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Investigation of the Influence of Social Media as a Communication Medium on Parent- Practitioner Partnerships Within the Early Years:
Parent and Practitioner Perspectives

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Research and Knowledge Exchange
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Literature argues that enhanced parental involvement in children's educational trajectories positively impacts children's outcomes (reflected in Cronin et al, 2018; Blanden, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001) though direction on how to foster effective links is varied. Introduction of a statutory partnership working agreement (DfE, 2021a) resulted in entrenched expectations that parents move out of deficit models of involvement (Steedman, 1990 cited by Cottle & Alexander, 2014) toward active, agentic stakeholders that co-construct educational decisions (Flett, 2007). An analysis of literature suggests there is insufficient evidence on the most appropriate methods that cultivate strong and effective partnerships to support the parents- as-partners rhetoric. Addressing this gap, the qualitative research investigated the impact of adopting a social media (SM) platform as a communicative and reciprocal tool in a Northeast Early Childhood Education and Care setting in England for parents and practitioners.

To set parameters for the study, the term 'social media' was defined as "Internet connections and activities based around the collective actions of communities of users rather than individuals" paralleled with "interactive and participatory ethos" (Selwyn 2011, p.14), and popular examples included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and educationally focused models such as Tapestry and Seesaw. Drawing on their socially constructed relationship, behaviors and lived experiences, participant responses during semi structured interviews were thematically analysed to identify common barriers, attitudes and benefits of SM for communication. The findings informed the conclusion that SM poses a significant opportunity to enhance communication and partnership working, contingent on a series of criteria. The recommendation that emerges is that SM usage policies, and a wider repertoire of communication tools, are co-constructed.

Literature Overview

<u>Parental Involvement</u>

Parental involvement and positive home learning environments (HLE) are cited as primary factors in improving pupil progress, elevating outcomes including attendance, academic achievement, student wellbeing and increased social mobility (Cronin et al, 2018; Blanden, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001). Feinstein and Symons (1999) argue that the form and frequency of involvement provides the principal influence on educational attainment, rather than schooling discretely. A larger body of research also links social class and socioeconomic status with achieving effective levels of parental engagement (Jeon et al, 2020; Li et al, 2019; Thrupp, 2001; Plowden, 1967).

Moreover, socioeconomic status is strongly associated with concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011; Bodovski and Farkas, 2008) which, in turn, positively correlates with increased educational attainment. This suggests that parental involvement levels of lower socioeconomic status households could be targeted to close disparities in educational attainment between the most advantaged and disadvantaged children (Field, 2010). Research also suggests social-class dispositions impact social cognition, with working class parents prioritising communion over agency (Chen, Li and Wei, 2019; Grossman and Varnum, 2010), indicating potential disjoints between prioritising needs of others versus needs of the individual.

<u>'Parent's as Partners': Rhetoric Versus Reality</u>

Whilst literature advocates for increased partnership working (for example, Desforges &

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Abouchaar, 2003; Williams, Williams and Ullman, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001; The Education and Employment Committee, 2000; Hara and Burke, 1998), a multitude of causal influences inhibit parental engagement, with strongest influencers including deprivation, linguistic and cultural differences between parents and practitioners and opposing role expectations of parents and practitioners (Willis, 2013 cited by Willis & Exley, 2018; Wheeler, Goodwin and Connor, 2009; Desforges & Aboucharm 2003). The root cause of many influences emanate from communication between parents and practitioners (Wheeler, Goodwin and Connor, 2009), suggesting need for tailored communication policies, receptive to the gender, social class and ethnicity of the cohort (Crozier and Reay, 2005, cited by Cottle and Alexander, 2014).

Flett (2007) recognised three models of parent support: deficit, involvement and empowerment, the latter being most desirable. Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018) argue empowering models of parental engagement that maximize the efficacy of partnership working should be two-way and reflexive to the diverse needs of each unique setting. If effectively adopted and reflected in practice, this may address further sociological constraints inhibiting engagement, including perceived power dynamics between parents and practitioners (Crozier, 2006).

Where does social media fit in?

Parallel to the evolutionary parent-practitioner partnership discourse, is the growth of digital technologies with increased information sharing, real-time communications and wider availability of technology, with 93% of the United Kingdom's (UK) population having internet access (ONS, 2019). The timeliness and convenience of utilizing SM for freely-initiated communication are cited as primary benefits of the approach, alongside improved co-operation through reciprocal dialogue and accessibility to progression information including parenting support (Willis and Exley, 2018; Lewin and Luckin, 2010; Calam et al, 2008). Nevertheless, the perceived trustworthiness of SM content concerned Tseng et al (2019) due to the ability to post content without prior vetting.

Practitioners should therefore act in the interest of beneficence and non-maleficence by intentionally posting content to counter falsehoods such as unsubstantiated myths, many of which became prevalent during the pandemic (Yang et al, 2020). This approach lends itself to an empowerment model of parental engagement (Flett, 2007) by making available accurate and relevant information that parents can choose to read, engage with, and act upon, ultimately benefitting the child through improved parent-practitioner partnerships and enhanced HLE's (DfE, 2021a; Cronin et al, 2018; Sylva et al, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). This can also minimize risks of alienating parents who experience engagement inhibitors (Goodall, 2016; Crozier, 2006; Sheppard, 2002).

Accessibility of digital technologies

Rapid societal changes as a result of the pandemic, including the exponential surge in SM usage, sudden reliance on remote communication, uncertainties around reinstating remote learning have succeeded in increasing the availability of digital technology for much of the population (ONS,

2019; DfE, 2021; DfE, 2020). Yet Vibert (2020) still estimates 1.14 million households continue to experience digital deprivation. Furthermore, the ability to engage in online communication is contingent on adequate digital literacy and availability of devices (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017), issues most prominent in households experiencing material deprivation, previously identified as a common barrier to parent-practitioner partnerships (Goodall, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

The Practitioner Perspective

Crozier (2006, p. 315) identifies parents' 'fatalistic view of schooling' as a major inhibitor of parental engagement, stating a shift in thinking requiring non-judgemental, collaborative working to establish new positive perceptions of school for parents (McLeod and Anderson, 2020). Willis and Exley (2021) note an emerging shift in practitioner willingness to adapt since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that practitioners have become more open to informal communication and matching parental needs. Consequently, home-school alignment has improved because parents are gaining knowledge of children's learning via online communication mediums, explicitly referencing the benefit of bi-directional dialogue through SM.

Methodology

The project yielded epistemological consideration to move beyond deficit models of parental engagement (Greenfield, 2001; Crozier, 2006), to explore socially constructed relationships, behaviours and realities within an interpretivist paradigm (Cottrell, 2014). This was a prelude to

inductive reasoning that drew on contextual information relevant to the participants (Gadamer, 1990 cited by Cottrell, 2014), resultant in expert opinion positionality that situates participants as experts in their own lives (Johnson and Christensen, 2008). As a result, phenomenology was best aligned with the project's exploration into the heterogeneous lived experiences of parents and practitioners, focused on their understanding of how SM may influence engagement levels. This was owing to the belief that 'behaviour is a reflection of our previous experiences' (Leavy, 2014, p.88).

The role of the researcher was considered in relation to Foucault's assertion that both participants and researcher hold relational and modifiable power (Brooks, Riele and Maguire, 2014). The researcher identified as both an insider who can interpret the data from an ontologically relational standpoint (Thayer-Bacon, 2016; Clough and Nutbrown, 2012; Wildman, 2006), and as a Deputy Manager with the potential capacity to influence responses (Miller and Bell, 2002). Mindful of conducting ethical research, procedural and situational (Society for Academic Emergency Medicine, 2010), ethical clearance from the University of Sunderland was obtained, upholding ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2019).

Qualitative data collection (Neuman, 2014) began with parents and their voices were used to shape inductive semi-structured interview questions for practitioners (Wooffitt and Widdicombe, 2006). Online surveys were chosen due to Covid-19 restrictions; however a critical aspect of the study was the exploration of accessibility to SM for parents which required consideration of potential barriers including digital literacy skills and digital inequalities. Parents were therefore also invited to arrange telephone interviews to minimise the risk of excluding participant voices. Data saturation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006) was achieved by drawing on sixteen parent responses using non-purposive sampling techniques and five practitioner participants that were purposively selected. This provided the study with an appropriate range of experiences and backgrounds to address issues raised by the parent voice (Emmel, 2013). Results were thematically analysed via a six-stage process to illuminate recurring issues (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

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Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

A series of overarching themes emerged, specifically related to time, convenience and appropriateness of SM; accessibility and preference; impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on communication; and engaging communication to cultivate parent-practitioner relationships. Practitioners strongly advocated for a multi-pronged approach to communication: a sentiment reinforced by parents and triangulated with the literature (Interview Participant (IP) 1; IP5; Survey Participant (SP) 13; SP11; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Feinstein and Symons 1999). The findings also attests to the need for caution when introducing SM as a communication tool to ensure parents' concerns regarding content and appropriateness are considered, highlighting the need for robust co-constructed parameters of SM usage.

Appropriateness of Social Media

Concern was raised foremost by parent participants regarding privacy and potentially inappropriate SM content. Specifically, parents did not want practitioners to relay child- specific information such as behavioural or developmental concerns via SM. Practitioners also addressed the topic of content but from a proactive perspective, identifying content they did deem appropriate- namely setting-specific information including events, reminders, activities, or ideas to support child development at home, disseminating useful information. A beneficent role, akin to that suggested by Tseng et al (2019), was assumed, signifying a move toward empowerment models of engagement (Flett, 2007). This shift could be linked to neoliberalism though the relationship extends beyond the scope of this research.

Both parents and practitioners reported SM usage benefits of involving parents' in their child's day through photographs, videos, and text. One parent (SP1) noted they felt more confident leaving their child when they would receive photographs evidencing that the child was safe and happy, therefore increasing parental confidence. This suggests by listening to the needs of parents or acknowledging their experiences, relationships between home and school may improve partnership working, advancing outcomes for children (Benchekroun, 2019; DCSF, 2009).

The multiple perspectives, concerns and reported benefits associated with adopting SM as a communication medium emphasised an all-party collaboration on the formation of a detailed and robust SM policy, specific to the demographic and cultural needs of parents (Crozier and Reay, 2005 cited by Cottle and Alexander, 2014) which would require regular review as cohorts change. This would facilitate attempts to tailor communication to the individual needs of parents, as recommended by Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018). Communication methods such as email and face-to-face must remain widely used, with SM becoming "another tool in the arsenal" (IP1)

for improving parental engagement that can facilitate a multipronged approach (IP1; IP5; SP13; SP11; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Feinstein and Symons 1999). The research underlined practitioners' commitment to adapt and meet the needs of parents while remaining impartial and non-judgmental, as IP5 articulated,

> *"I think it's so important that we don't value any one type of communication over another. Who are we to say which is a better way for a parent to engage- they're all valuable. As long as there is high-quality, effective communication, then I'm happy with whatever the parent needs"*

This evidences their promotion of an empowerment model of partnership working (Flett, 2007) and commitment to ensuring a widespread communicative reach, maximising parental involvement (McLeod and Anderson, 2020).

Time and Convenience
The participants cited convenience and time-efficiency as two key benefits to SM communication (IP1; SP7; SP10), suggesting that the ability for parents and practitioners to converse by leaving and returning messages at suitable times (SP12) was particularly attractive. The theme of time featured more prominently in the participants' responses than in the body of literature (reflected in Willis, 2013 cited by Willis & Exley, 2018; Wheeler, Goodwin and Connor, 2009; Desforges & Aboucharm 2003), suggesting a further gap in literature exists. Notably, much of the available literature predates the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in uncertainty over whether this finding is solely attributable to the pandemic. Resultantly, follow-up interviews to establish why time f eatures more heavily would be beneficial, whether that be due to social or cultural expectations prevalent in the locality (as with Willis, 2013 cited by Willis & Exley, 2018; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), increased workload due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Lough, 2020; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2020) or other, yet undisclosed, explanations, suggesting merit in the longevity for this research topic.

Accessibility and Preference
While accessibility to digital communication mediums, due to material deprivation, was prevalent within the literature (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; Goodall, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), parental preference for SM communication was largely absent. A strong parental voice and rationale emerged related to a personal preference for not engaging in SM communication with a setting, rather than an inability due to material deprivations. It must be acknowledged that despite the researcher's best effort to reach participants through non- web-based means, it is unclear whether this was successfully achieved and may potentially impact upon the findings.

Some parents cited a preference to retain SM for private, informal communication with friends, rather than 'blurring professional boundaries' (SP1) when using these platforms to communicate with practitioners. It could therefore be argued that educationally driven platforms such as

Seesaw or Tapestry (as described by Willis and Exley, 2018), which retain bi-directional and freely-initiated communication, alleviate these parental concerns (SP1; SP3) suggesting they are the most accepted platforms for online communication as they retain a professional identity. To comprehensively evaluate the implications of successfully adopting either of these platforms in this setting, further research would be required to establish whether a prevalence of accessibility or engagement issues was present for the wider parent body.

The Impact of Covid-19
The Covid-19 pandemic featured unanimously in the raw data when discussing existing levels of parental involvement. Parents noted that communication and the opportunity for involvement had reduced significantly (SP1; SP6; SP16), with a third of parents reporting dissatisfaction for their current levels of engagement. Practitioners equally cited Covid-19 as the primary inhibitor of communication. IP5 noted that many snippets of information were lost because they were not deemed important enough to warrant a phone call or email yet, due to Covid, could not be shared face-to-face either. Goodall et al (2010) suggests that best practice ought to include sharing information rich in detail including visuals, a sentiment echoed by IP4:

> *"You can tell parents all day long what their child has been up to, if they enjoyed an activity or what they thought of a new food they tried. But when they get to see the photos, they can see the absolute delight in their child's eyes when they finallymanage to climb the obstacle course for the first time or when they're having a snuggly story-time with staff- that's totally different. As a parent, that's what I want to see. So, you don't feel like you're missing out on any of it"*

Little consensus existed across, or within the cohorts, on optimum strategies to address the issues raised, reinforcing Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018) contention that strategies must be tailored to the individual needs of parents. IP5 supported this by arguing the imperative nature of offering a repertoire of communication mediums enabling parents to freely select those aligned with their needs. The participant responses conclude that Covid-19 impacted their experiences of communication and projected an acceptance for multi-modal communication mediums. However, drawing conclusive recommendations for addressing optimum communication strategies remains, as yet, unsubstantiated.

Problematically, the Covid-19 pandemic did impact data collection, necessitating virtual collection methods, exposing potential for inadvertent exclusion of potential participants through inaccessibility of digital technologies. Countermeasures were employed but their efficacy could not be guaranteed. There subsequently remains the possibility that crucial perspectives concerning accessibility are absent in the raw data, leaving the researcher dependent upon existing literature (such as Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; Goodall, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Complicating this further is the lack of research undertaken thus far in a post-pandemic landscape, posing the need for new research

into the impact of Covid-19 upon communication and expectations of communication to update current thinking.

Communication to Cultivate Relationships

The research identified a tentative correlation between reported parental social class and the confidence to approach practitioners, ability to advocate for their own communication requirements, or the perceived time constraints of the other party. Working class participant responses emphasised significantly greater concerns for time limitations and unapproachability of others when compared with middle class counterparts, exacerbating the problematic power imbalance cited by Crozier (2006) and MacLure and Walker (2000), with communication efficacy further supported by Bodovski and Farkas (2008). This corresponds to additional literature (Chen, Li and Wei, 2019; Grossman and Varnum, 2010) which argues disposition impacts social cognition: reflected in working class participants prioritisation of communion over agency, which may limit self-advocacy of communication requirements. Alternatively, it may be the professional who associates socioeconomic status of the parent with dehumanised traits, rendering them passive and without autonomy (Diniz et al, 2020).

Though this link was preliminary, its potential to uncover an innovative route to addressing attainment gaps between advantage differences for children (Field, 2010) through increased parental involvement warrants further investigation. This could yield a link with increased achievement (Avnet et al, 2019; Fan and Chen, 2001).

Emerging strongly from the practitioner voice, supported by parent participants and reinforced in literature (DfE, 2021a; Cronin et al, 2018; Blanden, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001), was the imperativeness of cultivating enduring relationships between the home, setting and the community. This finding is indicative of the importance of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) around the child in addressing outcomes for children. IP1 reflected on the settings use of SM to engage parents, both associated with the setting and within the wider community, through the sharing of advice and ideas for activities to try at home, envisaging positive influence on HLE's. She also noted that this helps to build relationships with prospective clients as well as existing ones, meaning that practitioners frequently built

tentative relationships with parents before the first meeting: initiated through SM and reinforced through face-to-face or telephone communication. The participants proposal was supported by SP12 who noted her contact with the setting was initially through Facebook, which she found comforting as she achieved a 'feel' for the setting by looking at posted pictures and by accessing setting information such as opening times. SP11 also noted that frequent SM updates engendered the ability to see photos of their child enjoying their day which increased their confidence in leaving their child in the new setting.

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Conclusion

The research and literature combined suggest, as a medium, SM has the potential to positively improve the parent-practitioner partnership through enhanced communication and increased involvement, which is contingent on a collaboration of criteria to ensure this mode of communication meets the needs, preferences and expectations of all parties.

SM is not a universal solution to communication that can be unanimously relied upon due to issues of accessibility, preference and perceived appropriateness. However, it may prove to be an invaluable addition to existing suites of communication mediums employed by settings aiming to enhance partnership working. Through synthesising the responses of both participant cohorts and critical literature, the need for practitioners to be educated on, and committed to, an empowerment model of partnership working (Flett, 2007) emerges. Communicative preferences of parents must be valued and promotion of parental confidence and educational efficacy may also be beneficial in improving engagement (McLeod and Anderson, 2020). Importantly, this research supports Crozier and Reay's (2005, cited by Cottle and Alexander, 2014) contention that effective communication must recognise the idiosyncratic needs of parents, noting the influence of social class on communication (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) in order to address the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Field, 2010). Further research to explore potential links between parental social class and perceived approachability of practitioners would add to the body of knowledge.

As a practitioner and researcher, the project has afforded insights into real issues that impact upon not only the daily lived experiences of families but also offers some practical strategies that can be called upon to make continuous improvements in practice with the ever-present ambition to advance outcomes for children.

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Supporting Gender Identity in the Early Years

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Research and Knowledge Exchange

Student Papers: June 2021 With society becoming increasingly more fluid (Hines, 2018; Perry et al. 2019), the practitioner's attention should be drawn to encouraging the healthy growth of gender identity in early childhood, with selfactualisation being a primary concern for children's wellbeing (Maslow, 1943).

I will present the conversation of gender identity in the early years whilst giving practical suggestions for practitioners to implement in language or physical activities, using psychology and traditional theory to aid my discussion. Practitioners should be aware that educating oneself on gender identity and the correct pronouns is of the utmost importance before structuring settings surrounding the growth of gender identity in the individual child.

Early years professions are being respected more in recent years, primarily due to lockdown affecting families (UNICEF UK, 2020) and qualifications are being raised along with expectations as the government realises the importance of this sector concerning the economy (ecsdn, 2021; Shukry, 2017). We cannot rely on this growth alone as the government's primary concern seems to be commodification and marketisation of education (Shukry, 2017; Dixon, 2010). Therefore, it is the practitioner's responsibility to bring back the humanism of the sector in this new push for identity growth in society. By law, practitioners must do all they can to promote equality in the workplace (gov.uk, 2010), so the conversation of gender identity is incredibly valuable and necessary in the early years.

Whether working with LGBTQ+ parents, supporting a child through social gender transitioning or more everyday things like avoiding stereotypical, binary language such as 'pretty dress for a pretty girl' and 'big strong boy', everything makes a significant impact (Hines, 2018). Olson et al. 2016 supports this as their research shows the mental health of children who are supported in their gender identity is significantly better than those not. Practitioners will encounter opportunities to encourage flourishment; this supports self-actualisation and therefore gender identity because it occurs when development is most expressive (Narvaez, 2016).

The NSPCC website is a helpful resource to start thinking about how we can support a child in their identity expression through active listening and giving the child as much autonomy as possible (NSPCC, 2021). Early years framework should include key steps such as those listed by the NSPCC. This way, all practitioners are working towards a shared goal for the sake of the child's wellbeing.

In my experience, conversations surrounding gender identity can be uncomfortable but necessary and rewarding. Practitioner concerns of being politically incorrect could prevent valuable conversations surrounding these issues. Despite this, politics cannot be avoided in early years

settings as our work is inherently political. Consequently, it is essential to be educated and have compassion in today's climate to work with families more effectively for the child's sake (DfE, 2021).

This need for collaboration is recognised throughout the sector and in broader society as the Children Act that the UNCRC is based on is globally accepted (gov.uk, 2004), the early years foundation stage and development matters documents are based on children's rights and reflect the freedom of expression with the unique child in mind (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012; DfE, 2021). Overall, practitioners must have qualifications that reflect a core understanding of holistic development and collaboration in practice. Collaboration should place the child at the centre, with practitioners valuing the child's voice (Dunlop & Fabian 2007; O'Farrelly & Hennessy 2014; O, Conner, 2017), especially when it comes to the child's identity. Children have more autonomy with their own gender identity in the UK today, as the psychological damage that restricts children and parents' decisions about their identity is being recognised by the courts (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2021).

Gender affects every aspect of a person's life (Hines, 2018; Miller, 2016). First, it is essential to remember that one's sex refers to their biological attribute, whereas gender refers to the socially constructed role we assign to a person (Hines, 2018; Parker, 2016). Many scientists see gender as a combination of biological and social systems, with gender not wholly fixed (Hines, 2018). Gender identity is an individualised process of how one sees themselves (NSPCC, 2021).

One of the main concerns of opening this conversation in the early years sector is that it is of a sexual nature (Oswalt, 2021). However, gender identity and development of sexuality occur from the earliest stages in one's life, with gender labelling between children occurring as early as 3 (Kohlberg cited in Fagot et al. 1985; Neary & Cross, 2018).

Psychological perspectives can help us understand gender identity. As psychology is already valued in the early years sector, we can develop contemporary conversation. Behaviourists emphasise the role of the environment in shaping our behaviour and self (Wanderson, 2016), a process that can be labelled as socialisation (Szkrybalo, 1998; Benson, 2001). If we apply this concept to practice, we can encourage identity expression in children, as everything we do and say impacts how they express themselves. However, behaviourists subscribe to the dominant ideology which in this discussion is the restrictively stereotypical approach to sex and gender, therefore we must be critical when applying these theories.

Equally, practitioners are likely to be familiar with Bandura's modelling theory and how the adult role impacts the child. If we can take the time to understand this, then we can consider his theory of gender development as modelling is a crucial part of gender stereotyping (Martin et al. 2004). These stereotypes are a limitation of societies full potential (Hines, 2018), they prevent students from taking subjects they are talented in at school out of fear of being judged (Makarova et al., 2019).

We can utilise these theories to inform our planning of activities in early years settings through tools such as the identity box activity in which I designed in my second year of university. The process of creating the box is a journey where the adult supports the child in feeling comfortable within their identity to reach self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Ivtzan et al. mirror this idea of

achieving wellbeing through self-fulfilment, in which they cite Levinson's idea of Identity formation (Levinson cited in Ivtzan et al., 2013). Forming identity is also mentioned in article 8 of the UNCRC (UNICEF UK, 1989).

Ivtzan also states that failure to work at one's issues with identity results in relationships that lack emotional depth which is why this activity can be the beginning of an open conversation between adult and child to access self-realisation as Carl Jung would say (Parker, 2009). Throughout this conversation, practitioners are responsible for broadening their creativity and sensitivity towards approaching these issues by utilising resources and language awareness. This idea synthesises with the Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (EYFS), especially in the understanding the world section (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012; DfE, 2021) as it models the openness that they need to bring to everyday interactions.

Moreover, children must experience a level of familiarity to ease the anxiety of liminality, according to Leigh & Wilson, (2020), as this journey of self can feel unsafe. Turner 1967 states that gender transitioning can bring about the feeling of being betwixt and between as it likens to the liminal period during a rite of passage. The identity box was designed to alleviate this discomfort as Olson et al. research in (2016) shows significantly higher rates of anxiety and other mental health issues in transgender children.

Partnership with parents is vital in encouraging identity expression. It is the goal that the identity box is created with the child's home environment in mind, culture, and sense of belonging which fulfils the graduate practitioner competency of working with families. Children whose social gender transition is not supported by their family may find comfort in this activity as they may not feel this sense of belonging and identity at home. This is in line with the EYFS, (DfE 2021) as it helps the child become familiar with the setting and aims to build a relationship with their parents. The EYFS does not give guidance on these situations so practitioners must find a way to access this communication relative to the circumstance. Keeping the child at the centre of this process gives rise to Article 13 freedom of expression and Article 14 freedom of thought, belief, and religion (UNICEF UK, 1989).

The adult needs to be sensitive to help children work through their frustration and feel at ease in their environment as they have the legal right to feel safe and heard (UNICEF UK, 1989). The child may benefit from their key person having a close relationship with the caregivers so that a working unit can be formed, ensuring their feeling of security. Psychologist Melanie Klein would have likely favoured this approach as they valued support systems, stating that they are necessary for healthy development (Wright, 2015). The system also fulfils competency '7.1 Evidence understanding of the importance of partnership with parents and caregivers in their role as infants and young children's first educators.' (Graduate Practitioner Competencies 2020:4). It also aligns with the development matters document which stresses the importance of working with the family and building a functional relationship for the sake of the child (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012).

The identity box process could take place between an adult and a child about 40-60 months. In development matters, it describes this age as 'Confident to speak to others about their own needs, wants, interests and opinions. Can describe self in favourable terms and talk about abilities' (The

British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012:11). However, research shows that children start being vocal about what they identify as by three years of age therefore the activity is easily adaptable to any age (Neary & Cross, 2018).

