foster carer’s experience of the training groups. We were able to recruit 14 foster carers from Cohort One and seven from Cohort Two which gave a total of 21 foster carers who agreed to take part in the research study. These participants were interviewed pre and post the training groups, with one follow up interview at three months.

2.5 ETHICAL APPROVAL: PROCESS IN ACTION

Full ethical approval was sought and gained from Portsmouth University’s School of Health Sciences and Social Work (SHSSW) Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was also sought from the City Council’s Children’s Social Care Research Ethics Committee which consisted of two senior social care managers who considered the
proposal through an external governance application form and gave approval for the
data to be collected. A copy of the ethical review and favourable opinion received
from both the local University and City Council can be found in Appendix 9.

There were many ethical issues that were considered prior to collecting data for this
research project such as the decision to undertake the research in order to review our
procedures and the fact that the participants are people with feelings and rights and
need to be fully informed about each part of the process. The consideration of the
welfare of the foster carers must be at the forefront of the researcher’s mind
(French, 1993). The code of practice outlined within the Research Governance
Framework for Health and Social Care (RFGHSC) (DH, 2004) was used to guide
this research study.

The code of practice covers the process of addressing ethical concerns which
included the following issues. Consideration was given to informed consent in order
to ensure voluntary participation from foster carers. An introductory letter and
written information were given out by the Learning and Development Officer
(LDO) to each potential participant. Participation was voluntary and non
participation did not affect the training or after care support they received.
Participants were informed about the research forming part of a research doctoral
programme and the nature of the institution within which the research took place
was highlighted. The letter introduced the researcher and their professional identity,
the training event and the aim of the research project. The letter also outlined the
number of interviews that would need to take place prior to and after the training.
The information sheet outlined the aim and purpose of the study, why they were
chosen to participate, what would happen, confidentiality and what would happen
with the research once completed. Informed consent was then gained both verbally
in writing prior to the first interview and again on each of the follow up interviews.

The importance of the choice of venue was discussed with each foster carer. Within
Cohort One, 12 foster carers chose a local and known local authority training centre
for the pre training interview with two requesting a home visit, this reduced to eight
in a training centre for the post training interview and only one in the training centre
for the follow up training interviews with the rest requesting home visits as and
when they were available. Within Cohort Two, five out of eight requested a training centre for the initial interview with all seven requesting home visits in the post and follow up training.

The importance of arriving on time for interviews was adhered to and the researcher discussed in full the foster carers’ right to ask questions and opt out of the research at any time without giving a reason.

Two important documents were reviewed by the researcher: (1) the Caldicott Committee Report (1997) and (2) the Data Protection Act (1998) in the sections related to individual’s rights to privacy with respect to the processing of personal data. The researcher was aware of the Data Protection Act (1998) with regard to any data stored on computers as this covers medical research (Crombie et al, 1996). Anonymity could not be assured as verbatim quotes were used in the reporting of qualitative data however the foster carers were informed that recognition would be minimised by the removal of names and a coding scheme (Sapsford & Abbott, 1996). Confidentiality was discussed at the beginning of every contact in relation to the interviews and data collected. All data were kept in a locked drawer in the administration office of the CAMHS LAC, with restricted access or stored electronically in a secure password-protected file.

Foster carers who had completed the diary during the twelve week follow up training period were given the option of keeping the diary after it had been analysed by the researcher. This option was not taken up as many foster carers already kept a reflective diary as part of their ongoing supervision process. At the end of the study the tapes and transcripts have been stored in accordance with regulations of the University of Portsmouth and the Research Ethics Committee. The tapes have been securely stored for a period of five years after which data and tapes will be destroyed.

2.6 CONCLUSION

In summary the main methodological approach and design of this research has been explored and expanded upon in order to justify the chosen approach in relation to
the research question. The use of triangulation within this study has been considered carefully and involves the use of different methods of enquiry which may be used to check the integrity of or extend and verify the findings of qualitative data. A triangulation approach is used to facilitate both the comprehensive nature of the data (Savage, 2000) and provide confirmation or otherwise of the value of the training course (Shih, 1998).

In the following two chapters, the process of collecting and analysing the qualitative and quantitative data will be discussed together with the findings from each approach. In Chapter 3 the collection of the quantitative data will be described in detail outlining the questionnaires used together with the analysis, results and a full discussion of the findings in relation to current literature in the field. In Chapter 4 the collection of the qualitative data gathered through the semi structured interviews and the diaries will be also be described in full together with the analysis, findings and a full discussion in relation to the current literature in the field. In this way the reader may gain a fuller understanding initially of the findings gained from the two methods of data collection.