Throughout this process, we deviate from the idea of the adult being the more knowledgeable other because the child is given room to show how they express themselves. The use of language is essential, as Dunlop 2007, O'Farrelly & Hennessy 2014 and Conner 2017 say the child's voice is the most important during these periods. Uprichard 2008 affirms this with his notion that the goal is to make the child feel like a being instead of a becoming. This sense of agency is essential during the process where the child collects materials and photographs and decides every aspect of the box's design. Adapted by Montessori's directress theory, the adult's role is to ask questions that supports this process (Lillard, 2016). If the child needs more support, the adult could work on their own box beside them, saying things such as 'I am using this colour because it makes me feel …', mirroring the idea of Bandura's Modelling (Martin et al. 2004). This allows the adult to learn from the child so that open communication can flourish and a better relationship with families can be built.

It is important to be mindful of how we plan these activities as we do not want the child to feel like a victim or outcast. This can be avoided by taking them into a quiet area away from the other children as well as including some of their friends. Furthermore, open discussions and updates with families are needed, as well as a letter home explaining the importance of this process for the child's health and options for families to be assured that their child will not be included so that the partnership with families can be maintained.

There is no direct reference to the transgender struggle within the Development matters 2012 document, or the 2021 EYFS. With the government neglecting these issues in the early years, practitioners can find direction within research and attend events from Schools Out UK and utilise advice from the Tavistock clinic, all of which informed my work.

In terms of educational resources for practitioners, a must-have for understanding gender identity is Sally Hine's clear and easily readable 'Is Gender Fluid?' Resources like this are a significant contribution to the new world that we are working towards. This simple knowledge could prevent you from using the wrong pronouns and being respectful could make someone's whole week as well as modelling how we should treat people so that our children can lead by example.

These are accessible and practical ways that we can encourage gender identity expression in early years settings. However, we have a significant blind spot in safeguarding policy and an overall framework that prevents full flourishment in child development by not giving specific attention to gender identity and LGBTQ+ struggles. The framework for supporting a child with their gender identity should take the structure of the NSPCC website. Any activities and resources surrounding gender identity should be designed to elicit comfort and alleviate identity struggles which harm the child's development. This process is educational for the child, other children around them and is reflective for the practitioners and family involved. These conversations and suggestions support the forefront of early years development matters which is the idea of the unique child. It gives a sense of regularity that children and adults miss out on within the liminality

of development, as well as providing comfort amongst the unstable and unfamiliar feelings that the pandemic heightens.

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How living in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA+) family and disability can influence a child's ability to thrive in society.

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How living in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA+) family and disability can influence a child's ability to thrive in society.

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Research and Knowledge Exchange
Student Papers: June 2021 The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) states that for children to thrive the three prime areas of learning must be supported, with the principle that 'every child is a unique child' recognised (DfE, 2017, p.6). Inclusion is the process by which we recognise these unique qualities and value individuals (Rogers and Wilmot, 2011). Fundamental to inclusion is children's rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) actions that children are empowered to develop to their full potential and are entitled to protection from harm to such development. Inclusive education is about being active in discovering the barriers children meet in accessing education and eliminating those barriers (UNESCO, 2012). Many marginalised groups need to be considered when discussing inclusion (Lavery et al., 2018). This essay will consider lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA+) families and disability as factors which may influence a child's ability to thrive in society.

Defining an inclusive education is an ambiguous task (Miles and Singal, 2010), the concept of inclusion can alternate in conformity with the context in the environment under deliberation (Berlach and Chambers, 2011). Education environments play an essential role in valuing diversity and are quintessential for incrementing the inclusion of students (Lavery et al., 2018). In the Early Years, an inclusive environment is where a child's identity and attributes are cherished, empowering them to feel belonging within the setting (Crawford, 2015). Children form preferences due to their curiosity by differences (Trawick-smith, 2020); which may lead to exclusionary behaviour (Wymer, Williford and Lhospital, 2020). Early Years practitioners can encourage critical thinking and positive self-image in children to capacitate them in forming non-discriminatory behaviours (Dimitriadi, 2014). In the EYFS, the idea that 'every child is a unique child' determines that practitioners must facilitate each child's learning needs (DfE, 2017, p.6) these needs should be distinguished within an inclusive environment (Alegria et al., 2010). A fundamental determinant that may impact a child's ability to thrive in a diverse society is the inclusion policies in Early Years settings (Brodie and Savage, 2015). In the National Curriculum for primary schools, children with disabilities are recognised under the inclusion section (DfE, 2013); however, the Early Childhood Forum (2013) found that the primary curriculum needed to improve on differentiating learning to meet each child's needs and in addressing inequalities. Positive steps forward have since been made, with the promotion of different family dynamics recently becoming compulsory in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2019). Even in diverse settings, importance can be established on a specific value/ability that makes those with conflicting abilities/beliefs in a minority, thus, risking

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adverse experiences (Matlin et al., 2019). UNESCO (2012) specifies that education is about being active in discovering the barriers children meet in accessing education, and then removing those barriers. The EYFS (DfE, 2017; 2021) and the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) ascertains that every child is taught the same curriculum. However, an inclusive setting expresses an eagerness to accommodate the needs of every child (Scholes et al., 2017), adopting the social model of disability (Smart and Smart, 2006) instead of the medical model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) whereby a child adapts their own needs to the setting. Early Years practitioners should be offered strategies and training tools for them to acknowledge their own beliefs and attitudes towards diversity and inclusion (Hernandez-Amoros et al., 2017) subsequently, utilising approaches that meet all children's needs (Scholes et al., 2017). The momentousness of equality within the Early Years can be consolidated in the Equality Act (2010), as practitioners cannot discriminate against a child based on the protected characteristics, including disability and sexual orientation.

As defined in section 6 of the Equality Act (2010), an individual is disabled if they have an impairment that has a long-term and considerable detrimental effect on their capacity to do normal day-to-day activities. 15.5% of all school-age children in England have Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (DfE, 2020). The use of the word normal in the Equality Act (2010) denotes that people with disabilities are not, which may lead to social exclusion (Sakakibara, 2018), based on pre-existing prejudices (Sterkenburg, Olivier, and Van Rensburg, 2019). The medical model of disability is a notable origin for disability prejudice (Dirth and Branscombe, 2017); the emphasis is on an individual's biomedical status over their personhood (Levesque and Malhotra, 2019). People with disabilities are consequently heeded as lesser than to those without an impairment (McLaughlin, Clavering and Coleman-Fountain, 2016). Engagement with the medical model by parents, practitioners and broader society may hinder children's development (Rees, 2017). Children who encounter social exclusion are in threat of poorer mental health (Richter and Hoffmann, 2019), lower academic achievement (Xiong et al., 2020) and early school withdrawal (Silva et al., 2020). The Children's Commissioner found that 45% of children with SEND leave school without any formal qualifications (Childrens Commissioner, 2019), such school failure is affiliated with adversities, such as marginalisation from adult society (Vargas et al., 2019). If the principle of children's best interests were actualised, there would not be such withdrawal and disjunction in education (Howe and Covell, 2013). Children need to feel safe and emotionally secure in their education environment (Bowlby, 1998) before they can develop their learning (Pianta, 2006).

Discrimination is rooted in segregation and harmful social attitudes (Shakespeare, 2007), this requires resolution in legislation and corroborative action (Fleisher and Zames, 2011). The Warnock Report (HMSO, 1978) was a turning point for education; it sustained the first inclusive review of SEND provision in England. It became the grounds for subsequent legislation, such as the Education Act (1981) and the Children and Families Act (2014). The report states that the goals for children's educations are parallel, but the assistance that each child needs varies (HMSO, 1978). Taking differences into account is essential to achieving fairness and to identifying and correcting subordinating hierarchies to achieve equality (Dowd, 2019). Under the Equality Act (2010), practitioners must make reasonable adjustments in their approach and provision to

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ensure that services are accessible. The Children and Families Act (2014) guides practitioners to make reasonable adjustments overseen by a Special Educational Needs Coordinator, a role established from the 1994 SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 1994). Progress should be monitored with an assess, plan, do, review cycle (DfE, 2015), ensuring that the assessment process is meaningful, thereby facilitating early intervention (Esposito and Carroll, 2019). Emphasis is placed upon the power of the child's voice, for example, the 2001 Code of Practice states that the beliefs of the child should be solicited (DfE, 2001) and the 2015 SEND Code of Practice's principles are concentrated on the child's best interests (DfE, 2015). Attending to the child's voice in policy leads to desired outcomes (Casadó et al. 2020) for all involved. However, both codes of practice have been criticised by the House of Commons Education Committee (2019), whereby they attest that more must be done when decision-making in taking into consideration children's views about the support they receive. Parent and teacher partnerships are also crucial (Boit, 2020) when addressing the needs of children with disabilities (Walz, Wang and Bianchini, 2019). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) stipulates that the connections within the various systems can shape a child's development and learning. Thus, with effective parentteacher partnership, there is more linkage between the mesosystem and microsystem, which can benefit the child's development (Sánchez-Romero et al., 2020).

How parents, educators and broader society work with and include children with SEND, is influenced by whether they see differences as problematic or opportunistic (Dimitriadi, 2014). Children are predisposed to discriminate and ostracise if they believe their social group endorses such behaviour (Birtel et al., 2019), with prejudices towards children with SEND originating in early childhood (Killen, Mulvi and Hitti, 2013). Roberts and Smith (1999) discovered that children interacted with a child with disabilities when they thought the relation would be straightforward as opposed to challenging. If educators and parents perceive the differences children with SEND have as opportunistic (Dimitriadi, 2014), according to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) children's perception of disability would change accordingly (Nowicki, Brown and Stepien, 2015).

Schools promoting inclusion utilising high-quality provision (Zieglar et al., 2020), can observe positive outcomes such as enhanced skill development (Kauffman, 2020) and social relationships (Watkins et al., 2015). Such integration also results in improved attitudes towards disability (Leigers et al., 2017); these experiences of inclusion have a profound impact on development (Fox, Levitt, and Nelson, 2010). If a child feels that they have meaningful relationships, it can help them thrive in their development and learning (Weiss and Riosa, 2015). Children who have disabilities can have a purposeful and fulfilling life when they are integrated into their community (Weingarten and Worthen, 2017), with their participation in education and society a legal imperative guaranteed by the UNCRC (1989).

The introduction of same-sex marriages in 2014 (Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2014) has resulted in a sudden rise in same-sex marriage couple families, an increase of 40.0% since 2015 (0ffice for National Statistics, 2019). Ordinarily cohabiting couples are more likely to separate due to their lack of legal protection (Raley and Wildsmith, 2004). However, a recent study (Kolk and Andersson, 2020) found that children in cohabiting LGBTQIA+ families were mostly unaffected as separation, instability and poverty were rare. This is because LGBTQIA+ parents are generally

educated, financially stable, and in a secure relationship (Cutas and Chan, 2014) before they build their family. The diversification of family demographics calls upon educators to develop an inclusive climate (Fabes, Martin and Hanish, 2019); unfortunately, LGBTQIA+ parents and young children are facing mistreatment within Early Years settings (Orel and Coon, 2016). Children of same-sex parents are susceptible to facing discrimination (Watkins, 2018) because of the stigmatisation of their parent's sexual orientation (Matviiko and Shkoliar, 2019). Children who are bullied tend to exhibit low self-assurance and increased behavioural problems (Schwab, Eckstein and Reusser, 2019), harming their self-belief (Sidiropoulou et al., 2019) and positive identity (Howarth and Andreleouli, 2015). The emotional health and well-being of children is a crucial part of development (DfE, 2017). DiVerniero and Breshears (2017) believe that the variety of poorer economic, social and health outcomes of LGBTQIA+ people and their families is caused by their persistent lived inequality (Badgett, 2018).

Research shows that LGBTQIA+ families experience exclusion (Oswald et al., 2018), disapproval (Leland, 2019), and a lack of representation from their school and curriculum (Glass et al., 2016). Parental involvement increases student achievement and attendance (Grundmeyer and Yankey, 2016), the exclusion LGBTQIA+ parents experience impacts partnerships with schools in addition to posing threats to the pedagogical achievement of their children (Goldberg and Allen, 2013). This highlights the paramountcy of relationships with families and the cooperative attitude that Early Years practitioners should pursue to strengthen the outcomes for children (Beck and Wikoff, 2019). This can be done by staff training on creating LGBTQIA+ inclusive curriculums (Educate and Celebrate, 2020a), one school reported that after such training, there was an increase of 23% in families reporting feeling safe to be open about their family (Educate and Celebrate, 2020b). Stonewall has a 'getting started' toolkit for practitioners on celebrating difference and challenging stereotypes (Stonewall, 2017) to confront homophobic bullying (Hall, 2016). Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are social support networks for LGBTQIA+ families (Wimberley, 2015), they build community and provide a positive environment for students to facilitate favourable outcomes (Toomey et al., 2011). Although they are a significant source of support, many students report that their community had no access to a GSA (Colvin, Egan and Coulter, 2019).

Thirty-two years ago, the Local Government Act (1988) banned materials which displayed LGBTQIA+ families in schools (Moran, 2001). In September 2020, relationship education became compulsory for all primary pupils, including the promotion of different family dynamics (DfE, 2019), which works with the 'No Outsiders' campaign (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009). 'No Outsiders' provides practitioners with a curriculum that stimulates equality and implements the Equality Act (2010) in a way that young children can comprehend (DfE, 2014). Despite this positive momentum, some feel it is not an appropriate curriculum for young children (BBC News, 2019), with others contesting it is fundamental for inclusive practice (Moffat and Field, 2020). Early Years education has no guidance on the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ families; nevertheless, the EYFS has an emphasis on learning about differences (DfE, 2017; 2021). As homophobic bullying starts at a young age (Chapman, 2013), the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) states it is crucial that Early Years practitioners continue to confront discrimination through inclusive provision. Practitioners can foster comprehensive family representation through educational materials such as books and

having open discussions (Beck and Wikoff, 2019). Roleplay such as the use of persona dolls, can advance young children's knowledge and understanding (EHRC, 2019) as well as supporting social and cognitive development (Johnston et al., 2018). Developmentally appropriate conversations through circle time provides children with the possibility to explore and express their feelings and beliefs (Cefai et al., 2014). These activities can assist in the development of empathy (Postolache, 2020) and understanding (Strelkova, 2020) which combats heteronormativity (Lester, 2014). Overall, children in an LGBTQIA+ family achieve just as well as those with heterosexual parents (Boertien and Bernardi, 2019), they are affected by the intolerance they face by society not the sexuality of their parents (Knight et al., 2017). Therefore, it is paramount that the inequalities LGBTQIA+ families face is further ascertained (Sharp and Metcalf, 2016).

Whilst many of today's Early Years settings are diverse learning environments (Knowles, 2017), for as long as children face inequality and exclusion, one can never claim that enough has been done (Dimitriadi, 2014). Early Years practitioners should begin to view diversity as a strength and asset to learning, rather than a problem to vanquish (McAnuff Grumbs, 2020) and reflect on how their own biases could impact their practice (Shaw, 2017). Early Years professionals are equipping and preparing children to live in society; thereby, it transpires how critical their role is in providing inclusion within a diverse environment (Dimitriadi, 2014). Henceforth, governments have a civic and moral responsibility to provide education that is responsive to and supportive of the diverse abilities and needs of all children (Dimitriadi, 2014). In conclusion, having a disability and living in an LGBTQIA+ family both contribute to a child's ability to thrive in a diverse society, with both factors providing individual adversities to overcome. However, it is not the disability or LGBTQIA+ family that children are harmed by, but rather the discrimination and intolerance they face by broader society (Knight et al., 2017).

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How living in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA+) family and disability can influence a child's ability to thrive in society.

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Physically Active Pedagogical Approach: Supplementing Traditional Teaching Methods in Primary School Classrooms

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Research and Knowledge Exchange

Student Papers: June 2021 **INTRODUCTION**

The broad spectrum of benefits that physical activity and movement has on children's development and overall physical health is well recognised and researched (Chalkley and Milton 2020). The innovative physically active pedagogical approach aims to combine movement, physical activity and educational components of the curriculum and integrate both elements into the classroom learning environment (Daly-Smith et al. 2020). The ever-growing demands of the National Curriculum (2014) can put a strain on young children; however, changing pedagogical approaches and teaching methods may provide various benefits for children, meeting developmental needs and theoretical perspectives of learning and developing body and brain (Biddle et al. 2019). Within the classroom context, this could be used to meet the statutory requirements set out in the National Curriculum (2014) in the core subjects of mathematics, English and science, as well as foundation subjects. Physically active learning was successfully implemented in numerous primary schools both in America, Australia, and other European countries, aiming to reduce sedentary behaviour and enhance academic achievement (Speck 2019). This desk-based research project aimed to explore whether physically active teaching methods could positively impact the emotional wellbeing of school-aged children.

METHODOLOGY

The desk-based research project adopted both the interpretivist and positivist paradigm and implemented mixed-method approach. The qualitative approach represents a valuable viewpoint from the researchers' perspective, avoiding generalisations (Mukherji and Albon 2018:86). It acknowledges the complexities of various explanations and meanings to different actions, holistic perspectives, and worldviews (Mukherji and Albon 2018:92). However, the quantitative approach allows to identify the limitations of sedentary teaching and learning approaches in primary schools through large scale studies, statistical data, and analysis of specific variables (Queiros, Faria and Almeida 2017). Figure 1 represents the search parameters of the academic literature accessed for the research project.

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EDUCATIONAL DATABASES	KEY SEARCH TERMS	EXCLUSION CRITERIA	LITERATURE SEARCH
EBSCO	Physical Activity	Adolescents	29 Peer Reviewed Journals (a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research/studies)
ProQuest	Physically Active Learning	Secondary School Children	Date range of peer reviewed research/studies: 2010-2020
Elsevier	Physically Active Lessons		Educational Books
Francis and Taylor	Movement and Mind		Government Publications/Policies/Reports
Wiley Online Library	Emotional Wellbeing		Public Health England/NHS guidelines and statistics
CU Coventry Locate	Psychological Wellbeing		
ScienceDirect	Sedentary Teaching Methods		
	Seated Lessons		

Figure 1. Literature search parameters (Awuson-David 2021)

The integration of the mixed-method approach generates and accurately captures the conceptual validity in the objective and subjective aspects of the research (Ponce and Maldonado 2015). Therefore, the purpose and justification of the chosen approach acknowledges the complexity of both the research aim and question.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) holds a central place in all educational initiatives. These initiatives aim to re-evaluate children's choices and rights as active participants instead of passive recipients, giving them a voice and acknowledging their intrinsic ways of their learning (Laevers and Declercq 2018).

Neuman (2014:68) highlights that every research should begin with a strong sense of ethical awareness, rather than as an afterthought. He also points out that the researcher should hold a significant stance regarding objectivity and a value-free viewpoint. This is vital whilst undertaking secondary desk-based research to avoid unconscious bias, prior assumptions, personal beliefs, opinions, and values (Neuman 2014:88). Although secondary research is considered a low-risk approach, the central values of this project included the scrutiny of ethical consideration, transparency, and conscious identification of the potential pitfall of bias (Bell 2010:94).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Physical activity is encouraged in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS 2017) either through play, creativity, exploration or outdoor activities. However, when children transition to primary school, the learning environment replaces physical activity with mostly seated lessons (Breda et al. 2018). The growing academic demands set out in the National Curriculum (2014) place physical activity at the back of a queue as academic performance and achievement take centre stage (Rudd, O'Callaghan and Williams 2019). NHS Digital (2017) published data focusing on the extent of emotional and mental health issues in children as young as two years of age. It highlighted the substantial increase by 48% since 2004 in emotional disorders in children aged 5 to 15 years. These findings recognised the ever-growing importance of early support needed to foster emotional wellbeing in young children through innovative pedagogical methods and wholeschool approaches.

THE IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL TEACHING METHODS

In the 1990s, there was an increase in research exploring the correlation between sedentary behaviour and adverse effects on physical health. More recent studies have demonstrated a particular focus on children's sedentary behaviours to prevent the lifelong detrimental effect on physical and psychological health (Azevedo et al. 2019). The longitudinal cohort study carried out by Griffiths et al. (2012) measured physical activity and sedentary behaviour in the U.K. with a comprehensive sample of 13,000 seven-year-old primary school children. The study findings exposed statistical data highlighting that children, on average, only accumulate 27 minutes of moderate physical activity a day and spend more than 5 hours a day sedentary. It further stated that only 15% lead an active lifestyle and achieve the recommended 60 minutes a day of physical activity. Griffiths et al. (2012) acknowledged that there are numerous times sedentary behaviour is unavoidable, such as reading and writing time. However, a more significant effort should be made to engage children in various physically active programmes to improve long-term health outcomes. These findings are closely mirrored by the recent "Active Lives Children and Young People Survey" (Sport England 2019) report, which focused on the 2018/2019 academic year. It showed that 40.4% of primary school children get an average of only 30 minutes of physical activity per day in a school setting. A 2017 qualitative systematic review by Hesketh, Lakshman and van Sluijs highlighted that one of the significant barriers to physically active participation and learning was the teacher's focus on academic content via seated lessons.

The systematic review by Azevedo et al. (2019) aimed to identify the determinants of sedentary time amongst children aged six and below, and found that transition from early years settings to formal schooling determined and reinforced the increased time in sedentary behaviour due to structured curriculum and mainly seated lessons. According to Azevedo et al. (2019), extensive sedentary behaviour observed in young children has a negative impact not only on overall physical health but on cognitive development, behaviour and self-esteem.

Interestingly, the systematic review and meta-analysis carried out by Rodriguez-Ayllon et al. (2019) aimed to synthesise the interaction between physical activity and mental health outcomes in young

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children and adolescents. It focused on psychological wellbeing, paying close attention to self-esteem, self-efficacy, feelings of happiness and a positive outlook on life. The available evidence points to findings that suggest the positive correlation between physical activity and mental health outcomes in older children. However, Rodriguez-Ayllon et al. (2019) acknowledged that there is a substantial gap in research. Nevertheless, the research points out that reducing sedentary time and increasing physical activity might preserve and protect mental health or psychological wellbeing in children of all ages (Rodriguez-Ayllon et al. 2019).

PHYSICALLY ACTIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The principals of the physically active pedagogical approach go back to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory which affirms the value of learning through experience and action. His educational theory represents the knowledge of distinct individual preferences to different learning styles and approaches. According to Rose, Gilbert and Richards (2016: 84), physical aspects of active learning have numerous benefits, such as improving physical development, dexterity, coordination and balance. Furthermore, combining physical activity and accomplishing academic goals fosters self-esteem in children and in turn support emotional wellbeing (Bailey 2016).

According to Vetter et al. (2019), this could be attributed to changes in the brain functions and neurobiological mechanisms studied by Lubans et al. (2016). Lubans et al. (2016) suggest that physical activity in itself can positively affect mental health and increase self-esteem in older children and youth. However, studies are limited to younger children. This viewpoint is echoed by Rodriguez-Ayllon et al. (2019), who identified that future research in this field is necessary with younger children.

Similar to the above study, Mullender-Wijnsma et al. (2016) carried out a two-year-long randomised controlled trial in 46 Dutch elementary schools involving 499 children between the ages of five and eight. This trial aimed to investigate if a new way of learning and teaching through the combination of physical activity incorporated in maths and language lessons could positively affect children's academic achievement. The analysis of the study showed no difference in reading skills; however, the mathematical skills and spelling scores significantly improved. According to Mullender-Wijnsma et al. (2016), these improvements might be accredited to the inseparable correlation between the brain and body mechanisms. Although these lessons were adapted to the mainstream curriculum in Dutch schools, the generalised research results could be applicable and warranted in similarly developed countries (Mullender-Wijnsma et al. 2016).

As previously mentioned, the widely studied benefits of the physically active pedagogical approach focused on academic achievement (Mullender-Wijnsma et al. 2016., Daly-Smith et al. 2020). However, a distinct gap in the literature is the lack of research in the connection and correlation to the effects of emotional wellbeing on primary school children who participate in physically active academic lessons. Self-determination theory (Deci 1971) and brain-based learning theory (Caine and Caine 1990) are the foundation of these educational interventions and signify the effect of physical activity on cognitive performance and attention. Both theories challenge traditional teaching methods and expose the influence emotions and stress have on

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learning. One of the brain-based learning theory (Caine and Caine 1990) principles strongly correlates emotional stability and ability to learn, the requirement for physical movement taking into account natural stages of child's development as part of physiological need. At the same time, self-determination theory (Deci 1971) uncovers vital aspects of successful learning through autonomy, relatedness and competence. All of these components convert to self-esteem, a sense of belonging and self-determination which enables the manifestation of intrinsic motivation and enjoyable experiences.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND BRAIN

There has been an increased identification that learning and teaching work in strong correlation and synergy with the human brain (MacBlain 2018:99). It suggests a new revolution in the educational environment and policies due to evolving developments in neuroscience that expose the undeniable correlation between body and brain (Bailey 2016).

Research carried out by Hillman et al. (2014) aimed to determine the effects of physical activity on brain function and executive control. The randomised control trial involved 221 children between the ages of seven and nine, who were included in the "FITKIDS" after school physical activity club and split into control and intervention groups. As noted by Chaddock-Heyman et al. (2014), children who engage in more physical activity compared to less active peers have larger brain volumes and exhibit superior cognitive controls. Executive functions are part of cognitive processes or controls that include attention, working memory, and mental flexibility and play a crucial role in behavioural control and academic achievement (Chaddock-Heyman et al. 2020). The results of Hillman's et al. (2014) research produced promising findings highlighting that increasing physical activity had a positive effect on brain functions, cognitive flexibility, attention, executive control and neural processing speed. The findings of this research are of particular significance to policymakers and educators. It should lead to the review of traditional sedentary teaching methods in schools to facilitate more opportunities for movement, physically active learning through the modification of the current educational practices (Hillman et al. 2014).

Furthermore, Batouli and Saba (2017) state that through physical activity and movement, the human brain can modify its structure and improve its functionality. The neural structures and networks of the brain are closely associated with physical activity, and the occurrence of this phenomenon is described as "activity-induced neuroplasticity" (Batouli and Saba 2017).

DISCUSSION

There seems to be a consensus regarding the adverse effects of sedentary behaviours in children across statistical quantitative data and research. The systematic qualitative reviews carried out by Hesketh, Lakshman and van Sluijs (2017) and Azevedo et al. (2019) identify that highly structured curriculum and teachers' prioritisation of academic content through seated lessons act as a primary barrier to reducing sedentary behaviour. Additionally, physical activity guidance "Start Active: Stay Active" (2011) focused on the extended health benefits and the damaging effects of

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sedentary behaviours. The report presents compelling evidence that physical activity has farreaching benefits not only on overall physical health but also improved learning, attainment and better mental health and mental functions in children. In 2019, the updated guidelines further acknowledged the damaging effects of a sedentary lifestyle and prolonged sitting times for children. It specifically mentions the importance of breaking up prolonged periods of sitting with light to moderate physical activity.

PREVALENCE OF SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR

Overall, there might be a potential explanation as to why sedentary behaviour is so prevalent within the primary school environment, which acts as a barrier to implementing a physically active pedagogical approach. Firstly, physical activity is progressively marginalised due to the prioritisation of core subjects in the National Curriculum (2014). Secondly, the introduction of the Education Reform Act (1988) aimed to raise attainment standards, improve efficiency and accountability, indirectly making schools compete through league tables. Thirdly, the Department for Education (DfE) and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA 2019) set national standardised tests. These tests mostly align with the core subjects, which places legislative requirements for schools to implement and report. Once again, as the Education Reform Act (1988) aimed to raise the academic standards, Ofsted (2019) became the driving force influencing school policies and decision-making. It exposes a narrow-visioned view that forces schools to "teach in order to test" children (Rudd, O'Callaghan and Williams 2019).

Similarly, the ever-growing evidence in research exposes this position as being short-sighted. Both research and theory show a strong correlation between the body's physiological functions and the brain neurological mechanisms (Hillman et al. 2014). Therefore, ignoring the expanding knowledge in this area, eventually, may have an undesired effect.

Public Health England (2015) guidance for headteachers and teaching staff provides numerous suggestions on how to increase and incorporate physical activity within the school environment. The updated version (2019) suggests developing multi-component and whole-school interventions. One of the eight guidance principles suggests embedding physical activity within curriculum, learning and teaching to improve emotional wellbeing and educational outcomes. It also encourages the engagement of children's voices and choices, empowering their ownership of involvement and learning. The guidance highlights the essential role schools play in promoting physical and emotional health and acknowledges the current research on the effects of physical activity on mental health and self-esteem. A critical issue arising from these findings raises the question if the current traditional teaching methods are still fit for purpose.

PHYSICALLY ACTIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The literature review highlights fundamental discoveries relating to the physically active pedagogical approach. Both Chaddock-Heyman et al. (2014) and Hillman et al. (2014) note in their studies that incorporating movement and physical activity into academic lessons can improve cognitive and mental flexibility and neural processing speed. Konorski's (1948) theory of

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synaptic plasticity defines the phenomenon of changes in neuron structure of the brain, which holds the ability to modify its structures through environmental factors and experiences. The above findings might lead to the assumption that physical activity has a substantial effect on psychological wellbeing. It enhances neural plasticity and supports efficient cognitive functioning, which plays a crucial role in an emotional state (Mandolesi et al. 2018). From the scientific point of view, physical activity increases serotonin levels, the hormone known to stabilise the mood and boost the feeling of wellbeing (Korb et al. 2010). The particular state of mind that Laevers et al. (2005) refers to is feeling "like a fish in water".

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

On closer examination, numerous studies consistently report and correlate physical activity to increased self-efficacy (Biddle et al. 2011) and self-esteem (Bailey 2016) in children. Both selfesteem and self-efficacy are the components of psychological wellbeing. They cannot be separated from the internal structures and the brain's functionality, which, due to technological advancements, can provide quantifiable results (Rodriguez-Ayllon et al. 2019). One unexpected finding in the literature review is "activity-induced neuroplasticity" (Batouli and Saba 2017). The current knowledge in this area could be ground-breaking for various reasons. Firstly, it emphasises that physically active teaching methods can facilitate a broad array of a child's developmental and psychological needs. Secondly, it may act as an inclusive approach for atypically developing children and those with learning difficulties (Batouli and Saba 2017).

Self-determination theory (Deci 1971) acknowledges autonomy as one of the crucial elements of psychological wellbeing. According to Laevers and Declercq (2018), emotional wellbeing and involvement are necessary measures of the learning environment. If children's rights are genuinely observed, then, indeed, children have the right to encounter an educational approach that enables a real sense of wellbeing and involvement (Laevers and Declercq 2018). They further highlight that both wellbeing and involvement in the educational environment are fundamental rights of every child. The significance of involvement can be further explored through Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (1997). Key elements of the theory focus on the dynamic phenomenology of interaction between a person and the environment. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) states that optimal experience and happiness is achieved through deep enjoyment and immersion in a challenging but achievable activity. Being engaged in a pleasurable task and experiencing flow promotes intrinsic motivation, focus and intense concentration (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). The review of physically active lessons by Skage et al. (2020) highlights that combining academic content and physical activity proved to be a highly engaging and enjoyable form of learning for children. Consequently, both engagement and achievement are the building blocks and determinants of positive wellbeing (Seligman 2018). In this view, physically active learning might be the new dimension of a pedagogical approach that is viewed and supported by the perspective and viewpoint of the child, especially when it comes to the educational environment.

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EMOTIONAL WELLBEING MATTERS

The research findings from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and Place2Be (2020) mental health charity showed a 66% increase in demand for emotional wellbeing support in schools since 2016. Furthermore, the "Wise Up" campaign (2017) by Young Minds highlights the need for children's emotional wellbeing to be taken as seriously as academic achievements by rebalancing the requirements and priorities of the current educational system. Preparing children to flourish academically is as important as preparing them emotionally, the latter having a more significant impact on lifelong learning than successful exams or tests (Young Minds 2017). Emotional disorders that start in early life has a detrimental impact in later life which threatens the healthy development and social functioning of every child (Ginsburg et al. 2018).

EDUCATIONAL NEUROSCIENCE

According to Housman (2017), neural pathways of the brain are closely connected with emotions and executive functions. The limbic system of the brain predominantly acts as an "emotion hub" (Guerriero 2017:213). In turn, the executive functions, cognitive processing and emotional competence shape the cognitive abilities that enable higher academic achievement and positive emotions. Being in a positive emotional state allows us to explore creatively, seek new experiences and quickly adapt to ever-changing life conditions and circumstances (Ginsburg et al. 2018).

On the other hand, Ryff's (1989) model of psychological wellbeing theory points out that emotional wellbeing is not all about positive emotions and positive functioning. The theoretically grounded structure of the model explores well-defined dimensions of psychological wellbeing exposing multidimensional balance in a broader context. The theory acknowledges that things like positive relations, purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery and self-acceptance are vital elements of psychological wellbeing (Ryff and Keyes 1995:1). Empirical research emphasises that schools hold a vital role in predicting both academic achievement and lifelong success (Cohen 2013:414). However, it could be argued that the educational system strives to improve academic outcomes, overlooking the need to first address the issue of emotional wellbeing. As emphasised by Housman (2017), emotional competence is a crucial aspect of successful learning and psychological wellbeing in early childhood and beyond.

The development of educational neuroscience and contemporary theories have numerous implications for the skilful art of pedagogical practices in today's educational establishments (Guerriero 2017:198). The acquired knowledge addresses complex questions around how children learn and the positive impact that physically active teaching methods could have if implemented as a whole-school approach.

CONCLUSION

The design of the current research project aimed to determine the impact of traditional sedentary teaching methods and explore the effect of a physically active pedagogical approach on children's

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emotional wellbeing. The statistical data (Griffiths et al. 2012, Breda et al. 2018) highlights the extent of sedentary behaviour in a school setting and the negative impact on overall health and psychological wellbeing.

The most significant finding presented by this research is the inseparable correlation between physical activity, brain functionalities and emotional competence (Hillman et al. 2014, Azevedo et al. 2019). According to Hillman et al. (2014), physical activity alone has a crucial impact on attention, cognitive flexibility and neural pathways of the brain. The phenomenon of "activityinduced neuroplasticity" could pave the way to a newfound knowledge of innovative teaching practices that incorporate a holistic and inclusive approach. Therefore, the assumption could be made that combining physical activity with academic content might have a positive effect on broader indicators of emotional wellbeing and future mental health outcomes (RodriguezAyllon et al. 2019). The findings collated throughout this research could establish the basis for informed interventions within the classroom environment to supplement and enrich the already existing traditional teaching methods.

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Pediatric Music Therapy

A report into how education and health policies are integrated into pediatric music therapy

May 2021

Contents

1. Introduction

This report will investigate how policy relating to education and health and wellbeing are integrated into the practice of pediatric music therapists. Music Therapy uses 'music…to effect positive changes in the psychological, physical, cognitive, or social functioning of individuals with health or educational problems' (Barksdale, 2003, p.1). Therapists can support a wide range of people, including children and young people.

As part of working to support various people, an important aspect of this is partnership working, which is 'where professionals or staff from different organisations work together to provide services to meet the needs of children, young people, and their families' (Oliver and Pitt, 2011). Interprofessional collaboration is a key factor in… 'increasing the effectiveness of health services currently offered to the public' (D'Amour et al., 2009, p.116). Within this report, this will be considered with a focus on music therapists' work with, national health service (NHS) professionals, teachers, teaching assistants and parents. Whilst it is becoming increasingly recognised within policy that, 'the arts can help meet major challenges facing health and social care: ageing, long-term conditions, loneliness and mental health' (APPG, 2017, p.4), the importance of music therapy is still hardly acknowledged. For example, although policies now acknowledge issues in health care, it needs to be recognised that the arts play a crucial role 'in mitigating the effects of the social determinants of health' (APPG, 2017, p.31), through impacting early development and thus success in education and employment. The report will explore current legislation and policy in the UK, with regards to the work of pediatric music therapists, including 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy' (HCPC, 2018), Mental health and behaviour in schools (DfE, 2018), Social and emotional wellbeing in primary education (NICE, 2021), Arts for health and wellbeing (PHE, 2016). These policies set out key principles and guidelines for music

therapists to base their practice upon, encouraging provision of high-quality services for children and families.

The report will include an overview of the history of music therapy and how it has become increasingly regarded as a profession due to changes in policy and more recently the effects of Covid-19, an outline of the policies mentioned above and the rationale for their development, a focus on professional partnership-working, looking generally at benefits and barriers and more specifically at research into partnership-working in music therapy. Finally, the report will conclude an evaluation of the policies across ECEC services, which could have implications for future music therapy practice.

2. Professional Recognition
2.1- History

It is important to gain professional recognition for all professions, to highlight value and appreciation of professional's work. As Letulė and Ala-Ruona (2016) suggest, professional recognition suggests 'credibility [of] the actions that practitioners perform' (p.133). For music therapists in particular, this shows awareness and acceptance of their training and practices. As a profession, music therapy is relatively newly developed, having been first introduced 'during World War II…to entertain the troops and to support morale and facilitate recovery' (Beyers, 2016, p.6). With this recognition, in 1977, the new legislation, 'Arts Therapists Board [was added] under the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960' (Bunt et al., 2002, p.11). Since then, music therapy has gained further recognition within UK policy and legislation, being legally classed as an arts therapy and all music therapy professionals being required to register with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC).

2.2- Recent Recognition

More recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of pediatric therapeutic and

mental health services has become increasingly recognised. With the sudden closure of

schools and changes daily routines which children rely on, many 'children and adolescents

may be stressed, and may not have the emotional or psychological resources to cope with
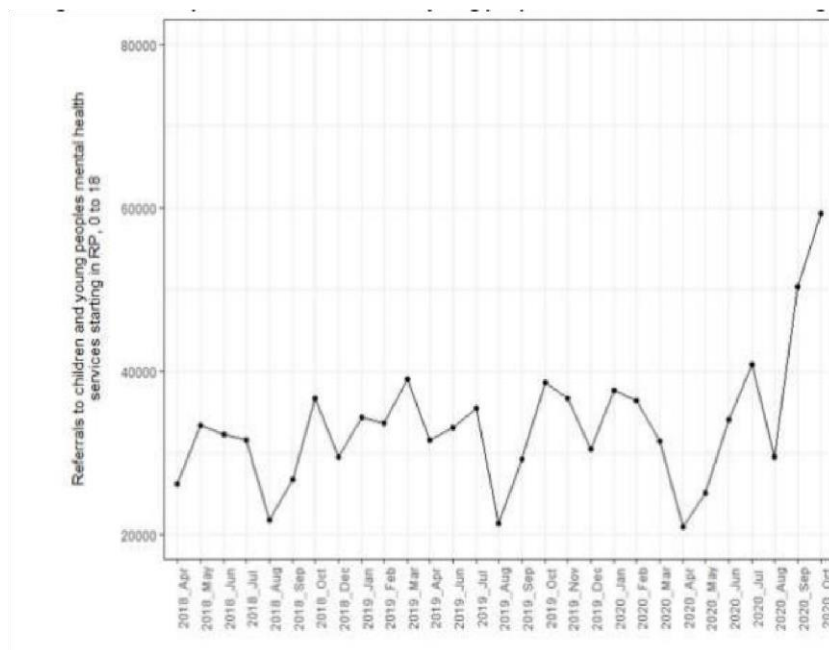
Figure 1- Monthly referrals to child and young people's mental health services

the many changes occurring' (Klein et al., 2020, p.622). Like most other professions,

pediatric services have been significantly impacted as a result of the pandemic and up to

13% have had to adapt their practices (RCPCH, 2020). 'One in six children aged 5 to 16 were

identified as having a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine in 2017' (NHS,

2020).

The graph above highlights monthly referrals to child and young people's mental health services, between April 2018 and October 2020. Focusing specifically on July 2020 to October, shows the significant impact of the pandemic on these services, with a decrease in referrals at the peak of the pandemic between July and August, followed by a sudden increase as restrictions began to ease.

2.3-

> **Chapter Summary- Professional Recognition**
> - **History**
>   - Professional Recognition plays an important part in acknowledging the usefulness of music therapy.
>   - Music therapy was first introduced as a profession in the aftermath of the war, to provide support those who fought in the war.
>   - In 1997, Arts Therapists Board was added to the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960.
> - **Recent Recognition**
>   - With children experiencing life and routine changes as result of the Covid19 pandemic, has emphasised the sheer importance of mental health services, including pediatric music therapy.

3. Policies

There are several policies which form the basis of Music Therapy as a profession, several of which are discussed below. Being aware and having knowledge of current legislation and policies making up a particular profession, 'enables both practitioners and researchers to position themselves in a way that makes their work transferable to policymakers' (Crooke, 2015, p.3). As music therapy is constantly developing and can be applied widely to practice, it is particularly important to 'communicate how music therapy can contribute to policy goals' (Crooke, 2015, p.3), in order to encourage understanding of its importance.

3.1- Health Care

As part of the 16 health care professions in the UK, regulated by the HCPC, who set up standards for professions to follow, music therapists are required to adhere to all HCPC policies. One important HCPC policy, is based on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). Initially developed from the Equality Act, encompassing the aims to 'reduce socio-economic inequalities…reform and harmonise equality law and [clarify laws] relating to discrimination and harassment' (Equality Act, 2010), the main aim of this policy is to clearly explain laws which health professionals should follow regarding EDI, including, 'eliminating discrimination', 'advance equality of opportunity' and 'foster good relations' (HCPC, 2018), and how to develop individual practice from this. Applying this policy within practice, music therapists should, prevent disadvantage, consider needs of protected characteristics and combat prejudice.

3.2- Education

As well as a focus within health care, there has also been increased focus within several educational policies, surrounding the importance of children being offered access to interventions, like music therapy and, in particular, there has been a significant focus on mental health within schools (DfE, 2018; NICE, 2021). The 2018 policy concentrating on mental health in school settings, set out by the Department for Education was initially written to help support previous policies, including the SEND Code of Practice, which similar to this policy, provides ample reference to the importance of 'early identification' (DfE and DoH, 2015), as well as advocating for the support of children. The main aim of this policy is 'to help schools to support pupils whose mental health problems manifest themselves in behaviour' (DfE, 2018). In addition, the key features focus specifically on the provision of intervention and support. Firstly, it is important for schools to clearly communicate the

strategies, which they have in place, to provide early intervention and support for children. Within the policy, the idea of 'early support' is highlighted alongside three other important focus areas, 'prevention', 'identification' and 'access to specialist support' (DfE, 2018). As part of this, the report mentions the use of additional support within schools, and whilst music therapy is not specifically identified, the overall benefit of therapeutic work with children, delivered by trained specialists, is acknowledged. With this in consideration, the policy refers to its application in education, in that 'therapy should be scheduled…to minimise the disruption to…attendance' (DfE, 2018). Finally, the policy explains the importance of effective partnership working in relation to schools and external support services, suggesting that ultimately, support services available, will vary depending on local areas.

A similar policy document, relating to children's wellbeing in school settings, was published in 2021, by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). The main aim of this policy is to increase awareness of wellbeing issues faced and recognition of how to best support children through these. Children's wellbeing is extremely important, 'providing the building block for healthy behaviours and educational attainment' (NICE, 2021). In addition, the document highlights the necessity for effective partnership working. Schools and local children's support services should work together to agree on procedures for how things will run, including several areas, 'assessment, referral and…the role of schools and other agencies in delivering different interventions' (NICE, 2021). The document also refers to the importance of working in partnership with parents and children to keep them informed and to provide the right support. Since the initial publication version in 2008, this policy

document supports several other important policies, including 'Every Child Matters' (DfE, 2003).

3.3- Arts Based

Finally, whilst the policies above all relate generally, to supporting children's wellbeing using therapeutic interventions, the policy, Arts for health and wellbeing, published by Public Health England (PHE) in 2016, takes a specific stance, focusing on the arts as a therapeutic tool. This policy elaborates on Aesop's framework about using art in health interventions (Fancourt and Joss, 2014) and aims to provide information about and assess arts interventions used, offering 'a greater understanding of the range of arts activities that can be used' (PHE, 2016), including music therapy. From this, the policy clarified how useful it can be, to allow children to be creative and come up with ideas and creations during arts therapy sessions. 'These can be effective for uncovering hidden perspectives…and strengthening participants' voices' (PHE, 2016). Finally, as with the other policies, the idea of partnership working is emphasised. As well as acknowledging that all professionals involved have various roles to play and contributions to provide, they can also all offer differing perspectives to situations, which can be useful in being able to provide children with the best support.

3.4-

Chapter Summary- Policies
- **Health Care**
    - HCPC 2018 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion explains laws for health care professionals to follow in order to eliminate discrimination and harassment.
- **Education**
    - DfE 2018 Mental health and behaviour in schools emphasises the importance of supporting children whose mental health negatively impacts on their behaviour.
    - NICE 2008 Social and emotional wellbeing in primary education aims to understand and effectively support wellbeing issues faced by children.
- **Arts Based**
    - PHE 2016 Arts for health and wellbeing focuses on how arts can be used for intervention purposes, offering chance for children to be creative and gives them a voice to express themselves with.

4. Partnership Working

4.1- Barriers

Whilst partnership working between professionals is beneficial, multiple professionals working together can inevitably lead to issues, often acting as barriers to effective professional collaboration. Firstly, and perhaps one of the main issues, as Gasper (2010) explains, 'individuals may only see one view-point which they believe is right' (p.61). In particular, this can occur, when 'professionals work in an area for a long time' (Frost, 2005, p.32), meaning they struggle to make changes to their views and adapt their methods of working. Additionally, places of work may have different expectations of their staff, which could lead to conflict regarding the way different staff are treated or the amount of work put in by staff. Another key area in partnership working, which could cause disagreement, is the use of professional vocabulary, which, when collaborating, may be required to be used by staff across all professions. This can often lead to assumptions about what is meant and

disagreements, 'when words used in various professions have different meanings' (Gasper, 2010, p.61), highlighting the importance of providing opportunities for joint training sessions to clarify anything causing misunderstandings. Finally, barriers could occur, due to something as simple as, professionals having a 'lack of awareness of the benefits of working together' (Glenny and Roaf, 2008, p.10), often causing a 'fear of losing control' (ibid.) and ultimately, a reluctance to change their approach to work.

Although barriers may be faced, it is important to understand how to overcome these in order to be successful in establishing effective partnership working relationships and as Frost (2005) emphasises, the only real way to overcome barriers is through 'willingness from professionals' (p.34). From this, a shared respect between professions can be developed, meaning all professionals involved will better understand the importance of 'different perspectives and skills' (Gasper, 2010, p.66), for collaboration, as well as potentially being more willing to adapt their views and practices. Glenny and Roaf (2008) suggest that, in order to make overcoming barriers easier, it is beneficial if 'practitioners are able to meet regularly and share the issues arising' (p.10).

4.2- Benefits

Whilst there are potential barriers which can be overcome, overall using partnership working, especially as part of the education and care of children, can be beneficial, not only for professionals but for children and their families too. In order to successfully work together, it is important for individual professionals to be aware of their own approaches and views to work. Again, focusing on the idea of willingness as an important aspect within collaboration between professionals, when this is followed, it is possible to share 'understanding, values and aims...to work towards a shared goal' (Gasper, 2010, p.66). Furthermore, an important aspect of partnership working for professionals is the dialogue

they are able to have. As Gasper (2010) explains, this allows for, understanding and considering different perspectives, gaining knowledge, and sharing of skills. Ultimately, from effective collaboration, professionals are able to gain 'awareness of the operation of other agencies' (Frost, 2005, p.34).

As well as benefits to professionals, partnership working can also lead to positive outcomes for children and their families. Firstly, with several professionals working together, it is valuable as, they can all put their training together, making it much easier to identify the needs of children and their families and provide the right support for them. In addition, access to services improves considerably through partnership working, due to the increase in 'availability of a wider range of services' (Gasper, 2010, p.85).

4.3- Partnership Working in Music Therapy

With partnership working and music therapy both having separate recognition within history, it has been highlighted that partnership working in music therapy has also had significant historical acknowledgment. This history stemmed from the initial work of Nordoff and Robbins, dating back to 1965. Through discussing their work, Verney and Ansdell (2010) suggested that music therapists react to children's behaviour differently because, as musicians, they process children's screams and other noises differently. This can be beneficial, as it provides a different perspective than that of parents or teachers and means music can be used as a helpful intervention for this behaviour. Several studies have focused directly on partnership working as part of pediatric music therapy with concentration on education and health collaborations (Fearn and O'Connor, 2003; Pethybrige, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). From these, it is possible to draw upon the effectiveness of employing partnership working in music therapy.

One study, conducted by Pethybridge (2013), looked at partnership between music therapists and teachers, suggesting that they could work together in supporting children with special educational needs (SEN), for example through provision of group music sessions. As part of this study, after the music sessions had run, an interview was conducted with an early years teacher. From this, key categories were found, including looking at the benefits for children and techniques used in therapy sessions, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership work. With regards to partnership working, the teacher emphasised just how important the link between education and music therapy is, suggesting session planning should take place collaboratively to bring various perspectives about how to use music to best support the child. Overall, the study makes it clear that for partnership working to be successful, music therapists need to 'communicate objectives clearly to teaching staff…without any training in music or therapeutic approaches' (Pethybridge, 2013, p.33).

With a further focus on collaboration within music therapy, Wood et al. (2016), describe an article written in 2003 by Fearn and O'Connor, who acknowledge music therapy as an important part of the Child Development Service (CDS) and look specifically at the effectiveness of partnership working between those in NHS roles and music therapists. Emphasising the need for partnership working, Fearn and O'Connor (2003) highlight a number of health care professionals who often work alongside music therapists, including 'therapists…Medics, Psychologists, Clinical Nurses and Social Workers' (Wood el al., 2016, p.42). Furthermore, in looking at collaborative working between a physiotherapist and music therapist, benefits of this partnership are suggested, in allowing both to gain appreciation of each other's skills and knowledge. This links to one of the benefits of

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partnership working generally, the opportunity to develop an understanding of how other professions run. Finally, within their research, Fearn and O'Connor (2003) suggest a particularly significant benefit of partnership working as a music therapist. Their training allows them to understand how to best support children to develop, whilst also remaining aware of possible negative impacts to families.

4.4-

> **Chapter Summary- Partnership Working**
> - **Barriers**
>   - Whilst the collaboration of multiple professions, all with various viewpoints, can lead to disagreements, it is important to overcome these barriers, allowing for effective partnership working.
> - **Benefits**
>   - Partnership working leads to benefits for professionals, children, and their families.
> - **Music Therapy**
>   - From research into partnership working in education and health care, the effectiveness of partnership working has been highlighted.

5. Policy Evaluation

Whilst the main aim of policy within early childhood care and education (ECEC) services is to 'reduce social inequality and educational disadvantage' (Faulkner and Coates, 2013, p.259), there is an overall concern that reliance on policies within these services, particularly educational services, may lead to society having unrealistic expectations of young children, as they are prepared early, in order for them to succeed within ECEC. In addition, Faulkner and Coates (2013) point out that government created ideas about early childhood and the importance of education seem to influence the way that services are provided much more than views of those accessing the services. With this in consideration, it is clear that 'policy makers need a better understanding of music therapy...so that decisions regarding arts

instructions can be better informed and more child-centred' (Salvador and Pasiali, 2017, p.93).

6. Conclusion

The content of this report has been influenced by peer feedback:

Feedback	Focus
Looking at multi-agency work with settings	Multi-agency work between music therapists and professionals within education and health care was highlighted
Looking at a history of music therapy provisions and how it has become more present in policy over recent years.	There is a focus on how music therapy has adapted and the development of policy.
The barriers to the partnership work.	There is a focus on barriers of partnership working and suggestions for how to overcome these.
The impact of Covid-19 on increasing the demand for mental health services.	Within the report, this is highlighted through statistics and a graph showing the number of monthly referrals to mental health services during this time.

Overall, the report has presented an overview of how education and health policies have been integrated into the practice of pediatric music therapy. The initial focus is on the gaining professional recognition and how music therapy policy has developed. Policies related to education and health, as well as arts interventions are explored, looking at how partnership working is woven into these. This then links into the benefits and barriers of partnership working, as well as partnership working in music therapy. The report is concluded through an evaluation of policy within ECEC services, including music therapy.

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An investigation into exploring the lived experience of raising children from a singleparent's perspective.

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An investigation into exploring the lived experience of raising children from a singleparent's perspective.

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Research and Knowledge Exchange
Student Papers: June 2021 **Abstract**

Purpose: This research project aimed to explore the lived experience of raising children from a single-parent's (SP's) perspective. The focus of the research was to identify positive aspects of SP family life, understand the parent's view of the perception of SPs, and to establish how a SP considers they are viewed in relation to stereotyping.

Method: An ethnographic approach was employed to provide rich data regarding the SP's lived experience. The research took place over three weeks, in the home of a family with a singlemother and two children within their early years, living in Britain. Observations of the whole family provided a basis for semi-structured interviews with the SP.

Findings: The findings displayed the importance of receiving love and social support from family and friends combined with practical assistance and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, viewing this support as mutually beneficial, provides increased positive outcomes with reduced feelings of obligating and burdening family and friends. Interviews highlighted frustrations regarding singleparenthood including lack of time, finances and navigating work-life balance. The significance of labels and gender disparity related to expectations and perspectives of SPs, and reflection and mindset, was also revealed. Finally, it was observed that SPs experience feelings of hope, autonomy, and a positive anticipation of the future.

Conclusion: Capturing the lived experience of SPs is complex, each having unique and individual experiences and therefore, not fitting into a homogenous group. Labels are unhelpful and unrepresentative, as they initiate preconceived, inaccurate assumptions and expectations. Findings also illustrate the significance of social support, optimistic mindset and reflective parenting in promoting self-efficacy, fulfilment and enjoyment regarding parenting. Recommendations have been made for improving practice, by ensuring preconceived assumptions and expectations are dismissed, and replaced with the understanding that SPs should be empowered to create their own identity. Further recommendations for policy suggest adapting workplaces to provide more SP friendly conditions by enabling flexible working. Further suggestions relate to future research, highlighting the importance of understanding the lived experience of SPs, and the necessity to increase their representation, by studying participants who became SPs due to various circumstances.

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Introduction

Research regarding single-parents (SPs) is limited (Barajas, 2011) despite 22.3% of families in the United Kingdom being SPs with dependent children in 2019 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Literature regarding SPs tends to focus on challenges; socio-economic disadvantage (Park, 2008; Doherty and Craft, 2011) and difficulty of managing role-strain in connection with work-life balance (Mairhuber et al., 2009; Gasse and Mortelmans, 2020). Research frequently displays preconceptions and stereotyping (Ganong and Coleman, 1995; Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette and Gosselin, 2016) and often fails to consider positive aspects of single-parenthood. 'Coping' is frequently reported, with support and optimism contributing to positive parental wellbeing and appropriate child development (Defrain, and Eirick, 1981; Nes, and Segerstrom, 2006).

This research endeavours to supplement the limited literature surrounding SPs by exploring the lived experience of raising children from a SP's perspective.

The specific aims of this research project are to:

•   identify positive aspects of SP family life.

•   understand the parent's view of the perception of SPs.

•   establish how a SP considers they are viewed regarding stereotyping.

The significance of this research is gathering information, relating to the daily life of a SP family, and enabling recommendations for practice and future research (Adair, 2010).

Review of Relevant Literature

Within the literature review three themes were identified; 'single-parents: a diverse group', 'cultural stereotypes and research' and 'lived experiences'. The first theme considers the broad range of family situations the term 'single-parents' encompasses (Graham, 2018; Wajim and Grace, 2020;

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Zhang, 2020). Furthermore single-parents experience a variety of economic circumstances and cannot be categorised into one homogenous group (Heinonen, 2019). 'Cultural stereotypes and research' examines research which states a child's family structure plays a significant role in contributing to their achievements and wellbeing, and that raised within a single-parent family will negatively impact these factors (Barajas, 2011; Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette and Gosselin, 2015; Creese, 2019). However, this is contradicted by other research which suggests economic hardship and parental education are determining factors of child's wellbeing, rather than family structure (Borgers et al., 1996; Murry, et al., 2001). 'Lived experiences', consider how social support (Widan and Greeff, 2019) and an optimistic mindset (Taylor and Conger, 2017) positively contribute to single-parents' wellbeing and self-efficacy, leading to improved ability to cope with stressful situations, enabling optimal parenting behaviours and reduced levels of depression and anxiety (Nes and Segerstrom, 2006; Masten, 2014).

Methodology and Ethics

Hughes (2010) suggests that paradigms frame the perception of research projects, influencing the epistemology and chosen methodology, including the process of investigation and the method of demonstrating validity (Ramani, and Mann, 2016). The aim and questions for this research are subjective, accordingly the ontological assumption is that there is not a single truth or correct answer to be discovered, but further understanding and insight will be gained (Tai, and Ajjawi, 2016). Investigations that require information regarding an individual's perceptions and experiences, cannot be provided via numerical quantitative data (Tai, and Ajjawi, 2016). Therefore, this research adopts a qualitative method, studying participants within their natural setting with the purpose of gaining knowledge ethnographically (Ellis, 2007; Atkins and Wallace, 2012; Aspers and Corte, 2019). This ethnographic research uses observations and interviews within the participants home (Parahoo, 2006). This approach is well suited to understanding an individual's perspectives allowing the researcher to become immersed within the culture and environment, and consider how these contribute to findings (Robert, 2009). Ethnographic research evolves and adapts as the relationship between participant and researcher develops allowing unique information to be gained, making it an ideal approach for this research (Ellis, 2007; Garrity and Canavan, 2017).

An aspect which decreases the transferability of findings is the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the participant's lived experience (GOV.UK, 2021). Furthermore, the small-scale nature of this study has implications for validity with the generalisation of findings reduced (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). However, this was not the intent of the research which was rather to gather detailed data representing an individual's experience of single-parenting. This was achieved through observations which guided semi-structured interviews increasing the validity within the data, as they provided the participant opportunity to share their views on the researcher's observations, fostering reduced misinterpretation (Golafshani, 2003; Turner, 2010). These were recorded and transcribed which Bell and Waters (2014) suggest increases validity, due to lack of interference from the researcher. The rich data collected consequently led to data saturation with topics being repeated within the interviews, increasing the validity of research (Fusch and Ness, 2015). As the

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researcher remained within the participant's environment for a prolonged duration, this reduced the impact of the Hawthorn effect as research became less novel (Roberts, 2009; Papatheodorou, 2013). The relationship between the participant and researcher developed during the study allowing for further understanding, empathy and trust 'I felt very comfortable and at ease' (Interview 4). This means a wider variety of sensitive topics were discussed than expected, such as personal information regarding the participant's financial situation. This increased the validity as it enabled the participant to feel comfortable in sharing sensitive aspects of their lived experience (Rogers, 2014; Carlos, 2018).

As highlighted within literature regarding an ethnography, issues of reliability may occur however, repeating aspects of the research, including methods of data collection and the position of researcher, can increase replicability (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011). Moreover, employing observations and interviews increases inter-rater reliability (Roy, and Banerjee, 2012). To further improve reliability, the same method of data analysis (thematic) could be utilised in future research (Clarke and Braun, 2014; Terry, et al., 2017). Although the research sought to gain knowledge of an individual's experience of raising children as a SP, those with similar characteristics may find research provides relevant findings (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011).

Sensitive topics are subjective, so difficult to define (Auguston and Hilario, 2019). Augusto and Hilario (2019) state sensitive topics are subjects which could cause substantial harm to those involved with research. The term single-parents encompasses a range of family situations, some of which increase the sensitivity surrounding research, such as those who became single-parents through bereavement (Graham, 2018; Zhang, 2020). There are negative stereotypes associated with single-parents which further increases the importance of researcher tact and empathy (Ganong and Coleman, 1995). Therefore, single-parents could be considered a sensitive research topic. It is essential for participants to be treated with respect and dignity without prejudice regarding any characteristic, including 'parental status' (EECERA, 2015, p.3). The researcher will signpost the participant to their General Practitioner should sensitive topics lead to distress.

To undertake research involving a sensitive topic ethically, Cornejo, Rubilar and ZapataSepúlveda (2019) argues a sensitive method of collecting data must be employed. Sensitive methods include using an ethnographic approach (Banerjee, et al., 2017) as the relationship that is built between researcher and participant during ethnographic research provides the researcher with an insight into participants self-esteem and feelings towards the study (Davies, 2007). Another method of mitigating risk of harm associated with researching sensitive topics, is using individual semistructured interviews. Guest, et al. (2017) states individual interviews are an effective method of collecting qualitative data in comparison to focus groups, when pertaining to sensitive information as the interviews are semi-structured, participants can guide discussion, giving them control and autonomy over their responses and reducing the risk of discussion becoming uncomfortable or distressing (Roy and Banerjee, 2012). It is the researcher's responsibility to stop the interview at any time, if they feel it is causing the participant harm, and to ensure the participant knows they have the right to withdraw from the interview without repercussions (Dixon, 2015). Furthermore, it is vital the participant's voice is heard this being a fundamental aspect of the ethnographic approach (Boivin and CohenMiller, 2018). This protects participants from harm by

empowering and representing their thoughts and perceptions within research achieved here by the chosen methods (Turner, 2010; Ralls, 2020).

Undertaking ethnographic research within a family home requires ethical consideration regarding when it is appropriate to complete observations and interviews. To protect participants from harm it is crucial that family life is prioritised over research (Palmer et al., 2014). Researchers should aim to 'maximise benefit and minimise harm' (BERA, 2018, p.4; Norland College, 2020). To follow this, research will only occur if it is deemed to not cause detriment to those being observed or interviewed. Consequently, research methods for this research are flexible, as they can occur when convenient, increasing validity of data collected. However, if it is not possible for observations to occur, the method of retrospective observations may be utilised (Amaechi and Fusch, 2019; Landrum, Cook and Tankersley, 2019). Although these are not as detailed as 'in the moment' observations, they are still suitable for guiding interviews (Palaiologou, 2012).

For this research informed consent was gained using a consent letter which informed the participant of research aims and purpose, processes involved within data collection and their rights as stated within research ethic guidelines (EECERA, 2015; BERA, 2018; Norland College, 2020). Participant rights include the right to confidentiality, anonymity, protection from harm, and to withdraw (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2001). Participants are also made aware of data protection processes which follow the General Data Protection Regulation ('Council regulation (EU) 2016/67', 2016) and the Data Protection Act 2018. These involve safe storage of audio recordings and transcripts on a password-protected laptop. This research does not involve participants who are unable to give informed consent, the parent will act as a gatekeeper and provide consent to observe children (Palaiologou, 2012). However, the researcher will continually assess appropriateness for observations to take place and follow safeguarding procedures if there are concerns (Oliver, 2010; Palmer et al., 2014). Participants were be offered the opportunity to see the final submission of research in order to thank them for their participation.

Background to Findings

Pseudonyms have been employed throughout, to ensure confidentiality (Muchmore, 2002). Research focused on one family, Eliza and her two children, Arthur (34 months) and Henry (15 months). Eliza became a SP five weeks after Henry was born when Rufus her spouse died. Observations provided a basis for semi-structured interviews. To gain further understanding of the qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted with codes created, to allow four themes to emerge; 'love', 'self' and 'hope' (Clarke and Braun, 2014). This research adopted an inductive approach, with the data collected, providing new meanings (Kalpokaite and Radivojevic, 2019).

Findings

Love

Family and Friends	Valuable contributions
Grandparents	Relationship • Parental figures • Close bond • Mutual love and adoration
	Responsibilities and assistance provided • Childcare - regular, ad hoc and emergency • Practical household maintenance support • Providing children with a range of education and life skills experience and knowledge • If require financial support for the children's education
Aunties and Uncles	• Providing children with a range of education and life skills experience and knowledge • Mutual love
Friends	• Play dates • Mutual social support • Childcare - during adverse times

Eliza utilises friends and family for regular childcare, with grandparents being 'massively involved in bringing them up' (Interview 1). Eliza explained when Henry was newborn and Arthur not sleeping she 'really needed help with nights' (Interview 1). She received over-night help from grandma and friends demonstrating, during difficult times Eliza called on family and friends. This led the discussion to whether Eliza felt a difference between asking for support from family or friends. Widan and Greeff's (2019) study found, due to the voluntary nature of friendships, single mothers placed a greater emphasis on friendship support compared to family support. However, Eliza suggests 'it's easier to ask family' (Interview 1) implying this is not the case for all. Webber and Boromeo, (2005) propose seeking family support is less desirable than friendship support, due to a negative inference with links to conflict, emotional costs and burdening, however Eliza noted 'they are obliged but they've also got a massive, vested interest, it's their grandsons' (Interview 1) implying this is mutually beneficial (Murry et al., 2001; Taylor and Conger 2017). Hayles, Xu and Edward (2018) propose grandparents are grateful for the opportunity for involvement. Eliza stated she was 'conscious about burdening family' (Interview 1) but also recognised '[the children] always would have been adored, but I think the relationship is another level because of what has happened [being widowed]' (Interview 1) thus indicating the relationship between grandparents and the children has become stronger, due to their circumstance. From the statement 'The relationship between Arthur and his grandparents … is incredibly beautiful to watch' (Interview 1) it is evident the whole family benefits from the close bonds. Hank, et al. (2018)

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suggest strong bonds between grandparents and grandchildren can have a plethora of mutual positive impacts, including improved cognitive function and wellbeing. This highlights the unique nature of family relationships, suggesting individual opinions exist regarding requesting support and caveats involved (Grevenstein et al., 2019). Overall, receiving support is impacted by mindset and viewing familial support as mutually beneficial, engenders positive outcomes (Attar-Schwartz, Filippelli and Fallon, 2019). Eliza views her strong family and friend support network, as a positive aspect of SP family life.

Self

Topic	Eliza's perspective and views
View of self and labels	• Labels are not important • Assumptions are made about widowed SPs • There are preconceived ideas about how widowed SPs should behave
Gender disparity and perceptions	• Single-fathers are highly praised and respected, which Eliza feels is not always deserved • SPs can be patronised
Reflection	• Reflecting on parenting is important to evaluate its effectiveness • Children are a reflection of parenting ability and how you are coping • Wellbeing is an integral part of parenting

Eliza does not relate to labels of 'SP' and 'widow' stating 'I am a SP, but I don't really see myself as a SP … I don't really identify as a widow either, even though I am, I just don't feel like I am' (Interview 2). Lauchlan and Boyle, (2019) consider labels as having both positive and negative effects but can provide a sense of belonging within a community (Ginsberg, 2012) or can lead to stigmatisation and misinformed assumptions (Ohan, et al., 2013). Eliza has experienced the latter 'people … assume I've got no mortgage because my husband is dead' and have 'views about how a widow should behave, not all of which I believe or agree with' (Interview 4). Taylor and Robinson's (2016) study investigating the lived experience of young widows and widowers found their participants had unique experiences (Zhang, 2020) thus suggesting individuals with similar characteristics do not fit into a homogenous group. Regarding not identifying with 'labels' Eliza explained 'I don't want to be pigeonholed, I feel I am just their Mum' (Interview 2). For Eliza, labels are inappropriate, suggesting assumptions and perceptions she does not identify with.

Eliza mentioned on several occasions that single fathers are viewed differently and are 'very well respected' (Interview 2) which is supported by Sallee (2014). Emslie and Hunt (2009) argue this is because when men undertake childcare responsibilities, they are executing work outside of

their traditional roles whereas, Eliza is fulfilling societal expectations (Manicom, 1984; Hooks, 2000). For Eliza, reflecting on her parenting is incredibly important. Eliza states 'I am really conscious, because I am a single-mum, of doing a good job and not have people think that child doesn't behave because there is no dad at home' (Interview 2) implying Eliza feels increased pressure to parent successfully because of being a SP. This is supported by Dijanic's (2016) study suggesting widowed single-mothers experienced increased pressure due to solely bearing the responsibility of raising children. Eliza highlighted 'the reflection is bigger because there is no one else to blame' (Interview 2). Ensink et al. (2017) propose reflective parenting increases parents' awareness and understanding of their actions (Cooper and Redfern, 2016). Moreover, Stenason, Moorman and Romano, (2020) state by evaluating the effectiveness of parenting, parents gained improved self-efficacy. Eliza 'believe[s] children are a great gauge of how you are coping yourself' (Interview 3). The idea of 'coping' appears extensively within literature surrounding SPs with this ability determined by social support, attitude and mindset (Defrain, and Eirick, 1981; Sperlich and Maina, 2014). In agreement with Eliza, Taylor and Conger's (2017) study into promoting strengths and resilience in single-mother families, found optimism and social support led to competent parenting, positive mental wellbeing and coping strategies, resulting in positive child outcomes including appropriate development, reduced emotional and behavioural issues and improved social ability. Thus, implying childrens' wellbeing is consequential to parental wellbeing (Taylor and Conger, 2017). Eliza feels perception and stereotyping of SPs, and being solely responsible for her children, increases possible judgement on her parenting ability. Therefore, by reflecting upon her parenting, she empowers herself to consider and adjust her parenting.

Hope

Themes	Aspects that display hope
Future	 • Open to adding to the family - parental figure and/or more children • Eliza's young age allows for increased options for the future
Joy	 • Raising the children is joyful • Having Arthur and Henry is a blessing

For Eliza, the future holds hope and possibility. Eliza describes being widowed at a young age with young children as a 'really rough hand to have been dealt, but it is also sort of a gift for the options of rebuilding my life, at my age I can choose whatever I want' (Interview 3). However, Lowe and McClements's (2010) study of young widows, found the loss of their spouse meant a loss of hope and dreams. Whereas, Bishop and Cain (2003) found for women, age was a predictor with younger widows increasingly likely to engage in cohabitation or remarriage, thus

emphasising Eliza's evaluation, that her age increased her future options. Eliza stated she is open to having more children with a partner or in an 'unconventional setup' as she is 'doing it on my own anyway' (Interview 2). Regarding whether single-parenting has changed her opinion on having more children as a SP, Eliza expressed 'I've done it, so it can be done' (Interview 2). Eliza views having sole responsibility for future decision making as liberating, 'being on my own, the world is … our oyster' (Interview 2) illustrating, being a SP has increased Eliza's parenting selfefficacy and empowerment (Gilkerson, et al., 2020).

Another theme that occurs frequently is the joy Eliza experiences 'I enjoy being a Mum' (Interview 2), displaying the positive impacts of having children are not diminished by being a widowed SP. Nelson et al's. (2012) study focused on understanding whether children are associated with more joy than misery, found parents experienced higher levels of positive emotion, fulfilment, happiness and life contentment than non-parents. Eliza echoes this 'I am really lucky to have those boys' (Interview 4). Children enhance the lives of their parents, enabling developing social networks, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003). As emphasised by Lavee and Katz (2003 quoted in Barkan 2020, p.14) 'the greatest joy in life is to follow children's growing', throughout the interviews it is evident Eliza loves and derives great joy from raising her children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of raising children from a SP's perspective. As can be seen in the data, Eliza experiences a variety of positive aspects of single-parenthood including love and social support from family and friends (Masten, 2014; Hartwig, 2016). Furthermore, this research sought to understand the parent's views on the perception of SPs and related stereotyping, finding gender disparity in the expectations placed upon SPs, (Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette and Gosselin, 2016) and all SPs experiencing judgement regarding parenting ability and feeling patronised (Bloom, 2001; Reay, 1998). Thus, demonstrating achievement of the research aims.

However, there is significant complexity when considering the lived experience of SPs. An ethnographic case study captured the individuality of the experience of raising children as a SP, providing in-depth data, unique to the participant involved. Eliza considers 'labels' as unhelpful and unrepresentative due to association with assumptions and expectations Eliza views as inaccurate and unnecessary (Ginsberg, 2012; Lauchlan and Boyle, 2019). SPs are often viewed as a homogenous group (Heinonen, 2019) what Eliza demonstrates is SPs are unique, each experiencing individually, love, frustrations and hopes. Relevant research tends to focus on the disadvantages compared to two-parent families (Murry, et al., 2001), failing to capture how raising children as a SP can be extraordinary and gratifying. The findings highlight the individual nature of single-parenthood, thus evidencing all SPs must be respected as unique individuals, a fundamental necessity of Early Years practice that seeks to celebrate and support families and offer assistance where needed (Grevenstein et al., 2019).

Findings illustrate the strength of an optimistic mindset and reflective parenting in fostering selfefficacy and enjoyment regarding parenting (Nes and Segerstrom, 2006; Ren et al., 2020). This is displayed by an instrumental aspect of Eliza's parenting which is enjoying chores enabling

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increased enjoyment and fulfilment. Also highlighted are the extensive positive aspects of singleparenthood such as autonomy and increased attention directed to the children. Through discussion with Eliza, subtle nuances of hope surrounding the future were captured with her viewing 'the world is … our oyster' (Interview 2). An overwhelming theme throughout the data is single-parenting is found to be a 'privilege' (Interview 4), joyful and self-empowering.

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Introduction

This paper looks at the crucial part research plays in leading practice in the Early Years. It draws on the experience of leading a small-scale research project to enhance language and literacy development within an early years setting. The early years are a time of intensive language acquisition and providing a language-rich environment is important for both language and literacy skills (Kapalkova et al 2016). This paper considers how knowledge of current research of the development of language and literacy skills in early years strengthens practice to support development, whilst at the same time offering validity to qualitative research carried out within a setting. In the following sections the role of leadership will be discussed followed by a discussion of the importance of drawing on research to underpin practice. Then the role of collaborative action research to support children's language and literacy development is presented, as well as a discussion of some of my research project findings. In the last section I address the importance of strengthening links to home to ensure parental involvement. I finish by drawing some conclusions in relation to our work as practitioners in early years settings. Throughout the research project and in this paper all ethical considerations were followed in line with BERA (2018) guidelines.

Leadership of practice

The roots of the pedagogy and curriculum of any early years setting stem from the underlying philosophies that as MacNaughton (2003:114) describes 'explain why we do what we do'. In the U.K. the framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the criteria for curriculum and practice (DfE 2017). However, settings choose their own way to follow and implement the framework (DfE 2017). A guiding philosophy is crucial as without one, Tanner and Tanner (1975:63) warn the curriculum can be 'a product of ad hoc decisions'. Strong leadership values and actions are fundamental for implementing a clear guiding philosophy that underpins practice.

In Melhuish and Gardiner's (2018) study strong leadership is noted as being essential for good quality provision. This supports Robbin and Callan's (2009:2) belief that 'there is a significant relationship between the quality of a setting and its leader'. Siraj and Hallet (2013) identify how an effective leader must understand their own philosophy, values, visions and principles in order to share them with others. While visions are what we hope to achieve, values are our belief of what is important (Martin and Henderson 2001). Leaders cannot provide quality provision alone; their

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vision and values must be shared among practitioners and, as Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2003) recognise, leaders sharing their philosophy, knowledge and understanding with others is a key factor in best practice. Hallet (2013) recognises that early years leadership often revolves around a group of practitioners working together, inspiring one another with the shared goal of the benefit of the children in their care. Thus, as Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007:28) describe, true leadership embraces a 'commitment to collaboration' with shared understanding. ManningMorton (2014) highlights that it is fundamentally important for all practitioners to understand why we do what we do, what we are trying to achieve and how we will achieve it. The curriculum and pedagogy we develop for children reflects our values and beliefs about the way that children learn.

Research underpinning practice

Our understanding of how children learn is enriched from years of complimenting and contrasting research, and it is important to recognise how this not only informs our practice but how we should continue to review research and undertake research ourselves (Robert-Holmes 2014). It is also pertinent to acknowledge the difference between evidence-based practice and evidence- informed practice. Evidence- based practice is, as it sounds, practice based on the evidence of research which as Epstein (2009) warns can restrict scope of practice. On the other hand Epstein (2009) advocates for evidence-informed practice, where practice is enhanced by previous research but not limited by it. De Florio-Hansen (2016:2) agrees explaining how it is best to improve practice through using research by concentrating on 'the foundations of different approaches' and choose the tools for research and teaching that best fit each individual situation depending on 'not only goals, standards and objectives, but also by unique teachers and learners', who work in concrete specific contexts. As Gillen and Cameron (2010) argue, this is crucially important when drawing on research in the early years because children develop holistically within environmental and social contexts making it impossible to definitively deduce a single point that benefits development in isolation. This explains the many limitations often listed in research, however leading evidenceinformed practice overcomes these limitations.

Leading practice through action research to support children's language and literacy development

I carried out a small-scale action research project in the full-day care Montessori early years setting, which I lead, over a period of six weeks. The setting has places for sixty three children aged from birth to five years and employs twenty members of staff. Set in a rural location, in a relatively affluent area, only a small proportion of children who attend are considered to be disadvantaged however an increasing proportion of our children have additional needs particularly in the area of language development. The rationale behind the project stemmed from my awareness of research, such as Roulstone and colleagues (2011), that highlights how strong communication and language development in the early years is linked to positive outcomes for children later in life. Children are spending more time in early years provisions due to the U.K. government providing free entitlement to early years education, for disadvantaged two year olds and all three and four years olds, in

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recognition of the benefit early years provision can have (DfE 2016). However, despite Sylva and colleagues' (2004) findings that early years provision benefitted all areas of children's development, Melhuish and Gardiner's (2018) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) found no proven benefits to speech and language development from attending an early years setting in comparison to being in a home environment. These findings illustrate that there could be a gap in provision with regard to prioritising children's speech and language development to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children.

Thanks to knowledge of this research and a passion for championing the development and learning of all children, I recognised the need to assess and improve the speech and language provision for the children in my care, many of whom have speech and language delays. As I continued to research the topic, I discovered studies, such as Terrell and Watson (2018), that highlight how language development is related to all areas of learning, especially literacy. The link between communication and language as a basis of literacy and the 'importance of literacy in children's long-term attainment, social and cultural life' is reaffirmed in the recent review by Pascal et al (2019:8). Further investigation led to finding research that established such a strong link between language and literacy that supporting either area of development through specific activities was deduced as having a positive effect on both areas of development (Metsala 2011). So, for example, leading activities that specifically support language development will indirectly benefit literacy skills and vice versa.

Callanan and colleagues' (2017) extensive study showed that high quality adult-child interactions are essential for speech and language development. However, in a busy early years setting onetoone adult-child conversations can be interrupted or may be rare, as found in Boyd (2014). This has been a factor raised many times during reflective practice meetings within my setting. Other research, such as Flynn (2016), recommends creating an environment that offers opportunities for talking; Bain and colleagues (2015) agree as they found it is important for settings to make a conscious effort to provide and enhance opportunities for language and literacy development. Although organising activities that create opportunities for children to talk to one another are important, as King and Dockrell (2016) highlight, sustained conversations between young children are infrequent. This leads to the importance of creating situations where children can have sustained conversations with practitioners.

The more I read, the more I found studies that had been carried out on the subject of language and literacy development and the more I developed an understanding of the importance of shared book reading with children (Lonigan et al. 2013, Hindman et al. 2008, Justice et al. 2010). Sharing a book with a child provides a wealth of opportunities to promote both language and literacy skills. This led me to evaluate exactly how much shared book reading occurred within the setting and a gap was identified in provision. Despite some story reading taking place some children missed participating in this activity due to their daily routine or attendance patterns. Among these children were many who desperately needed extra support in developing their language and literacy skills. Further academic investigation led me to discover that Hindman et al. (2008) found that just reading a story to a child is not enough to support development. This finding was echoed by both Mol et al. (2009) in their meta-analysis and Pollard-Durodola et al. (2011) in their investigation of

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strategies used by speech and language therapists to promote language development. The way in which an adult interacts with children during book reading determines the learning gained, raising the point that if a story is simply read out loud learning opportunities are being lost (Hindman et al 2008). Alarmingly, Terrell and Watson (2018) deduced that practitioners should be specifically trained in techniques by speech and language therapists for children to benefit. Whilst noting this as a point for discussion with the speech and language therapist who supports some of the children in our setting I recognised a need to immediately evaluate and strengthen our current provision.

The importance of looking at and leading practice in the quality of the shared book reading experience lead to the development of the research question 'Supporting language and literacy skills – how does the introduction of small story times enhance provision in an early years setting?'. Reviewing others' research in and around the topic of language and literacy, such as Boyd (2014), as well as literature relating to research techniques informed my methodology and methods to be used, a perfect example of De Florio-Hansen's (2016:2) 'choosing adequate tools'. The tools chosen were action research using observations, a journal and practitioner interviews.

Leading practice through collaboration

This action research could only be successful with the co-operation and collaboration of other practitioners. Leading practice in early years for several years has led me to build and value a learning community within the setting with a strong team culture as advocated by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007). The setting follows the Montessori philosophy of free-flow, active learning with children self-choosing from the prepared environment throughout a four hour work cycle (Pound 2005). Practitioners observe and guide children, when needed, presenting activities to them to suit their interests and level of development. The children are never interrupted when engaged in play or work as Pope (2002: unpaginated),drawing on the words of Greenwald (1999), states 'interrupting children when engaged in purposeful activity interferes with their momentum, interest and inner workings of thought'. Hence the practicality of building the story times into the daily routine was reliant on the practitioners gathering the children at moments when they were not engaged in other learning. It required the practitioners to understand the benefits that were hoping to be gained from the research and finding a way to introduce a group time in a way that was sympathetic to the Montessori work cycle. Smith and Langston (1999:73) describe this as a 'collaborative' approach, in any setting one practitioner can act as a change agent but for a change to truly work all practitioners involved must be supportive. By sharing the knowledge I had gained from my academic research of language and literacy development the other practitioners could also see the benefit to be gained from introducing shared story reading times. Throughout the research all the practitioners involved reflected in the journal giving them opportunity to fully experience the research for themselves, adding their observations of the benefits they noticed (Mukherji and Albon 2010) This helped me portray my goal of improving language and literacy development illustrating Kotter's (1995) acknowledgement of how communicating goals when leading practice gains support from others who will also be instrumental in making it happen.

Findings of action research

The findings from the action research helped lead practice to further support language and literacy development. As is the process of academic research, I analysed the data gathered and findings emerged that drew correlations to previous research (Robert-Holmes 2014). The importance of practitioner strategies in supporting children's language and literacy development were highlighted in the action research project. Drawing from Hindman et al.(2008), if practitioners are not aware of this then opportunities for learning would be lost. When reading stories myself and observing others, the findings showed that we were naturally using such strategies. We introduced new vocabulary and encouraged the children to name and label pictures in books. Having regular exposure to new words and having the chance to use them cements their understanding (Harris et al. 2011). We asked questions at a level to support each child's level of understanding and development enabling us to scaffold their learning. Being attuned to a child's current level of development and adjusting the reading and questions appropriately is advocated in Terrell and Watson (2018) and Kaderavek et al (2014). We modelled and extended language which furthers expressive language skills by increasing the benefits of learning new vocabulary extending the positive effect to literacy skills as found in Massey (2012). Massey (2012) explains how children learn new words through incidental and elaborated exposure and gradually store them in their memory. When children hear new words from listening to conversations or everyday activities and routines this is referred to as incidental exposure. Elaborated exposure is gained by leading practice that incorporates purposefully introducing new words through stories, conversations and activities where meaning is given to the words through adult guidance (Justice et al. 2005). The small story times introduced in this project allowed elaborated exposure to new vocabulary and gave the children a chance to repeat and use the words, through questions posed and conversations led by the practitioners.

Recognising that the skills of the practitioner in using techniques during story reading play such a crucial part in supporting language and literacy skills I led a professional discussion with the practitioners who were not involved in the research to share my knowledge and what our research had found. I also partnered up the practitioners for story times so that less experienced practitioners were able to observe the techniques modelled in practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002).The practitioner's role in supporting speech and language in this way falls in line with Bruner's (1983) socio-interactionist view of how children learn language. Bruner (1983) suggests humans have an inbuilt Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), a natural desire to interact combined with supportive adults in a social context who build children's language learning. Exposing children to a variety of language within a meaningful context and adapting language patterns to the level of the child scaffolds learning (Bruner 1983).

Certain elements emerged from the findings and from many daily reflections. Whilst reading stories in daily practice, I noticed how the layout of the book, the size and style of the print impacted on how likely I was to point out the print to the children. In Justice at al's (2017) research they identified four categories of strategies that support literacy skills, they were print organization including tracking words from top to bottom and left to right; development of meaning of print such as letter knowledge including capital and lower case letters; knowledge of words including word length and

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pointing to one word at a time. The action research showed that these strategies were only rarely seen in the small story time sessions and, although not all strategies can be included at all times, this highlighted a possible missed learning opportunity. It emerged from the action research that our story times did not promote many opportunities for pointing out text, not only due to the presentation of the text but also due to the seating position of the children. When the children sit in front of the adult they were only being shown the pictures and then the adult turned the book to read the text. This demonstrates that group story reading may have limitations in comparison to individual shared story reading in terms of highlighting text. This observation has led to some of the shared story times taking place with a few children gathered round a table so that they have the opportunity to see the text as well as the pictures. I also recognised the importance of undertaking a review of the books on offer to the children in the book corner and shared this observation with the other practitioners. This has led to an increase in the number of books with different sized font to emphasis words such as big, crash, splash and lift the flap books that emphasise speech.

Links to home - supporting parental involvement

The increased interest in books and stories that the children in my action research showed spilled over into their home life. Parents commented on how the children talked about the stories they had shared, were using more vocabulary and were wanting to look at books more at home and bring them to nursery to share. The link to home was clearly enhanced as children also spoke about their home life during the story sessions showing how the opportunities created for talking was enhancing language development. Milburn et al. (2013) found that the strongest effect to language and literacy development stemmed from a combined home and school approach. Similarly Higgins and Katispataki (2015) found encouraging parental involvement in their children's learning is shown to have positive effects on children's development and educational outcomes. These research findings, although crucial to remember, are not new. As Nutbrown and Clough (2006) detailed The Rumbold Report of 1990 highlighted the importance of parental involvement in children's education recognising the value of parents as their child's first educator. This report led to the recognition of the importance of a strong equal partnership between parents and practitioners with regard to children's learning; this is an overarching principle of the current EYFS (DfE 2017:6). Mathers et al. (2014) also reflect this listing family-practitioner partnerships as a key dimension of a high quality setting resulting in better outcomes for children.

The importance of parental involvement and the opportunities that shared book reading provides to enhance language and literacy development made sharing the increased understanding and developments in practice with parents an obvious next step. At home, in many cases, children could have the opportunity to share books one on one with their parent. Indeed Bain et al. (2015), drawing on Wells 1987, state that reading to children is recognised as the most beneficial activity parents can do to develop communication skills. These individual shared book reading opportunities could also provide fantastic opportunities to benefit literacy skills such as highlighting print, phonetic sounds, capital letters and long and short words as found in Justice et al. (2017).

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The end of my action research project coincided with the start of the Covid-19 lockdown meaning the majority of the children would no longer be accessing early years education and would be spending time at home with their parents. This led to me compiling a simple 'Shared story reading tips' document based on my knowledge gained from academic research blended with findings from the action research project. I shared this with parents to help them maximise the benefits to shared story reading at home. This also supported the setting in fulfilling the obligation to promote the children's learning while they were at home (DfE 2020). To make the techniques that would suit each specific child accessible and practical for parents to use I incorporated the techniques into the next steps information shared virtually with parents and presented some on-line story reading sessions demonstrating strategies to highlight literacy development. These sessions were well received by parents and I am hopeful that by leading practice in this way, through sharing knowledge of my own and others research, children's language and literacy development have continued to progress during the unprecedented Covid-19 lockdown situation.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how leading practice involves a sharing of knowledge, vision and understanding amongst early years teams to provide quality provision. It demonstrates the role of research in underpinning leadership of practice, drawing on the example of introducing small group story times to promote children's language and literacy skills. This paper considers how gaining an increased understanding around an area of development, from reviewing others' research as well as conducting action research ourselves, can provide the foundations to enhance practice and build provision in a collaborative way, with both other practitioners and parents, for the children in our care.

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Investigating the use of technology and its impact on child development in the early years:
A case study exploring practitioners' and parents' views

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The main purpose of this research was to explore the perception of parents and practitioners on how technology contributes towards holistic development of children. This small-scale interpretive study set out to identify the participants' insights around the use of technology. It is recognised that children under the age of five should spend no more than an hour of screen time a day (World Health Organization, 2019; UNICEF, 2017). Despite technology becoming a growing phenomenon within England, the Early Years Foundation Stage is intending to remove it from the Early Years Framework and replace it with Natural World from September 2021 (DfE,2020).

This case study research involved questionnaires and semi structured interviews. There were eleven participants overall, four practitioners and seven parents, of which two participants extended their responses via semi structured interviews too. Questionnaires were distributed via a setting, within a town in the East Midlands of England.

The findings indicated that participants tend to allow children to access digital devices freely and see a benefit in supporting their educational development. There were disadvantages noted also, such as the impact on children's behaviour when technology is used for prolonged period.

The main conclusion of this study is that a greater understanding into how children learn to use technology though play is needed, for both practitioners and parents alike.

Literature Review

Technology, rooted in the word 'techne', is referring to 'art 'or 'skill' (Skbrina, 2015). Secondly, technology is defined as anything battery operated (Rossetti, 2020). Furthermore, a range of terms are used to describe children's technological resources that are part of their everyday life, as Palaiologou (2016, p.330) suggests, including: 'technologies', 'digital technologies', 'smart toys', 'screen based', 'digital media', 'Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)' to name just some. With such a rapid and vast evolution of technology, defining this can become imprecise. In a broad sense, technology is described by Bergen, (2008, p.88) as the 'design that meets a need'. However, technologies in contemporary early childhood, is considered the digital technology that is understood to have an impact on childhood (Palaiologou, 2016, p.330). Similarly, Volti (2009, p.6) defines technology as 'a system created by humans that uses knowledge and organization to produce objects and techniques for the attainment of specific goals'. It is therefore suggested that because technology is an integral part of children's everyday

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life, the concentration should be on how to use technology to benefit from it, rather than the terminology used.

Technology within the curriculum

The Statutory Framework for the Early Year's Foundation Stage is a mandatory framework for every EY provider in England (DfE, 2017) and technology is mentioned under the section, 'Understanding the world', with an Early Learning Goal as follows:

'Children recognise that a range of technology is used in places such as homes and schools" together with this sentence. "They select and use technology for a range of purposes.'

(DfE, 2020; DfE, 2017).

Expanding upon this early year's goal, technology is also presented as children being imaginative, using what they have learnt about media and representing it in their own ways 'through design and technology' (DfE, 2017, p.12). However, the research identified how technology for young learners, age range three to fours', does not discuss screen-based technology. With only this as guidance, it is therefore suggested that it leaves the practitioner uncertain on how and when to use technology.

Moreover, it is asserted (NHSGGC, 2020; Royal College of Pediatricians and Child Health, RCPCH, 2018) that young children, under the age of five should spend no more than an hour on screen time a day (WHO), 2019; UNICEF, 2017). Interestingly, the DfE (2020) is to remove the term technology from the EY framework and replace it with Natural World from September 2021. On the pilot materials, technology is not mentioned at all. (DfE,2020).   Goto (2019) argues that it is not the technology itself but how long and how the children are using it that should be a concern. Goto urges the English Government that teaching of technology in Early years should remain part of the framework because technology, used in moderation, can improve children's development, particularly in areas such as creativity and problem solving (Goto,2019; Nursery world, 2019).

Parents/carers view on technology use at home.

Bond (2014) suggests that the greatest fear in terms of technology use for children is that it is changing the nature of childhood. The rapid development of technology has made parents anxious about the control they have over their children's use of it (Clark, 2016, p.148). These fears are amplified by the parent's perceptions that children can become more skilled and more competent than the adults, in using technologies. Prensky (2001) describes children as 'digital natives' who are born in a digital era and completely competent in the use of technology as an important element of childhood (Marsh, 2014, p.47). It could be argued that the rapid development of technology leaves the parents less knowledgeable and in need of learning to integrate technology for their day-to-day use.

Even though parents are concerned about children's use of technology, it is still used to entertain children at homes, such us, television, DVD's, computer games (Postman, 1987,1994; Clark,

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2016, p.148). Overall, Formby (2014) asserts that 73 per cent of parents agree that learning about technology use from an early age it is very important for progressing in school with a vast percentage of children engaging with a touch screen at home, for different activities such as songs, painting, and mainly educational games. It is therefore suggested that technology use may increase at home as times goes on, leaving parents behind further.

Practitioners' views on technology use in settings

Marsh et al., (2015) note that practitioners are intrigued using technology with young children, although they have no access to an appropriate pedagogical framework for understanding children's digital play. Expanding upon this, Edwards and Bird (2017) suggests that very little is known about how children in early years settings learn to use technologies though play. Because early years education is considered play-based and practitioners observe and assess children's play (Edward, 2013; Edwards and Bird, 2017) with a lack of understanding on how children learn to use technology it is suggested that integration and promotion of technology in early childhood is difficult to achieve (Aubrey and Dahl, 2014).

Technology has many benefits for supporting children's learning, such us learning new words, new songs, developing problem solving skills together with allowing creativity and freedom of expression. Practitioners' information and sharing of information is made easy with the help of technology and saves time, through worldwide communication, to mention only a few advantages (Bugby and Cadwell, cited in Sykes and Teszenyi, 2018). However, if the practitioners are 'digital immigrants' (Clark, 2016), it could be argued the use of technology can be taught or adapted to children from a different perspective that may not necessarily help the child to reach their full potential.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach, because views and opinions were needed and adopted a case study approach, which is a in depth study of a particular topic, (Shuttleworth, 2017; Bassey, 1999). It allowed an investigation of the phenomenon in detail. The data for this study were collected using two different methods.

Questionnaires were sent out to a setting and circulated through professional networks and to parents known from two other settings. Twelve questionnaires were sent out of which eleven participants responded. It was necessary that parents had children under 5 years old at the time of completion.

Semi – structured interviews were conducted with the purpose of ensuring a 'greater quantification' (MacNaughton et al., 2001, p.151) of reliability. Two participants agreed to an indepth discussion, a professional and a parent were interviewed over the phone, due to the circumstances, for approximately an hour each. The semi- structured interviews were constructed with a balance of closed and open questions to strengthen the qualitative approach and to gain 'clear and accurate data' (Cottrell, 2014, p.152).

Ethics - For any research ethical considerations must be underpinned and that was done prior to the start of the research, such as relevant ethical permission letters sent for sign off from tutor's

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approval as per university ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association, BEERA, 2018; Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researcher, EECERA, 2015) and this ethical process was adhered to throughout the research. Ethical consideration occurred throughout the whole research process, for example keeping the anonymity of the participants with consents letters, together with the right of participants to withdraw at any time from the research and their confidentiality kept (Robson,1993, 2016; Data Protection Act,2018). It was important that research was done 'with' children (Bolshaw and Josephidou, 2019), and not to children and this remained central to the process.

FINDINGS

As thematical analysis was undertaken on the qualitative elements of data, four different themes emerged from summarising the raw data, these were:

1) Communication

2) Children's behaviour

3) Time spent on devices

4) Benefits of using technology for young learners.

Findings from practitioners' and parent's questionnaires

Participant's responses (n=11) showed that over 90 % of the children have access to technology. Over 80 % of the children are using technology daily. It was also found that 29% of children spend half an hour on a device each day. Finally, it was revealed that just over 14% of children spend two hours or more on devices.

Findings from practitioners' and parents' interviews

It was found from the interviews that both professionals and parents are using technology daily. Similarly, children are free to use it when they initiate it. Participant 1 recognised the benefits of such, and stated that children 'learn to communicate and interact, learn new words, by using technology', 'engaging with family and friends that are far away',

Furthermore, the findings from the interviews suggest more benefits into using technology by children. Participant 1 expanded on this by declaring that children are using technology' to calm the child down', and to help 'learning new skills'.

Participant 2 on the other hand saw disadvantages of using technology and stated that child behaviour can be impacted upon by 'losing interest in other activities when technology is around, 'crying when devices are turned off'. However, children's behaviour is noted to also be positively affected, for example, participant 1 said that the child 'hasn't lost interest in other activities', 'technology is still seen as a privilege, 'likes outside also '.

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Discussion

The current study found that over 80 % of children are using technology in settings and at homes daily. Televisions and tablets are in favour at home with over 70% of children accessing them, and 100% of setting participants using smart screens, which confirms Donohue's (2015) view that children notice the technology tools, such as televisions, tablets, smart screens, at a very early age; with their curiosity being aroused often by parents and practitioners or other significant adults in their lives (DfE, 2017). Although the majority favour the use of televisions at home and smart screens in settings, as Livingstone et al., (2015) point out, this could be because what is offered to them by adults in terms of technology is not necessarily their choice. It is therefore suggested that some children are using technology in a way that is influenced heavily by adult usage.

These results have found that about half of the parents are letting children use technology for an average hour a day and the other half for around two hours a day. Meanwhile, 50% of professionals are not monitoring the length of time children use the smart screen for, giving children the freedom to use technology for as long as the screen is on throughout the day, and in between different activities, such as lunch time, as and when children desire.

The responses suggest that professionals in this study are unsure how to measure or monitor technology use and as such children may be exceeding the recommendation that children under five should spend no more than an hour a day on digital technologies (WHO, 2019).

The findings suggest that majority of practitioners are giving the children freedom when using technology, although it is to be removed from the framework (DfE, 2020). It could therefore be argued that practitioners and children will probably still use technology as they are already used to it. However, Goto (2019) recommends retaining the use of technology within EYFS, but at the same time focusing on the purpose and duration of its use by children. It is argued that the use of technology should be purposeful. Livingstone (2019) and Reeves et al., (2019) argue that concerns about the use of digital technology in early years should focus on the content of screen time rather than the duration. It is therefore suggested that practitioners and parents should consider using technology for educational purpose (Cox,1993; Twining, 2020, p.1).

A significant finding from this study was that it was felt by 71 % of respondents, that children can easily disengage from technology, especially when someone communicates with them. 86% of parents stated that when explaining to the children the reason of ending the time on devices (such as dinner time, pause it for next time, or night-time), children disengage more easily. The results show similarities, (75%) within the setting, with reference to disengaging easily by communicating to the children. Therefore, these small-scale results, may disagree with those of Office of Communication (Ofcom, 2019) noting that around 19 % of parents are struggling to control their children's screen time. However, Ofcom (2019) are analysing a wider age range rather than concentrating solely on nursery aged children, as this study did.

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Parents and practitioners' views on child behaviour

The findings do not align with WHO (2019) and UNICEF (2020) who establish that time spent for under-fives using technology should be less than an hour a day (NHSGGC, 2020; RCPCH, 2018) and even though parents agree with this, some find it difficult to keep within these time frames due to different circumstances, such as work or children not responding well to device being taken away.

While Volti (2009, p.6) defines technology as 'a system created by humans that uses knowledge and organization to produce objects and techniques for the attainment of specific goals', with children developing an attachment to technology tools (Richter, Robb & Smith,2011, cited in Ihmeideh & Alkhawaldeh, 2017, p.140), it could, therefore be argued that children developing an attachment to technology is the reason for changes in their behavior. However, when explaining to the child, the reason for ending the use of technology this strengthens the positive behavior that children show.

It was reported by some participants in this study that in some settings the whiteboard is on during most of the nursery day so children can choose to play on it whenever they wish to, and this is often a very popular activity. Corsaro (2017) suggests that children have less time to be children because of their exposure to technology from early days, and the constant use of technology, it is suggested, can impact on holistic development. Findings from the parents suggest that technology interferes with the child development, with parents reporting issues such as speech delay and lack of outside play.

Parents and Practitioners views on the benefits of the use of technology

Edwards and Bird (2015) found that technology in early years should be used in a play-based way and this study shows that over 75% of professionals and 85% of parents agree with this concept and are giving the children this opportunity of initiating the use of digital technology. It is noted however, that existing literature lacks a clear description of how children learn to use digital technologies though play and further observations are needed so practitioners can implement the use of technology more effectively (Edwards and Bird, 2015, p.170).

The results of this small-scale research further support the idea of using the technology for educational purposes, with 100% of practitioners confirming that it is used within their settings for learning new words, rhyme time songs, problem solving games, turn taking games. This contradicts the views of Corsaro (2017, p.38) who strongly believes that exposure to technology by young children can affect their development, in terms of speech delay, physical, emotional, and social development.

The outcome of this small-scale study corresponds with the digital world that children, parents, and professionals inhabit, in the sense that technology is an integral part of settings and homes alike, with an increase being seen in daily usage. This aligns with the view of Atherton (2018), who identifies children as being 'digital natives.' However, the outcomes of this research are in

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contrast with the guidance issued by both the DfE (2020) pilot and WHO (2019) which both focus on a reduction in the use of technology in EY.

Summary

The evidence suggests that technology is on the rise in settings and homes with over 75% of participants considering the technology use as a valuable tool with several benefits, including improvements of communication. Conversely, concerns about the effects of technology use have been expressed, such as changes in child behaviour.

The main findings from this research were that settings and homes provide nursery age children with daily use of technology such as televisions, smart screen TV 's and other devices like tablets, for educational and entertainment purposes. On average 70% of participants are giving the children the opportunity of an hour and over a day of use whenever they request it. Surprisingly, almost all participants were reluctant to use technology with young children but still offering it daily. It could be argued that further guidance and strategies would be beneficial for the participants knowledge, for example how and when to use it and how to do so effectively.

The data findings confirm that the use of technology is increasing in educational settings and at home. It is also evident that generally participants believe technology benefits children's holistic development, however at the same time there is recognition that there can also be negative effects, for example changes in children's behaviour (Formby,2016; Kidron, 2019).

From these findings the study can conclude that technology is an important element of childhood (Marsh, 2014, p.47). It is an important tool which is part of children everyday life, with most children seeing the use of technology as a must (Clark, 2016). Furthermore, the evidence that emerged from this small-scale study suggests that how and when to use technology is still not clearly understood by the participants. However, most practitioners and parents recognise that benefits are to be found. It is therefore suggested that with some extra support from the Government, such as promoting the benefits of using technology this could have a positive impact on children's holistic development. This further research should be supported with direct observation on children to document the exact time spend, behavior towards the use of technology to compare the changes the new framework may have. Even though this process requires more time, it validates the results in more depth (O'Connor and Fotakopoulou, 2016, p.246).

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An Investigation into the use of online learning journals to enhance the keyperson role and potential barriers to the use of it.

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Research and Knowledge Exchange
Student Papers: June 2021 This small-scale research project
was undertaken at a small-sized village preschool setting. After working within the early
years sector for many years, I held a belief that the use of an online learning journal
would be of great benefit within the setting, for all its service users and the staff working
within the preschool. From this standpoint, I decided to title my project

'An investigation into the use of online learning journals to enhance the key person role and potential barriers to the use of it'.

From the introductory literature research undertaken, a common theme began to unfold. It seemed that the use of online learning journals had increased significantly and could now be recognised as good practice (Callanan, et al., 2017). Several sources considered the benefits that they hold. Primarily they can be seen as a time saving methods for practitioners, who already face pressures producing a significant amount of paperwork. Additionally, the method appears powerful, when attempting to facilitate engagement with parents (Pinnington, 2020). It is this level of partnership working with parents, that Key persons like myself strive for. However, there can be disparity over what a key person would like to achieve and what is possible due to a lack of resources within the setting (Elfer and Page 2015). Key persons may feel anxious regarding the enormity of the role. Page & Elfer (2013) give an example of this in terms of concerns over children's physical safety when all responsibility rests on one person's shoulders. The key person could have a varied group of children that they are the named person for, considering that the current ratios are potentially 1:8 (Department for Education, 2017) this also leaves key persons to have to be effective time managers, in order to give each child the care and support needed for them to thrive.

By using digital tools, it is possible to observe children's play and share this directly with families and importantly the child (Cameron & Moss, 2020). Current research points towards quality of observations that the key person makes can be improved by using an online learning journal (Callanan, et al., 2017). It is suggested that the ability to use technology to record/video the child at play 'offered greater detail', as the practitioner can re-watch and tease out more information, importantly for children who may not yet be verbal communicators this can be especially beneficial (Cameron & Moss, 2020). Furthermore, due to the tracking capabilities of these tools, it also supports the early identification of children that may not making sufficient progress (Callanan, et al., 2017).

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However, for the setting involved in this study, there were also barriers, such as concerns surrounding staff's own digital skills and usability of the online learning journal. Practitioners use of digital technology such as iPads are based on previous experience and understanding coupled with feelings of competency. Hoffmann, et al. (2014), suggest that there is a generational divide surrounding the use of technology. Therefore, some adult users exposure stems from schooling experience and users can have tendencies to be wary of technology that they lack training or knowledge of. Nevertheless, settings and practitioners need to diversify to keep up with the everchanging technology within the education system, and it is possible with practice to overcome technological challenges (Adams & Pente, 2011).

With key persons needing to juggle daily tasks and the expectation to form a strong emotional bond with the children in their care, it could be surmised that any additional gains to reduce the time away from the children should have a positive impact (Elfer, et al., 2018). Furthermore, it could be suggested that technology has the potential of increasing parental participation. Parents are 'experts on their children' (Elfer, et al., 2018), so child development outcomes can be benefitted from increased partnership working between parent and key person. Ontologically my version of what is real would include the assumption that I am correct, Crotty (1998) suggests that to discover reality we must detach ourselves from what we think we know, by involving others to uncover their perceptions will provide validity to my findings.

My epistemological standpoint is one of constructivism, the families, children and colleagues were all involved at the very core of my research, I collected qualitative and quantitative data to support my theory (Haralambos, et al., 2013). This research used a variety of methods, including asking for and listening to children's thoughts, with questionnaires for parents and practitioners. RobertHolmes (2014) suggests that this qualitative approach allows the participants to voice opinions, this it could be suggested is important to this research as it required multiple participants to discover if an online learning journal would be right for the children, families and key persons alike. The children's priorities were expected to vary from that of an adult. The EECERA (Bertram, et al., 2015) reminds us that we must give regard and respect the rights of all participants involved in the research project, children should be able to participate in decisions that may affect them. Permission was sought from all parties taking part so that they could make an informed decision.

The findings from the questionnaires highlighted staff's thoughts on what they felt would be beneficial within the setting. All staff suggested that extra time spent with the children rather than focusing on paperwork would be of benefit, this is something that the feedback from the children also indicated. All the children talked of play and care as something that the adults in the setting do. Children replied with comments such as "they play with me" when asked 'what is a key person?'. Whilst some children seemed unsure of how to answer my questions, instead, asking me to join in with their play "would you like some dinner", (whilst offering me some lettuce and bread roll). This implied that what is important to the children is adults to engage in their play. One staff member had stated that low levels of children in the setting due to the Covid -19 pandemic had enabled them to spend more "quality time" with the children, this finding is supported by my literature review of what practitioners would like to achieve with their day and

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what is possible due to time constraints and resources (Elfer & Page, 2015). Based on the findings from my literature review it appears technology has the benefit of freeing up practitioner time (Pinnington, 2020). Additionally, digital journals can support in the overall assessment process, and help streamline data analysis (Callanan, et al., 2017). Literature also suggests that it improves the quality of the observation, enabling practitioners to put immediate thoughts down, linking these with an observation (Callanan, et al., 2017). This would therefore be a truer account of the child's capabilities rather than an account written up after the fact, for example at the end of a busy day.

Some points were raised regarding barriers to using an online learning journal, seemingly the staff's own digital skills were the greatest concern. With one staff member was very honest and wrote 'As not very computer literate would need a lot of training' [sic], and another writing that 'the time it takes to train us to use it' they considered to be a barrier. It could be argued that this is an inevitable change, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational establishments to become digitally competent, with the Department for Education (2020) good practice guide to remote education stressing the importance of staff training in the use of technology.

The online journal that was trailed for this research was a live system, meaning that if a key person uploaded information to a child's learning journey it was immediately available for the parents to see. Verbal feedback from 1 of the 2 families that took part six weeks into the trial showed a desire for more updates than what was currently being uploaded, in some respects validating the concerns raised by staff that it could add additional pressure to keep paperwork up to date. However, this was not the findings from the literature review, which points towards it freeing up key person time by reducing the amount of paperwork correlation (Callanan, et al., 2017). From the parental feedback suggestion was made that some parents would like to use an online journal to enable them to 'do observations at home' and, 'upload photos of (their) child'. Implying that the observation system can be a two-way process, potentially alleviating some pressure from staff to produce all evidence. One parent however, opposed the idea of a real-time system, as they looked forward to their child informing them of what they had done during the day, and did not want to know via an app. It is worth noting that parents do have a choice as to when they look at information posted by the key person, they receive an email notification and can choose when to log on to look. Although the parent's concerns over it affecting communication with their child is a valid perspective, one parent who had some previous experience of a digital log suggested it 'was nice to read comments and see photos of my child – would check every few weeks'. Indicating that this was not an insurmountable problem.

Online journals and the incorporated assessment tools can also be used to identify development opportunities within settings daily provision (Callanan, et al., 2017), this should be considered something that all settings should do to continually improve the children's learning and development experience (Department for Education, 2017). With the literature pointing towards using technology to support in the home learning environment (Department for Education, 2020), it was interesting that a large proportion of parents who responded to my questionnaire considered that communication could be improved by using technology in some way. Only 19%

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of respondents had no suggestions of steps the setting could take to improve the way they created two-way communication.

One valuable viewpoint raised by parents was that it is not always possible to collect their child from the setting in person, therefore another means of communicating would be beneficial. This highlights the argument that many families are working and may not bring or collect their child from the setting, practitioners may need to consider that it is an extended family member that they have the most contact with (Ward, 2013). The staff at the setting also considered that an online learning journal could increase two-way communication with families and benefit them in passing on general information as well as individual information sharing, however, concerns were once again raised that it could increase pressure to keep up to date with paperwork. Findings from the literature review also supported the idea that home to school communication can be benefit from the two-way process that comes with the use of an online learning journal (Pinnington, 2020). Using an online journal makes it possible to share with families and the children themselves such things as videos (Cameron & Moss, 2020). Giving the sense that children can have ownership of their play in this way, they can share with their parents what they have done, and put a narrative to it, in their own home.

In conclusion, although results seem to indicate that an online learning journal would free up practitioner time, and increase two-way communication with families, it is hard to ignore that staff at the setting are reluctant participants in this digital age. However, the call from the Department for Education (2020) for remote learning over the Covid-19 pandemic, leaves a poignant thought that this is the future of education, and the question is how long it will be before settings are judged on the use of technology that they use for record-keeping and conversing with families. Ofsted published its innovation and regulation plan in March 2017 part of which highlights how regulation may need to adjust to this technologically changing landscape that is education (Ofsted, 2017). The use of using an online learning journal may for some be difficult at first, like all changes it is a case of practice. This skill is not insurmountable, but a skill that even the digitally unaccustomed can triumph (Adams & Pente, 2011).

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Supporting Early Childhood Education for Sustainability using themes in children's picture

books about the environment

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<u>Abstract</u>

Picture books are used widely throughout early years settings in supporting the development of literacy skills. This research considers how themes and messages in picture books about the environment might be used to support early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS). A wide range of literature has been reviewed for the purpose of the research. Existing research suggests that although there is no universally recognised way in which ECEfS should be implemented, three interlinked components of education *in, about* and *for* the environment are integral to programmes. The analysis examines five children's picture books about the environment recommended for three to eight-year-olds, identifying a number of themes within the narratives. The findings of the research suggest that picture books can support the development of basic environmental literacy and also ecoliteracy, where agency and accountability are addressed within the narrative. The ability of picture books to truly engage a young reader and offer a transformative experience relies on the support and encouragement of reflective practitioners.

Introduction

The way in which children will be disproportionately affected by '. . . runaway climate change and the massive loss of biodiversity' is discussed by Weldemariam and Wals (2020:13), who highlight the crucial role of early childhood education in counteracting the environmental destruction caused by the human race. Chapter 25 of the 1992 Earth Summit's Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992) states that the long-term success of sustainable development is dependent on the involvement of children and youth, whose perspectives must be considered. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005-2014 (UNESCO 2005) was aimed at the creation of a more sustainable future through the integration of the associated values and practices into all areas of education. The DESD recognised the role of education as one of the many paths towards achieving sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the UN Education Agenda 2030 (UNESCO 2019) describes education as 'a human right and a force for sustainable development and peace'.

The aim of this study is to examine the key components of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) and where children's environmental literature, specifically young children's picture books fit within such programmes.

Review of Literature

Davis (2009:239) summarises that research from the fields of neuroscience, economics and health, has suggested that investments in early childhood have the potential to benefit not only the individual but also wider society. More specifically, Green (2015:207) states that the early years are a key period during which children construct the foundations of their environmental identity. In a document entitled 'Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care', the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006:18) stated that 'wider societal interests' must be reflected in early childhood programmes which promote 'democratic participation' and 'respect for our shared environment'.

Engdahl (2015) discusses the findings of research carried out for The World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) between 2009 and 2014. The research, involving over 44,330 children and 13,225 teachers across 28 countries, was aimed at increasing awareness of education for sustainable development (ESD) within the early childhood community (Engdahl 2015: 347). Participation and involvement are listed by Engdahl (2015: 349) as fundamental aspects of ESD, through which children are empowered to develop agency, adding that the 'social and cultural transformations' needed in achieving sustainable development will require that pedagogies and educational programmes are reconsidered. Over a decade ago, Davis (2009: 229)

recognised Scandinavian countries, particularly Norway, as being world leaders in relation to ECEfS, with the subject being a formal part of the Norwegian national curriculum. Recently revised curricula in Norway, Sweden and Japan have set new international benchmarks for ECEfS, however a lack of clarity still exists within the field. According to Elliott et al (2020: 64), reported challenges include the need for 'pre-service and in-service practitioner and professional education in ECEfS, confusion around the terminologies and conceptual understandings of sustainability'.

In an article which explores common understandings of ESD, Hedelfalk, Almqvist and Ostman (2015:979) discuss the differences between education *about, in* and *for* the environment. Education *about* the environment is concerned with natural systems such as the water cycle and plant growth; education *in* the environment occurs through outdoor experiences; education *for* the environment requires active participation and critical thinking. Education *for* the environment is described by Davis (2009:230) as transformative, in which children are viewed as competent, able to problem-solve and take action for the environment. Gaard (2008:20) discusses an ecopedagogy in which theory and practice are combined to provide the knowledge and experiential learning necessary for tackling the ecojustice problem. Ecopedagogy consists of three aspects: the development of basic environmental literacy; cultural ecoliteracy which requires the critique of unsustainable practices alongside the study of sustainable cultures; lastly a 'critique of the anti-ecological effects of industrial capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and ruling-class culture' (Gaard 2008:15). When considering these three aspects of ecopedagogy, aspect one can be supported by the use of children's environmental literature – education *about* the environment. Aspects two and three of this ecopedagogy reflect the critical thinking required during education *for* the environment.

Luff (2018:448) states that outdoor experiences in nature can provide the sensory experiences through which children can become active participants, developing creative and critical thinking skills. Gaard (2008:20) adds that these experiences within nature foster the attachment needed for a deeper learning to take place and for behaviours to change. Environmental literature 'appeals to both the emotions and the intellect', having the ability to leave a lasting

impression on a child (Gaard 2008:20). According to Op de Beeck (2018:80), when combined with experiential learning, children's environmental literature has the potential to 'communicate complex ecocritical values' to young children. When books are explored from a standpoint of environmental justice, we adopt a new perspective, viewing the world through a critical lens whilst carrying out our daily activities.

Muthukrishnan (2019:19) summarises ecoliteracy as a sustainable mindset, based on an understanding of ecology and the finite nature of natural resources available to humans. According to Muthukrishnan (2019:19), the development of ecoliteracy is critical in ensuring the survival of both the planet and the human race and should therefore be supported from a young age. The role of literature in the development and education of children is discussed by Ramos and Ramos (2015) who define the concept of ecoliteracy as addressing the complexity of the world and the relationship between humans and the environment. According to Ramos and Ramos (2015:105), ecoliteracy can be developed through agency and accountability present within a narrative. Echterling (2016:287) highlights the nature of picture books as often being 'explicitly pedagogical', with the intention of educating children about a particular topic, promoting both beliefs and behaviours. In an examination of children's environmental literature, Echterling (2016) highlights the oversimplification of environmental problems within some texts which suggest that such problems can be managed by individual actions and lifestyle changes alone. There is a need for such picture books which address the relationship between 'environmental degradation and systemic social problems', in which children are reflected as political subjects and activists (Echterling 2016:288). Similarly, Gaard (2008:21) calls for children's environmental literature that demands 'personal and socio-political changes' through the creation of 'intergenerational, inter-cultural and inter-species communities'. Gaard (2008: 15) acknowledges the power of narratives to promote connection and community and reflect the true nature of interdependence between humans and the natural world.

The concept of agency is explored by Caiman and Lundegard (2014) as something which is achieved and constructed through experience and interactions with others. Boyd (2019: 993) highlights the importance of the ethos

of a setting in relation to the development of children's agency. Practitioners must take time to listen to the voices of children and reflect upon their own practice, whilst also allowing children time to reflect and develop their critical thinking skills. Through the transformative nature of education *for* the environment, children are able to identify issues and suggest possible solutions, therefore building the foundations of political activism (Boyd 2019:993). Weldemariam and Wals (2020:13) note the concept of 'young children as agents of change for sustainability' as being central to current discussions in the field of ECEfS. Whilst acknowledging the importance of empowering children and supporting agency, Weldemariam and Wals (2020:16) suggest current anthropocentric approaches within ECEfS overlook the agency of nonhuman beings, implying they are passive and 'awaiting children's action'. It is the belief of Weldemariam and Wals (2020:17) that a post-anthropocentric perspective which recognises the agency of non-human species and rejects the notion of species hierarchy, can support children to recognise their place in an interconnected and complex natural world. Weldemariam and Wals (2020:21) emphasise the crucial role of the practitioner in a transformative pedagogy, in which children become entangled with their natural surroundings and are prepared to challenge the widespread 'anthropocentric worldview'. This recent research would suggest that practitioners must think of children as agents of change not separate from nature, but as part of nature, acting alongside and entangled with non-human species.

The concept of books as sliding glass doors through which readers are empowered to take action is discussed by Johnson, Koss and Martinez (2018). Literature has the power to serve as a mirror, in which we see some aspect of ourselves reflected; a window in which we are exposed to a new experience or perspective, often challenging our own perspective; or a sliding glass door, in which the reader is able to step into another world, experiencing empowerment and transformation (Johnson, Koss and Martinez 2018:572). The importance of characters within literature is also emphasized by Johnson, Koss and Martinez (2018:572), who state that a character has the power to create personal and emotional connections between the reader and the narrative, thus enabling transformation. When presented with books which provide a sliding glass door experience, young readers can view the world through a critical eye and with

the encouragement of practitioners, are able to reflect and possibly experience transformation.

Despite the developments around ECEfS that have taken place in the past decade, research would suggest that many challenges still exist regarding the implementation of appropriate pedagogies and programmes. Literature which addresses the complex relationship between humans and the natural world and addresses both agency and accountability, most likely supports the development of ecoliteracy. The ability of books to enable transformation through sliding glass door experiences may require the support and guidance of a practitioner. Through reflecting on themes within children's environmental literature, a practitioner should consider the message a narrative gives to a child and whether the book empowers the child and inspires activism, or whether environmental issues are even presented as problematic.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of environmental themes within children's picture books and is based on the personal interests of the researcher. The study is subjective in nature and is therefore qualitative. The data gathered in the study is based on the interpretation of the researcher alone and the subjectivity of the researcher will be used to interpret data gathered. The small-scale study will use purposive, non-probability sampling. The sample of five picture books used for the study has been obtained from the BookTrust website; the BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. The sample has been taken from a recommended reading list of sixteen books about the environment for younger children. The books have been selected based on the suggested interest level of three to eight years, which is most appropriate for the study. The study will analyse the text and illustrations within five picture books to identify themes and messages, therefore content analysis has been selected as the most appropriate method of data analysis.

For this research, Coventry University ethical guidelines have been adhered to and an ethical consent form has been approved by a university supervisor. In addition, no research was undertaken until ethical approval had been granted. As the research was carried out using secondary sources and therefore did not involve any other participants other than the researcher, there were few ethical considerations.

Research Findings

The following environmental themes have been identified within the sample of five books: deforestation, habitat loss, plastic pollution and species loss. Habitat loss will be discussed alongside other environmental themes, where relevant. Additional themes have also been identified with regard to how agency is represented in relation to the environmental issues addressed within the narrative. These are: individual agency, collective agency and political activism. The findings are summarised in the table below.

Text	Description	Themes
Clem and Crab, authorillustrator F. Lumbers	Clem finds a friend in a crab whilst collecting plastic from the beach for use in a school project, before inspiring her classmates to take action.	Plastic pollution, individual agency, collective agency
Greta and the Giants, author Z. Tucker, illustrator Z. Persico	When Greta is approached by a number of homeless animals, she takes a stand to stop the greedy behaviour of the Giants and finds herself joined by a crowd of like-minded people.	Deforestation, habitat loss, individual agency, collective agency, political activism

The Last Wolf, authorillustrator M. Grey	Little Red heads to the forest to catch a wolf, only to find that the Last Wolf is living in a treecave, along with the Last Bear and the Last Lynx.	Deforestation, habitat loss, species loss, individual agency, collective agency,
There's a Rang-Tan in My Bedroom, author J. Sellick, illustrator F. Preston-Gannon	A young girl is inspired to take action when she learns why an orangutan has taken refuge in her bedroom.	Deforestation, habitat loss, individual agency, collective agency, political activism
Somebody Swallowed Stanley, author S. Roberts, illustrator H. Peck	Stanley the plastic bag is swallowed by several creatures before being found by a boy who turns him into a kite.	Plastic pollution, individual agency

Analysis

The theme of deforestation can be clearly identified within three of the books. In 'Greta and the Giants' (Tucker 2019) the Giants have chopped down so many trees, that hardly any forest remains and the responsibility of the Giants in causing the loss of habitat is explicit. The Giants represent the anthropocentric nature of western culture and its disregard for the environment. The illustrations show a world of pollution, with grey smoke billowing from chimneys. The narrative tells a tale of unsustainable development and urbanisation, the Giants seemingly oblivious of the destruction they have caused. Similarly, the deforestation within 'There's a Rang-Tan in My Bedroom' (Sellick 2019) is identified by Rang-tan as being caused by humans (Sellick 2019: 8). In 'The Last Wolf' (Grey 2019), the deforestation has also caused a loss of habitat, leaving only a single wolf, lynx and a bear, however the responsible party is not clearly identified.

In 'Greta and the Giants' (Tucker 2019), Greta takes a lone stand before being joined by more people and animals, all holding placards therefore demonstrating collective agency and political activism. This 'intergenerational, inter-cultural, and inter-species' community within a narrative of resistance reflects that described by Gaard (2008:21), who states that such narratives are essential for environmental justice. In addition, Gaard (2008:19) suggests the agency of animal species within a narrative is important in 'restoring the subjectivity of nature'. 'Greta and the Giants' highlights the collective agency and political activism necessary in the pursuit of sustainable development, however the narrative over-simplifies the complex issues of 'environmental

degradation and systemic social problems', as described by Echterling (2016: 283). This over-simplification of the restoration of balance leaves an opportunity for the practitioner to question young readers' thoughts on whether such issues are so easily resolved. The character within 'There's a Rang-tan in My Bedroom' (Sellick 2019) also shows agency and political activism, when she states that she will fight to save the forest (Sellick 2019:15). The illustrations picture the girl posting a campaign letter and sharing the plight of Rang-tan with her classmates, who in turn join her campaign. The illustrations show the children holding placards which again suggests political activism and a demand for environmental justice. The final illustration shows the young girl and Rangtan embracing one another, about to face a future which is yet to be written. This suggests that the girl is at one with and not separate from the orangutan, as emphasised by Weldemariam and Wals (2020). In 'The Last Wolf' (Grey 2019), Little Red is helped to plant trees by her mother, which again represents the intergenerational action described by Gaard (2008:21). This goes some way to developing the ecoliteracy discussed by Ramos and Ramos (2015), as Little Red and her mother demonstrate agency when they plant three trees in an effort to restore balance. The narrative does not clearly identify humans as responsible for the deforestation that has resulted in the loss of habitat. In contrast, the clear responsibility of humans in causing the problem and the collective agency within both 'Greta and the Giants' and 'There's a Rang-tan in My Bedroom' most likely support the development of ecoliteracy, as described by Ramos and Ramos (2015).

Two of the books within the sample address the issue of plastic pollution within the seas and oceans. The narrative and illustrations within 'Somebody Swallowed Stanley' (Roberts 2019) highlight the harm that a plastic bag can cause to sea creatures, however there is no acknowledgement of humans as being responsible for plastic pollution. The final illustrations show the boy using Stanley to construct a kite, therefore demonstrating how plastics can be reused through individual agency. The illustrations fail to reflect the sheer problem of plastic pollution within the oceans and the narrative implies that Stanley is the only plastic bag in need of removal. 'Somebody Swallowed Stanley' is an example of how a huge environmental problem is represented very simply, in isolation from the larger context, as highlighted by Echterling (2016:289). In

contrast, the illustrations within 'Clem and Crab' (Lumbers 2020) picture a beach littered with all manner of plastics that 'other people had left behind' (Lumbers 2020:2). This brief acknowledgement of humans as being responsible for the pollution is an introduction to the ecoliteracy described by Ramos and Ramos (2015). At the beginning of the narrative, 'Clem', through individual agency, collects the plastics for recycling and use in a school project. She then visits an aquarium where she learns about 'the huge problem of plastics in the ocean, and what we can all do to help' (Lumbers 2020:14). The book concludes with Clem returning to the beach to find her classmates engaged in a beach clean. The intergenerational, collective agency needed in removing plastics from a beach is demonstrated here, however political activism is not a feature of the narrative. The narrative also fails to address the wider context of plastic overuse and unsustainable consumer habits.

One book has been identified as most likely to provide a mirror through which a reader is able to identify with some familiar aspect. 'Clem and Crab' (Lumbers 2020) illustrates the multi-cultural nature of a modern, western society therefore reflecting the cultural familiarity described by Johnson, Koss and Martinez (2017:571). Two books are most likely to provide the reader with a window to a world 'removed from their own' (Johnson, Koss and Martinez 2017:572). 'The Last Wolf' (Grey 2019) and 'Somebody Swallowed Stanley' (Roberts 2019) feature creatures and a plastic bag with anthropomorphic characteristics with the addition of human characters. For this reason, these books may be more likely to challenge the thinking of the reader through the offering of a connection, as discussed by Johnson, Koss and Martinez (2017:572).

Two books which are most likely to provide the reader with a transformative, sliding glass door experience (Johnson, Koss and Martinez 2017:572) are 'Great and the Giants' (Tucker 2019) and 'There's a Rang-Tan in My Bedroom' (Sellick 2019). Greta is changed when she meets the animals who request her help and after learning of Rang-tan's plight, the young girl is inspired to take action. Both characters adopt a position of agency in the name of environmental justice, possibly inspiring the reader in a similar way. In addition, 'Greta and the Giants' pictures an 'intergenerational, inter-cultural and inter-species' community engaged in political activism, which most likely reflects the true

nature of a child's place within nature, as discussed by Weldemariam and Wals (2020).

The themes of deforestation, habitat loss, plastic pollution and species loss have been identified within the sample of five books. Agency has been identified in all five books, with the books demonstrating a combination of individual agency, collective agency and political activism. Some of the books are likely support the development of ecoliteracy as discussed by Ramos and Ramos (2015) through agency and accountability present within the narratives. Two books have been identified as most likely to offer a sliding glass door through which a young reader can venture, possibly experiencing transformation. All of the books are most likely useful in supporting ECEfS, however, the books which address both agency and accountability whilst demonstrating the political activism necessary in demanding environmental justice, have the potential to captivate a young reader, providing a transformative experience.

Conclusion

There is much work to be done on a global level in tackling the deep-rooted inequalities which prevent sustainable development. The challenge is a complex one which will require the collaboration of both governments and agencies across the globe. Education is recognised by the UN Education Agenda 2030 (UNESCO 2019) and also by members of the academic community as a being a driver for the change so urgently needed if sustainable development is to be achieved. As the foundation for lifelong learning, early childhood education must be the starting point for ESD. Recent research highlights the many challenges in implementing ECEfS programmes, however experiential learning is regarded as central to providing meaningful experiences through which both children and practitioners can participate in the coconstruction of knowledge. Education *in* the environment should be supported by education *about* the environment, in which children's knowledge and understanding of environmental issues can develop and the foundations of ecoliteracy are laid. There is undoubtedly a place for picture books which develop basic environmental literacy through providing factual information and addressing specific environmental issues. There is, however, a need for practitioners to consider whether a book is thought-provoking and likely to serve as a mirror, window or a sliding glass door. Does the book suggest that an environmental issue will be solved by individual actions alone or is there a need for collective action and political activism? Books which act as sliding glass doors may transport a reader into another world in which they are entangled with nature and are inspired to become agents of change. Such books should reflect children as political subjects. It might be helpful for educators to organise books along a spectrum, beginning with books which support the development of basic environmental literacy, through to books which support the development of ecoliteracy, through the presence of agency and accountability within the narrative. When guided by a reflective practitioner, books which

challenge thinking and promote political activism could empower and inspire slightly older readers to seek environmental justice. Through this transformative experience of education *for* the environment, children are encouraged to think critically, problem-solve, and become agents of change.

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Exploring how outdoor experiences and in particular a beach and rockpool activity can support young children's holistic development and learning.

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This piece of work evaluates the benefits and challenges of exploring natural environments with young children. The author planned a beach and rockpool visit for a group of 20, Foundation Phase children. Initially the author set the scene for the children by reading Donaldson's (2005) Sharing a Shell story book in the classroom. This was also an opportunity to discuss with children the importance of protecting habitats for wildlife with support from Natural Resources Wales (2021a; 2021b) and RNLI (2021) documents. The activity was situated at a local beach in which children would be exploring rockpools and the marine life that inhabit coastal areas. The intention of the activity was to provide children with a structured, stimulating outdoor learning experience encompassed by first-hand experiences with nature and wildlife and to encourage children's physical and cognitive development, fine and gross motor skills, and an awareness of environmental sustainability. During the activity children would be guided to find and look at creatures in the rockpools, use the help of an ID guide to identify what they discovered, be supported to treat the creatures found with care and empathy, and replace all creatures back carefully in the rockpool having observed them. Children would use nets and buckets and other tools to explore the site. The following discussion places experiences such as exploring the beach and rockpool in the context of early years literature and theory.

According to Jacobi-Vessels (2013), research results indicate that the use of outdoor environments provide children with opportunities for effective holistic learning. Furthermore, Acar (2014) agrees noting that environments surrounding children are influential to the progression of cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. This coincides with David and Hamilton (2016) who note that the use of the outdoors as a learning environment is essential to holistic development. Similarly, Holland (2020) states that using the beach as a learning environment provides opportunities for skill development and holistic learning. Therefore, utilising the beach as the outdoor environment for this activity could support children's holistic development and skill progression. Moreover, Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) suggest a further benefit of using the outdoor environment is that children can satisfy their need for challenge and excitement.

Additionally, Wilson, (cited in Ernst and Tornabene, 2012) notes that early childhood exposure to nature and outdoor learning environments encourage children to develop a positive understanding of self-awareness, introspection and lifelong attitudes towards nature and the

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environment. This is agreed with by Fisher (2013) who suggests that experiences with nature from a young age will foster an appreciation of wildlife and ecological compassion. However, there are concerns that children are not encouraged to learn within a natural environment as noted by Welsh Assembly Government (2007) thus resulting in a lack of adequate knowledge to the significance of environmental awareness and sustainability. Therefore, exposure to marine life within the beach and rockpool activity could encourage the development of empathy for wildlife and habitats.

The activity also supports the ethos of the Welsh Assembly Government's (2008) Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship themes where children will have an opportunity to be in the natural environment, to consider how their choices and decisions have implications for their environment, and by actively moving and exploring, supports the children's wider health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the activity also supports the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in terms of understanding how awareness of environmental issues links to the future well-being of Wales. This coincides with Donaldson (2015) who states that outdoor learning should be accessible to children, providing opportunities to gain experience and develop metacognition and emotional development from diverse environments, thus enabling them to become ethical, informed, capable learners and citizens of the world.

However, despite the beneficial qualities gained by outdoor environments, Waite, cited in Kinver (2016) suggests that pressures on teachers or practitioners to achieve academic results within the classroom leads to insufficient time to appreciate the qualities of outdoor learning. Similarly, as suggested by Little, Wyver and Gibson (2011), parental attitudes towards outdoor activities and the risks involved have a significant impact on the opportunities for children to explore and develop in outdoor environments. This coincides with Orestes (2015) who suggests that parental concerns, perceived health and safety regulations and accountability if a child is harmed, contribute to practitioners' reluctance to provide children with outdoor learning opportunities. In contrast, Brussoni et al. (2012) states that placing excessive restrictions on opportunities to encounter risk can obstruct a child's development. This coincides with Eager and Little (2011) who states that risk is not acting recklessly, it is engagement with uncertainty to achieve a goal, thus the beach and rockpool activity could encourage children to go beyond their comfort zone, to enhance their capabilities, perceptions and holistic development, which would be unavailable in an indoor classroom environment.

Moreover, Copeland et al. (2012) suggest that teacher personalities and preferences such as a dislike for cold weather may also be factors in prohibiting children from outdoor learning experiences, therefore resulting in children experiencing less opportunities to engage and learn in an outdoor natural environment. Additionally, Donaldson (2015) in the Successful Futures Framework notes that within the new curriculum, practitioners and teachers will be permitted to use their own knowledge, skills and judgements to develop appropriate methods of educating, in turn producing positive outcomes for children. Therefore, adults who acknowledge the

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significance of natural outdoor learning and provide access to these types of environments, support children's holistic development. This is supported by Bandura's views, as noted by Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters (2015), in which adults should act as role models for children, motivating their determination and instilling core values. Therefore, this could be supported within the beach and rockpool activity where the adults take the children outdoors, provide demonstrations of curiosity and exploration and scaffold learning.

By visiting the beach, the activity supports Pickering (2017) who suggests that the outdoor learning environment is not limited to the school grounds. This is supported by Welsh Government (2015) in the Play Sufficiency Assessment Toolkit where a significant objective is children having experiences outdoors. Similarly, the Welsh Assembly Government (2007) suggests that environments away from the school grounds should be used to accompany work undertaken in the classroom. This could signify that the Sharing a Shell story, read in the classroom prior to the activity taking place could encourage sustained shared thinking, metacognition and empathy. This is supported by Simon (2021) who discusses the adult's role in encouraging children to make connections between stories and their environment, by exposing children to the world around them. Therefore, the beach activity could enhance empathy and provide a deeper understanding of natural environments such as rockpool areas.

Additionally, Welsh Government (2015) state in the Foundation Phase Curriculum Framework that outdoor learning environments should be used as a learning resource to offer children the opportunity of first-hand experiences that promote exploration and development. This coincides with Froebel's belief, as stated by Tovey (2020), in which outdoor learning activities are essential if children are to have direct experiences of different plants, animals and habitats. These direct experiences could also provide children with new possibilities, interests and knowledge, which was a significant component of the beach and rockpool activity. Similarly, Sikander (2015) notes of Dewey's views on the importance of children learning through 'real', concrete experiences and interactions with the environment, which is also a feature of the beach and rockpool activity. However, restrictions and limitations on outdoor learning activities have limited opportunities for children to directly engage with nature and wildlife, as suggested by Mustapa, Maliki, Aziz and Aswati (2019). Furthermore, this disconnection to nature has been noted by Witt (2011) as a significant concern to children's development which could lead to a future disregard for protecting the environment and potential Nature-Deficit Disorder (Louv, 2019), where children are not given sufficient opportunities to connect with the natural world. Therefore, the beach and rockpool activity could support the development of environmental knowledge, behaviours and attitudes through direct interaction with marine habitats.

Furthermore, Mackintosh (2017) discusses that the distinctive landscape and features of a beach environment offer opportunities for physical development as a part of the child's formal and informal learning. As suggested by Hives and Scheffel (2019), the unsteady and ever-changing

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landscape of the beach provides challenges that children must overcome. Therefore, the activity could encourage the enhancement of physical development, problem solving skills, confidence and competence as children pursue and balance on varied terrains. Similarly, within the activity children will be expected to manoeuvre on sand and rocky terrain and will be introduced to uneven ground. Therefore, the activity could support the sense of proprioception as children will need to sense and detect their joint positions without consciously looking at them in order to navigate across the stones and respond to stimuli to avoid injury (Rees, 2020). Playworld (2018) also highlights the progression of gross motor skills and vestibular sense as children determine the appropriate solutions to reach the expected location within the activity. Similarly, the activity could enhance cognitive development and concentration skills (Active Health 2021) as children determine the correct steps to take to progress. Moreover, Hanscom (2016) suggests that the beach environment offers a whole-body experience that stimulates children's senses, not only felt by hands alone, and includes sights, smells and noises encountered at the beach. The author planned for children to wear appropriate footwear, however the activity could have included the opportunity for children to explore barefoot on the sand to appreciate and receive different stimuli furthering their sensory development.

The beach and rockpool activity involved opportunities for water-play and exploration. Harvoth (2012) notes that water play stimulates the development of children's thought processes in which they alter their way of thinking and develop new concepts. Piaget's views, as discussed by Lefa (2014) also support the interaction between children and water-play as enhancing imagination, problem solving skills and language skills as they manipulate and alter the flow of the water. This was also highlighted by Crosser (2021) who noted that water play can encourage collaborative play among children thus enhancing sustained shared thinking and cognitive development. Therefore, the beach and rockpool activity could be significant to fostering mathematical concepts, social and cooperative skills and encouraging children to make sense of the world around them. Furthermore, the activity could influence these developments by requiring the adult to ask questions thus encouraging the child's thought process.

White (2013) notes that adequate preparation and planning is needed to achieve optimal learning and play experiences in the outdoor environment. Furthermore, Allen (2016) highlights the significance of adult-led, structured play in enhancing a child's development. This coincides with Healey and Healey (2017) who suggest that a structured approach to activities and play can foster self-regulation as children will need to be patient while waiting for their turn and control frustrations, thus providing increased reductions to aggression and hyperactivity, in turn improving and supporting wellbeing and mental health problems. In addition, Elwin and Rossi (2017) suggest that research illustrates a positive connection between structured activities and play with improved cooperative learning, teamwork and academic results. Furthermore, scaffolding techniques by adults in structured activities can aid in the development of new knowledge and cognitive development through cooperative learning and social interaction, as noted by Vygotsky

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(1978). Therefore, the structured plan of the beach and rockpool activity could support children to surpass their comfort level, acquire new knowledge and social skills and aid in the development of self-esteem and control.

However, natural outdoor environments such as the beach offer numerous prospects for unstructured play, as noted by Herrington and Brussoni (2015) which allows children to play freely, thus enhancing their imagination. Similarly, Ginsbeurg, cited in Olsen and Smith (2017), states that children should be encouraged and provided with opportunities to engage in unstructured play and activities in order to achieve developmental milestones. Additionally, Sundquist (2021) highlights the significance of child-led activities, formed from children's own desires and curiosities, thus enhancing a better understanding of the world, as they challenge hypothesis and concepts during play. Furthermore, Caro (2012) suggests adults should only interfere in child-led activities if invited, taking a passive role thus allowing children to learn as they lead their own play. Therefore, the adult-led structured beach and rockpool activity could potentially obstruct opportunities of further learning experiences for the children as they are confined to a certain area and expected to complete the activity under adult instruction. Therefore, revising the beach and rockpool activity plan, allowing children to lead their own play and activities on the beach, as opposed to responding to the adult's lead, could enhance the children's development progression.

Moreover, during child-led play, as stated by Play Wales (2017) children are able to play with objects and materials within the environments in ways other than their intended purpose, thus allowing the enhancement of the imagination. However, this is not included in the beach and rockpool activity as the structured activity does not involve child-led play therefore is insufficient in promoting imaginative qualities for children. In addition, Gibson's (2014) affordance theory suggests the environment in which children play encourages interaction with nature in ways unique to every child, depending on their perception of what objects in the environment can do or be used for; thus influencing a child's behaviour in that environment. Furthermore, Nicholson's (1971) loose parts theory highlights how a child's play experience can be impacted by engaging with loose parts (open ended, transportable materials) in the immediate environment in terms of supporting collaborative play, decision making skills, sustained shared thinking and improved health and wellbeing (Play Wales 2017). Similarly, Gencer and Avci (2017) state that it is essential for children to obtain loose parts and materials that can be used freely within their play to understand the world and enhance their creative skills. Therefore, the beach and rockpool experience could be criticised for lacking opportunities for creative thinking by the children, as the objective is to explore the beach and rockpool using defined equipment provided by the adults.

To conclude, the beach and rockpool activity could be beneficial to the development of ecological awareness, sensory and cognitive development, fine and gross motor skills, and encouraging children to challenge themselves in a different learning environment. However, the activity may not provide opportunities for play or child-led activity, thus not supporting their creative thinking.

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Therefore, including within the beach and rockpool activity an opportunity for children to play on the beach, uninterrupted by adults could enhance the quality of their outdoor learning experiences.

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The Global Pandemic:
An opportunity to re-focus on outdoor environments for the benefit of social interactions development.

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The Global Pandemic: An opportunity to re-focus on outdoor environments for the benefit of social interactions development Emma Search – Anglia Ruskin University

Research and Knowledge Exchange
Student Papers: June 2021 This article aims to present a
refocus for practitioners on outdoor play experiences intrinsically linked to
social interaction development for early childhood and early years educators.

It is well documented that access to the outdoors yields physical, cognitive, social, and emotional wellbeing (White, 2014, Bilton, 2010, Garrick, 2009, Tovey 2007). However, there has been a recent decline in the amount of time children spend on free play outdoors (Mullen, 2019, Bento and Dias, 2017) coupled with the closure of many outdoor play spaces in the UK due to lack of local authority funding (API, n.d.).   Moreover, during the last year a substantially reduced right to outdoor environments has become part of life whilst the world takes on the global pandemic (Covid-19). This global phenomenon has impacted every country within the world; however, the scale of its impact will be variable according to the reaction of governments, local authorities, and society itself (Froebel Trust 2021).

In a world where playgrounds temporarily closed, and society has been ordered to 'stay at home' children's opportunities to connect with the outside world have been further diminished. Furthermore, and in response to the pandemic, UK Government issued a temporary disapplication of obligations within the current statutory framework (DfE, June 2021).

The social interactions contributing to children's holistic development remain influenced through a myriad of sub-themes throughout a child's early life. Starting from those first interactions between a caregiver and their new-born child, additional family members and the wider community as a baby grows and develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Whilst early social learning theories are central to the overall progress of children, changes across community, cultures and society bring to the forefront changes within the nature of learning.

As a child begins to interact within the wider environment, dynamic interrelations between personal and environmental factors emerge to form part of a child's socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Historically Vygotsky's theory of imaginative play and social levels created a 'medium of language' and 'internalised thought' (Vygotsky 1987 cited in Gray and MacBlain, 2015). Vygotsky's assertion was that children's play began with social interactions with adults.

A recent study conducted by the Department of Education (DfE, 2018) suggests high quality early years provision plays a part in developing pro-social behaviour. Furthermore an increase in substantially positive outcomes for disadvantaged families has been found through the provision of such high quality care (Sammons et al., 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Sylva et al., 2004). Part of this high-quality provision includes access to outdoor play spaces, suggested by Bilton (2010) as being an important part of learning and development, alongside a unified vision of clear beliefs and values (White, 2011). However, research shows some conflict between practitioner values when supporting children within natural environments (Maynard, 2007, Bilton, 2010, Rose, 2014, Hunter, 2019). Maynard (2007) highlights the teacher-child power struggles particularly when

working in natural settings. Later works of Bilton (2010) confers adults as primarily facilitators during a child's learning process, conducted through direct and considered interactions. Indeed, works of Rose (2014) sought to demonstrate the key debates in early years provision between the 'role of an adult in adult-led and child-initiated activities' (Rose, 2014, p.4) indicating a myriad of opinion.

Research conducted by Leggett and Newman (2017) in Australia drew upon research to explore educator beliefs of their roles as 'intentional teacher' (Newman, 2017, p.24) during indoor and outdoor activity. They identified a frequent occurrence of practitioners taking a 'stand back' approach', prioritising 'supervision' over time spent on meaningful interactions (ibid., p24). Whilst two much earlier studies have highlighted practitioners' understanding of a scaffolding approach to enable children to engage in higher, more intricate activity (Vygotsky, 1978 in Bodrova and Leong 2006, cited in Tsai, 2015), Leggett and Newman (2017) perhaps indicate the rather sporadic nature to which such intentional teaching within outdoor environments is subjectively driven.

Hunter et al (2019) conducted qualitative analysis of an early childhood centre, following its transition from traditional playground to a nature-based outdoor classroom. Hunter et al (2019) found a consistent theme from teachers seeing children as 'leading the way' (Hunter et al, 2019, p.34) and practitioner's primary purpose as facilitators of safety. Hunter's contemporary research appears to strengthen earlier conclusions of Rose (2014) and Leggett and Newman (2017) indicating outdoor learning may be limited in value due to the lack of 'specific goals' (Hunter et al, 2019, p.45).

Social skills and emotional development can be fostered through a child's sense of wonder, questioning and excitement and a teacher's response can provide for rich, meaningful interactions (Waters and Maynard, 2010). It is important to provide careful planning of quality interactions to establish high quality play, however it is clear from research that practitioners and teachers remain caught between the political frameworks of academic outcomes over pedagogies of practice (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, practitioner approaches to outdoor play tends to lean towards a 'stand back' approach (Leggett and Newman, 2017, p24) alluding to a more supervisory role when partaking in outdoor activity. Whilst research concluded by Singer (2014) highlights the correlation between adult proximity and stronger impact on play engagement, Devi, Fleer and Li (2018) found teachers frequently place themselves outside of children's play and do not engage as play partners. This would suggest a gap in theoretical knowledge of practitioners and warrants further investigation within early years practice.

Whilst some research has highlighted views of some practitioners in gaining 'freedom outside the classroom' (Waite and Davis, 2007), later works of Waite (2008) appear to highlight the 'acute awareness of external requirements' (Waite, 2008, p65).

Despite the above concerns, research indicates practitioner understanding of the 'reciprocal nature of adult-child interactions' may aide the uncertainties surrounding intervention from adults (Rose, 2014 p.4).

Earlier works of MacNaughton and Williams (2004) sought to highlight the many interactions early years practitioners can have with children during an average day. Several studies have sought to understand, through qualitative analysis, the attitudes of practitioners during outdoor play activity (Maynard, 2007, Bilton, 2010, Leggett and Newman, 2017, Hunter, 2019). Maynard (2007) highlights the teacher-child power struggles particularly when working in natural settings. Later works of Bilton (2010) confers adults as primarily facilitators during a child's learning process,

conducted through direct and considered interactions. However, later study (Rose, 2014) shows evidence of conflict arising between practitioners viewing the outdoors as a supervisory space rather than a place for intense adult-child interaction. Indeed, works of Rose (2014) sought to demonstrate the key debates in early years provision between the 'role of an adult in adult-led and child-initiated activities' (Rose, 2014, p.4) indicating a myriad of opinion.

A mixed methods research project conducted in the Netherlands (Singer et al 2014) highlighted the strong association of positive play engagements where there was continuous proximity of a teacher and child. Moreover, Singer asserts a clear connection between the length of time there is close 'physical proximity of the teacher' and its influence on 'play engagement' (ibid., p.1233). This study correlates with much earlier works of Howes and Smith (1995) and more recently, Laevers (2005) indicating play engagements are 'closely related to the' child's 'emotional security' within 'the' practitioner- 'child relationship' (Laevers, 2005, p.207).

Whilst Singer (2014) found a correlation between practitioner presence and positive play engagement Singer points towards the potential for additional research. This includes an analysis of the impact varying time periods practitioners spend in the presence of children; alongside analysis of specific practitioner interactions to theorise the concept of meaningful interaction (Leggett and Newman, 2017).

Further contemporary research conducted by Devi, Fleer and Li (2018) has reaffirmed teachers frequently positioning outside of children's play. Whilst the adults within the study identified their important 'contribution to children's imaginative play' (Fleer, 2015, p.309), they had not identified the importance of being a 'play partner' inside of children's play (ibid., p.309). Yet Wilson (2018) highlights the philosophical approaches to western discourses of human-nature as 'children, especially young children take their cues from adults and the social environment as to how to view the rest of the natural world and their relationship with it' (Wilson, 2018, p.31).

Perhaps Bilton's (2014) earlier works provide some weight in suggesting a need for explicit aims of the outdoor provision and a valuable focus on oral language to promote effective communication skills. Indeed, more recent research, following the global pandemic conducted by O'Keefe and McNally (2021) suggests that whilst teachers understand the importance of focus on children's social and emotional wellbeing following aftermath of the crisis, recognition of play as a valuable driver in promoting effective communication may be key. Such focus may also indicate a superseded approach towards children's learning with a more focused role of play for social and emotional wellbeing.

Findings from O'Keefe and McNally (2021) conversely highlight the contemporaneous issues of play pedagogy alongside restrictions brought about by Covid-19. This poses further questions surrounding current social distancing measures, limited access to play materials, and lack of clarity or policy.

Whilst the outdoors provides open space, it also encourages 'fluidity' through its 'weakly defined and moveable boundaries, characterised by social mixing' (Sibley, 1995, cited in Lester, 2008, p.55). Whilst Bilton (2010) highlights the possibility of outdoor environments being viewed more as a learning environment rather than a teaching environment, further clarity is provided in terms of how staff should approach outdoor activity. Bilton (2010) suggests this should be approached with the same professionalism to that within indoor activity. Therefore, whilst outdoor play may be primarily child-led, facilitation within such play situations can help to scaffold children's higher order thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1981).

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Research has highlighted the views of some practitioners in children gaining 'freedom and fun' within outdoor environments (Waite, 2011, p.65). However, according to Waite (2008) appears 'framed by an acute awareness of external requirements' (Waite, 2008, p65).

Despite the above concerns, research indicates practitioner understanding of the 'reciprocal nature of adult-child interactions' may aide the uncertainties surrounding intervention from adults (Rose, 2014 p.4).

Children's play and play spaces influence children's ability to grow and thrive physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally and it has long since been recognised the holistic benefits access to the outdoors brings. Children's rights are fundamentally upheld through statute (UNCRC, Article 31) requiring children to be exposed to a play-based approach to learning, however the existence of quality outdoor experience remains contested.

Outdoor play has been at the heart of early years policy provision and continued to form a focus for many contemporary scholars (Tovey, 2007, Maynard and Waters, 2010, Bilton, 2010, 2012). The global pandemic has offered fresh challenges toward children's access to the outdoors despite fundamental children's rights (UNCRC, 1989, Article 31). Conversely, early years practice offers a unique opportunity in delivering quality outdoor activity, with particular focus on natural play spaces to encourage: a greater sense of positive feelings towards one another (Bixler, Floyd and Hammitt, 2002); encourage longer periods of complex play (Kuh, Ponte, & Chau, 2013; Morrissey, Scott, & Rahimi, 2017; Nedovic & Morrissey, 2013) and; buffer psychological stresses in the promotion of wellbeing (Wells and Evans, 2003, cited in Oberbilig, 2014). That said, Bilton (2014) suggests the outdoors is not to be more superior to that of indoor environments and whilst Gray (2011) asserts the natural environment provides a 'richer place' for social interactions (p.11), Hestenes and Carroll (2000) suggest children with socio-emotional difficulties may experience difficulties engaging in social play bringing further questions around the role of practitioners in guiding and scaffolding social interaction play activity (Vygotsky, 1978).

How a practitioner or teacher interacts can impact the resulting experience and outcomes for children. Whilst the early years sectors place strong emphasis on child-led, self-initiated play (EYFS guiding principles) it can also pose valuable learning opportunities for a child. Social skills and emotional development can be fostered through a child's sense of wonder, questioning and excitement and a teacher's response can provide for rich, meaningful interactions (Waters and Maynard, 2010). It is important to provide careful planning of quality interactions to establish high quality play, however it is clear from research that practitioners and teachers remain caught between the political frameworks of academic outcomes over pedagogies of practice (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, practitioner approaches to outdoor play tends to lean towards a 'stand back' approach (Leggett and Newman, 2017, p24) alluding to a more supervisory role when partaking in outdoor activity. Whilst research concluded by Singer (2014) highlights the correlation between adult proximity and stronger impact on play engagement, Devi, Fleer and Li (2018) found teachers frequently place themselves outside of children's play and do not engage as play partners. This would suggest a gap in theoretical knowledge of practitioners and warrants further investigation within early years practice. Furthermore, adult/child ratios may have some bearing on the quality of interactions between adults and children. In practical terms, the EYFS statutory requirements on adult to child ratios (EYFS 2021) will have some bearing on outcomes and is perhaps something that warrants further research.

Whilst this paper has addressed outdoor play from a social and emotional standpoint, it appears inconclusive from existing literature whether the outdoor environment is a pre-requisite to social

interaction development or the features within it. It cannot be argued that access to the outdoors yields overall holistic development however the extent to which the outdoors develops social skills remains difficult to conclude. Gray (2011) confers natural environments as substantial places for social interactions, however socio-emotional difficulties may hinder children's progress. Practitioners may form a crucial role in guiding and scaffolding social interaction, particularly those with language or communication difficulties (Hestenes and Carroll 2000).

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Introducing the Forest School approach in an Early Years setting

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Research and Knowledge Exchange

Student Papers: June 2021 **Fictional Case Study.**

Claire is the manager of a pre-school which takes children from the age of two and a half. The setting is situated in a deprived, inner-city area, with a multi-cultural population. Unemployment is high which has placed additional pressure on families financially as well as emotionally. A community of travellers have come to settle in the area and have enrolled their children in the setting.

Claire and her staff are feeling the pressure of having a diverse group of children and feel they are not meeting their individual needs, with some children displaying challenging behaviours. Claire and her team have been reflecting on their practice and feel they need to change their pedagogy. The team have made the decision to incorporate one day each week to visit a Forest School which will be reviewed at the end of term. It will involve the children travelling to a woodland area, which has already been developed by the local city council. Information has been delivered to parents and risk assessments have been approved.

This paper will focus on the Forest School approach, the philosophy behind it and the type of teaching methods that are involved. Learning in the outdoors has become just as important as the indoors, children must have the opportunity to experience both environments (GOV.UK, 2020). In addition, it will look at the environmental factors that are thought to have an effect on a child's learning, in this case, deprivation and poverty. Research has revealed the benefits of using this method of teaching, however there are challenges when introducing a new pedagogy and one specific method of teaching may not support all children (Forest School Association, 2020). Many factors need to be considered including the culture and diversity of the children attending the setting and the stakeholders' views and opinions.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) states "it's a child's right to develop as well as to survive" (UNICEF, 2020). Many children will not reach their full potential due to certain factors and the children in this case study live in an area defined as 'deprived'. In a 2007 report, the poverty advisor Professor Donald Hirsch found that a child who lives in poverty, in poor housing, in a disadvantaged community or who has parents with few qualifications is less likely to achieve themselves. Cultural barriers may make it difficult for some families to access support and early years education (Hirsch, 2007, p. 8). Research shows that by the age of three a child can be nine

months behind in their development (Hirsch, 2007, p. 5). However, some children do go to achieve in education (Hirsh, 2007, p. 2).

In 2018, the National Institute for Health carried out a study in America involving 77 children. Their focus was on the effect of poverty on brain development in children. Part of their findings looked at the cortisol levels in the brain which enables a child to control their emotions and affects a child's ability to concentrate. The cortisol levels in children living in poverty were high having an effect on a child's ability to learn (Blair & Raver, 2018). The practitioners in this setting would need to look at each child and ask themselves the question, are the basic needs of this child being met? This can be related this to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (Bates, 2019, p .66). Practitioners must have knowledge of the type of support that is available to families in their local area, so they can be signposted to the correct support.

Children attending this setting come from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds. Cultural capital, the different experiences a child brings into a setting depending on their social environment, has been included in the changes to the Early Inspection Framework 2019. The reason for this change was to improve the opportunities for children from all social classes (PreSchool Learning Alliance, 2019). We can relate this to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1998) a French sociologist (Hunt, 2020). He related cultural capital to a person's education, interests and accent. Each child that attends a setting will have had a number of different experiences which are called a habitus, these will be based on their personal circumstances. Some suggest that children who have enjoyed a wide variety of experiences will have a greater cultural capital compared to children from a disadvantaged background. Practitioners must provide opportunities for all the children in their setting, this begins with learning about each child and their family. Children in this case study may not have access to a garden or visit parks the forest school approach to learning would give these children a new experience of the outdoors (Hunt, 2020).

The pre-school staff have decided that for one day of the week they will take the children off site to experience a forest school. A definition of this approach, taken from the Forest School Association states, "Forest School is a child-centred approach and inspirational learning process that offers opportunity for holistic growth" (Forest School Association,2020). Forest schools arrived in the United Kingdom in 1993 (Forest School Association, 2020). Ella Flataus, from Denmark, started one of the first examples of a forest school in 1952 (Bates ,2019, p 96). As part of the curriculum they would take children on walks every day through the woods. After a few years of the children doing this a group of parents organised school buses to take children to the countryside (Stasiuk, 2017). The McMillan sisters also adopted the idea of using the outside for children's learning and development (Jarvis et al, 2017, p.102). The sisters believed in the importance of sunshine, fresh air and plenty of time playing in the garden and they saw the benefits this had on the children's physical and emotional well-being (Jarvis et al, 2017, p.10).

This approach must not be confused with an outdoor learning pedagogy. Forest Schools follow six key principles which are exclusive to this type of learning. The key principles are it takes place in a natural wooded environment, it uses a range of learner-centred techniques, promotes holistic development, children take supported risks, practitioners hold a Forest School qualification and it is a long-term approach. There are three levels of training for practitioners to complete (Forest School Association, 2020). This approach focuses on the child's experience as a whole, results and tests are not part of the method (Mehmet, 2020).

The Forest School approach promotes holistic development with each child using a range of learner centred processes and children are supported in risk taking (Forest School Association 2020). Dr Frances Harris from the university of Hertfordshire (2017) describes this teaching method as "constructivist education" Children learn from both the natural environment and from working with others (Harris,2017, p.272-291). During a session, a child may be involved in activities such as scavenging, jumping in puddles, climbing, constructing a bug hotel or starting a fire (Mehmet, 2020).

In a 2017 article, Gabriela Bento (2017) writes about how outdoor play is lessening and children are becoming disconnected from the natural world. Research was carried out in Portugal on the benefits of playing and learning outside (Bento, 2017, p.157). The findings revealed how it benefited a child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. Spending time in the outside supports bone development and children develop a stronger immune system (Bento. 2017, p. 158). Professor Derek Clements Croome from the University of Reading carried out research on heat in the classroom and the effect on a child's ability to learn. His findings concluded that the classroom environment was unhealthy and when the carbon dioxide levels were high children's reaction times were slower their memory was affected and they became drowsy (Bilton, 2010, p.17).

Forty children from an early years setting in England were taken to a Forest School in 2018. They experienced a range of outdoor learning experiences. A teaching assistant who accompanied them wrote about the positive effects this had on the children. Firstly, they got to spend time in open woodland spaces which they were not used to. Secondly, the children who struggled with behavioural and emotional problems found that the peace and quiet, as well as being in a large space supported their well-being and behaviour (Greaves, 2018). In an article written by Liz O'Brian and Richard Murray (2007) describing the impact of Forest Schools on young children, they highlighted that the Forest School approach involves the children attending on a regular basis for a long period of time before practitioners see changes in children's behaviour (O'Brian & Murray, 2006).

Four children from the traveller community are attending the setting. Each community of travellers have their own unique culture, history and some have their own language (Hardy,2018). Traveller

children often watch the adults in their family and community and will take part in tasks that are often associated with only being carried out by an adult. Traveller children must be taught in a way that identifies with their cultural experiences (Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity Team, 2020). Dawn Breeze, a headteacher in a primary school, wrote about her experience of traveller children attending her school. Her view was that travelling children spend a great amount of time outside and therefore a Forest School approach might benefit some children (Breeze, 2016).

Adopting a new pedagogy in a setting can seem daunting but adopting one from another county can bring its own challenges. Firstly, ensuring that the philosophy behind this approach is understood. Mark Leather, professor of Education and Outdoor Learning, writes, "aspects of an original philosophy implemented in other countries can be lost" (Leather, 2016, p. 3).   Regarding Forest Schools in this country, his view is that practitioners are being trained quickly due to the high levels of interest into Forest Schools. Practitioners learn how to provide activities but don't understand the philosophy behind it. Leather also criticised the amount of research findings regarding Forest Schools and felt there was not enough reliable evidence available (Leather,2018, p.2-18).

The philosophy relating to this pedagogy is Friluftsliv; it is unique to Scandinavian countries especially Norway and Sweden (Leather, 2016). Friluftsliv is "open air living" and it is part of the country's heritage. Lasse Heimdal Secretary General of Norsk Friluftsliv described Fritulftsliv in an article published in the National Geographic where he wrote, "it's more than just an activity, it's a lifestyle, it's tied to our culture" (Smith, 2020). Regarding the United Kingdom, Trisha Maynard Professor of Early Childhood Spaces wrote, "the outdoor environment is not a central feature of British culture" (Leather, 2016, p. 3). Adopting this pedagogy for some may be difficult, as the outdoors may not be a big part of their lifestyle. Research was carried out in South Wales on four primary schools in an inner-city area. It focused on the use of the outdoors as learning spaces and asked members of staff for their views (Maynard and Waters, 2007, p.225). Their findings were the use of outdoor spaces for learning was weather dependent, one school didn't use the outside area from November to March. Teachers needed to be persuaded about the benefits of using the outdoors and they were concerned about the culture of blame that may arise from families because of accidents (Maynard and Waters, 2007, p.226).

The transition to Forest School learning will need to be progressed slowly to ensure all stakeholders are well informed and have the opportunity to ask questions and air their concerns. All staff members will need to be committed and enthusiastic and be prepared to be involved in all aspects of the learning (Bento, 2016, p.217). Communicating with parents is crucial, information needs to be provided on practical aspects as well as the benefits it will have on their children. The information needs to be shared in an accessible way for everyone (Ouvry & Furtado, 2020, p.209).

Inviting a member of the Forest School team to come and speak to parents may be beneficial or visiting the site before the children's first session may help with addressing any concerns. Explaining to stakeholders that staff are trained in this specific area may put parents' minds at rest. Providing regular updates on how the change is going may help families feel included and reminding families that the Forest School approach is going to be reviewed on a regular basis is important. Another area of concern for families might be the idea of "school readiness" and whether the Forest School approach will prepare children for a reception class. In the United Kingdom there is no accepted definition of this term. School readiness will mean different things to different families (Grimmery, 2018, p.15). Oxford County Council describes school readiness, "it is when families, early years providers, schools, work together to support the development of children's confidence, resilience and curiosity" (Oxfordshire County Council, 2020).

Risky play is a large part of the pedagogy and parents may have concerns about the safety aspect. The Health Executive says regarding children taking risks, "the goal is not to eliminate risks but to weigh up the risks and benefits" (The British Association For Early Childhood Education, 2020). It is the role of the practitioners to evaluate the risks and make an assessment (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2020). Views on risk taking will differ in different cultures and the type of risky play offered to children will depend on the practitioner. (Little, Sandseter and Wyver, 2012). In a journal article written by Sandseter and Beate (2013) it discusses early years practitioners in Australia and risky play. (Beate and Sandseter, 2014, p.434) Research showed that while some practitioners promoted risky play others were concerned about the children taking risks and it was due to their own anxiety (Beate and Sandseter, 2014, p.434). One of the main factors contributing to this anxiety is fear of being sued by families in the event of an accident (Beate and Sandseter, 2014, p.435). Each child will decide the amount of risk they are willing to take. Risky play benefits a child's development in the following ways; it helps with problem solving, confidence, children learn how to use tools safely, helps build resilience and creativity. Risky play develops skills that will help the child as they grow and it is important to remind families that all the activities are carried out in a safe environment (Carrigg, 2016).

This paper has focused on the Forest School approach. Research has revealed the benefits to this pedagogy with regards to children's health and their development, but there are some elements that families may be unsure about, primarily, risky play (Bento, 2017, p.157). Introducing a new pedagogy may bring challenges. Communication between settings and stakeholders is vital because families must feel included and that their opinions are listened to (Ouvry & Furtado, 2020, p.209). This approach will not work in every setting (Bates, 2019, p.247). Practitioners must get to know their individual children and learn about their families so that they can find the best method of teaching for that particular group of children.

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How children learn and develop from birth Drawing on differing perspectives of child development, critically discuss the importance of a rich language environment from birth to eight, and its relevance to a child becoming a 'social being'.

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Research and Knowledge Exchange
Student Papers: June 2021 This paper will critically discuss the
importance of a language-rich environment and different child development perspectives
from birth to three whilst exploring this age range. It will look at how language develops and
essential factors that may influence language development to support a child to become a
"social being". The research undertaken for this assignment will consider psychology,
sociology and health theorists and research. It will also link development and factors that
may shape a language environment, such as social, cultural, economic, and political factors.
Halliday (1978) highlights the importance of language acquisition and states it is both a
cultural and social practice; he states, "In the development of the child as a social being,
language has the central role. Language is the main channel through which the patterns of
living are transmitted to him, through which he learns to act as a member of a 'society'... and
to adopt its 'culture'" Halliday (1978, p. 9). Theorists such as Bloom (1964) had observed
and recorded the rapid rate of cognitive development during the early years of childhood
and the effect of experience on this process.

Mora (2017) states that the first years of a child's life are the most important, especially the first
three years for brain development. At this critical period, the brain can change physically; this is
called plasticity as the brain is a moldable organ in constant change; these changes are unique
and differ from each child, this is down to the education received, the environment and culture in
which the child lives. Ruben (1997) says that there are essential elements to language: phonology,
semantics, and syntax; there is also the time frame for critical and sensitive language
development periods. Several studies support the idea that the critical and sensitive time of
phonology is from around the sixth month of foetal life through to the twelfth month of life. This is
followed by the critical and sensitive periods for syntax runs up to around four years old, and
semantics develops up to the sixteenth year of life (Ruben 1997). A study that supports the idea
of a critical and sensitive period of language acquisition is the case of Genie, the "feral child" who,
due to neglect, never learned language skills as she was not exposed to a rich language
environment when young, which consequently resulted in her never being able to acquire verbal
language. Vygotsky's (cited by MacBlain) theory of language development focused on learning in
a social environment and the zone of proximal development this is something that Genie the "feral
child" never had the opportunity for in the critical stage of language development.   Language
development is closely linked with cognitive development, and critical theorists in cognitive
development also highlight the importance of both. Jean Piaget's (cited by MacBlain, 2018) theory
of language development states that children use both assimilation and accommodation to
develop and learn language. Piaget felt that for children to develop the skill of language acquisition,
they must first develop mental structures in the mind, and from this, language develops. There is
criticism of Piaget's work; most of this revolves around the methods used in the research. A

significant influence for his theory was the observations of his children; in addition to this, the other children observed were all from families of high socioeconomic, meaning that it is challenging to generalise his findings to a larger demographic (Hopkins 2011).

There are essential and close links to language and cognitive development but exploring language development theories on behaviour and language is also essential. Nativists such as Chomsky (1986) (cited by Kevin Crowley 2017) do not believe that language develops through imitations of behaviour and is predetermined by our biology. Chomsky believes there is some shared language commonality in everyone due to the similarities that are displayed. This means the learning process and development of langue is an essential skill we are born with called "Language Acquisition Device" (LAD). This allows children to develop and acquire langue in their own time and way, believing children automatically learn language without the need of formal instruction. Chomsky observed that all children will make similar language errors irrespective of what they are taught and that there is a set of grammatical rules that all human languages share. It is essential to highlight that Chomsky does not identify the brain areas that allow humans' instinctive language capability. Chomsky theory of language acquisition is held with high regard and still referred to today; it does have its weaknesses. The biggest weakness being that there does not appear to be enough evidence supporting his ideas on the language acquisition device as this would be seen as unethical to trial this experiment. Although there has been some research involving Genie the "feral child", there is not enough evidence to support his theory outright. Skinner (cited by Matthew Saxon 2010) argued all children who learn language are rewarded by parents or primary caregivers and believed children learn language through operant conditioning. Skinner also suggested that children learn language through imitation of other people; this interaction can also be linked to the early development of the theory of mind and early child language acquisition using joint attention. Issues with Skinner's theory are down to the levels of cognitive development in both the child and the adult who is supporting the language development, as well as the environment this takes place in, as in some cases if there is no object of reference – this could be in-home learning there could be no support on language acquisition; this is supported by Matte-Gagné and Bernier (2011) research paper that states that there are links between the cognitive development of a parent and the impact this can have on the language development of a child as well as their social and emotional development and further state that children who are in cognitive stimulating environments in early childhood are at an advantage in the learning process.

Poverty is linked with numerous factors leading to poor social interactions, with language development being limited as a prominent factor as well as brain development (Hart B et al. 1995). Hart and Risley's (1995) study on the education of parents and the use of words in the home highlighted that the total number of words spoken at home varied between families, and the usage of words was the most important factor of language growth for a child. The correlation between poverty and language growth meant less educated caregivers have been shown to use fewer words when communicating with children. They use less complex syntax and fewer references to events that are not in the present-day. The early years' development is the most crucial time of

development. Children who are born into poverty or very low-income families face significant challenges (Power et al. 2013).

Language is one of the three critical areas in the early years foundation stage and aims to ensure that all children have opportunity to experience a language-rich environment, develop their confidence in skills in expression and speak and listen in a range of situations. Macblain (2018) writes that children do not play out on the streets anymore, spending more time in the home or settings of education such as nurseries and schools. In an early year setting, there is usually an emphasis on language play children learn through listening to songs, rhyming poems and nursery rhymes. As the children develop it allows play to become more structured with defined rules and expectations. Bakken, Brown and Downing's (2017) research shows that children who have the opportunity to attend early years setting have good levels of interaction with other children which is beneficial for language and communication development. There is a marked increase in the language development of children at a critical age of 3 and attending nursery promotes both language and cognitive skills.

In conclusion, there is a clear and vital timeframe for language accusation, and this is a critical time of development for children in all areas. There is also a sensitive period of language development up to the age of 16, allowing children to widen their use and development of language. There is clear evidence to support nativists such as Chomsky's as well as Skinner's theory on nurture and language development; whilst both theorists provide valuable and important ideas into the acquisition of language, both have their weaknesses too, and they must be taken into consideration. The factors mentioned above. poverty and early years settings, affect the language development in their own way whilst some are detrimental in the development of language. The promotion of language development in early years settings is important as it allows children to develop language in real-life situations with peers. Children need to be exposed to language throughout their early years to develop their language fully and need to be given opportunities in real-life situations. Without these opportunities the limitations of language acquisition can have ramifications on cognitive and social development.

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Have you thought about becoming a real teacher?

The COVID-19 pandemic and the public perception of the value of the early years worker.

A discourse analysis of the early years 'professional'.

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Research and Knowledge Exchange

Student Papers: June 2021 **Abstract**

This research analyses public discourse during January 2021, the third national lockdown in England during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through discourse analysis methodology, conclusions have been drawn in relation to the social construct of the early years workers value and status. Being exposed to an increase in media and policy attention, and reframed as keyworkers, the rationale guiding this research was curiosity as to whether the social construction of the early years worker, as of little worth and status, could be open to change. Despite its importance, work across all levels of the education system is hugely undervalued in society. Discourse analysis of media texts, such as newspaper articles and television interviews, exposed the unjust positionality of early years workers in particular as expendable to the needs of higher value workers. Government policy, communicated through the media, exacerbated the dominant discourse of derision, by reinforcing the 'childcare' aspect of early years education. This rejects the early years as part of the education system, thus maintaining the construct of the early years worker as a glorified babysitter and not an educator, at the very bottom of an already hugely undervalued sector.

Introduction

Childcare and education have historically been seen as women's work, from the early pioneers of early education to the present day. Work with young children is seen as biologically determined (Ailwood, 2008; Osgood, 2006) and an extension of women's natural capabilities (Ailwood 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Osgood, 2006; Randall, 2000; Yarrow, 2015). 'Homely' care from motherly figures is still deeply embedded in government policy and ideology leading early years workers to adopt a quasi-maternal role. Such policy reinforces the idea that the work is of little value,

unskilled and gendered, implying that early years workers should use their innate qualities and practice these through domestic labour. This dominant discourse devalues the importance of early years education and the skills needed to educate young children. Through discourse analysis of media texts, this research aims to analyse the extent to which these assumptions are still present in dominant government and media discourse.

The Government and the Early Years: An Attack on Working-Class Women

Major focus on early years policy began with New Labour in 1997 who depicted a sector 'in crisis' and in need of radical reform, to improve employability and the country's economic competitiveness and to allow women to re-enter the labour market. Early years workers were seen, not only as the key to this success, but also essential in reducing and tackling poverty, social inequality and disadvantage (Dahlberg & Moss 2007; Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2009). Whilst much of future societal success rested on the shoulders of the early years workforce (Osgood, 2009), they were simultaneously depicted as an inadequate and lacking sector in need of 'professionalising' to increase 'quality' of provision.

New Labour's National Childcare Strategy implicitly stated that women entering the early years workforce can be supported to help them care successfully for their own children, reinforcing the perception that early years work is an extension of mothering, whilst implying that parenting is a skill in which working-class women were lacking. They are expected to adopt a different persona, masking who they are to meet the needs of their middle-class clients, serving and loving their children to middle-class values and adopting a middle-class ethos (Vincent & Braun, 2013). The government, therefore, construct early years work as a default career, undertaken as an alternative to a life on benefits (Osgood, 2005). A discourse of derision, depicting the early years workforce as indolent, untrustworthy, unambitious, intuitive, under-qualified, reliant, and opaque (Osgood, 2006b) and in need of professionalising and radical reform, so publicly, dehumanises the early years sector and becomes an act of violence against the workforce which overwhelmingly consists of working-class women. The same gendered and classed narrative continues (Osgood, 2021) ensuring that working-class women are the ones continuing to gain employment in this sector (Ailwood, 2008; Tronto, 2013).

The Caring Professional: An Oxymoron?

Dominant masculine, neo liberal qualities (based on male, white, middle-class values) traditionally associated with professionalism include rational thinking, leadership, assertiveness, and power (Osgood, 2006). This automatically places the early years sector, whose work involves conventionally feminine qualities, behaviours, and attitudes such as care and love, as unprofessional (Lally et al, 1997). This maintains the maternalistic discourse and further devalues work with young children, contributing to the perception of this as a low value 'career'. This also acts to justify the poor working conditions and low pay faced by those in the sector.

Hochschild (1983) addressed the notion that labour is not divided into manual work and mental work and instead the two could be combined. Being able to maintain professional intimacy, contain emotions and painful feelings whilst building strong attachments is highly skilled and should be recognised as such (Hochschild, 1983). Work with young children requires 'emotional

work of the highest calibre' (Elfer et al. 2003:27). The notion of what constitutes a 'professional' must be therefore be open to change.

Attempts to professionalise the workforce through the introduction of the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) marginalised the sector further. The entry requirements were the same as those needed to become a teacher, however, early years workers who gained the EYTS were unable to work in schools and, despite having a title that makes them appear to have status, continued to have poorer pay and working conditions than teachers (Nutbrown, 2012). The disparity of pay, working conditions and status between early years workers and teachers further degrades the profession (Osgood et al. 2017) and widens the divide between early years workers and teachers (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010).

The Media

Literature shows that work in teaching and education are often seen as the lowest value in society (Ingersoll & Mitchell, cited in Chong & Lu, 2019). When work in education is split into subsets, for example, preschool, primary, secondary, higher, and further education, it is preschool teaching that is considered of lowest value (Chan, 2012) and so early years workers have the most work to do in terms of overcoming obstacles to elevate their status (Buchanan, 2015). Societal status as well as interpersonal values and beliefs, contribute to professional identity and a sense of professionalism.

Social learning theory purports that aspects of our identity are impacted by the groups we belong to, including occupational groups, and how we are viewed by other people (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in society. Long standing popular expressions such as 'hair-or care', an assumption that women who do not possess academic abilities have only two options of career available to them; hairdressing or childcare, persist with the 'outdated equation between caring and female irrationality or anti-intellectualism' (Taggart, 2011:85). Common expressions frequently reinforced through the media, such as 'Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach', also act to degrade the whole teaching profession, impacting negatively on the professional identity of early years workers.

Chang-Kredl, Pauls and Foster (2019) argue that the low wages and poor working conditions are directly influenced by the social undervaluing of the sector. This results from the naturalising view of women as mother figures and cultural belittling of the profession though mainstream media texts which then become subtle and unconscious biases. Their analysis of popular media texts found stereotypical representations of the early years worker which reinforce societal assumptions. Female educators were depicted as 'maternal': feminine without being too sexual, white, in their 30's/40's, respectable, softly spoken, caring, quiet and complicit (Duffy, 2005) and to enjoy being with children is the norm (Colley, 2006). This educator takes care of the 'dirty' work and is often looked down upon and exploited by the middle-class customers who see childcare as work that is beneath them.

COVID-19

Much like during the policy reform in the late 1990's when the sector was thrust into the spotlight and where future societal success was rested on the shoulders of the early years workforce (Osgood, 2009), during this pandemic, the sector was hailed as essential frontline workers. However, the reality is that the sector received little public praise or recognition in comparison to other caring professions. As a direct result of government policy, underfunding and a lack of support during this pandemic, many providers were forced to close, or remain at risk of closure, particularly those in disadvantaged areas. This will have devastating consequences for young children's development in terms of a widening attainment gap (Early Years Workforce Commission, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the unjust treatment of the sector to the forefront for both those inside and outside of the sector, leading to many early years workers questioning their worth, professional value, position in society and subsequently their future.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth, the construction of the early years sector through government policy and the media, and how this influences public perception of the early years work. This study looks to explore the treatment and portrayal of the early years sector, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, using data such as newspaper articles and interviews published during January 2021, the third national lockdown in England. To achieve this aim, three objectives were defined:

• To explore the language used in the construction of the early years worker through representation in the media
• To explore language used in the construction of the early years sector in relation to public value and perception
• To infer the implications of the portrayal of the dominant discourse for the early years sector, in terms of judgement of their work, their labour conditions and the future of the sector

Methodology

The ontological and epistemological perspective taken in this research is that there is no single reality of truth to be found, and that reality is both socially constructed and in need of interpretation (Levers, 2013). This perspective is often aligned with postmodern thinking and suggests that a single phenomenon is open to multiple interpretations rather than a single truth (Pham, 2018). This research therefore uses an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative study is appropriate as the goal of this research is to analyse this social phenomenon by relying on a range of data, including individuals' experiences of a given situation during a specific time period. Qualitative methods allow for exploration and investigation of meaning (Willig, 2013) to enable interpretations to be drawn. This qualitative study uses a grounded theory methodology.

The study was performed using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is concerned with the contextual meaning of language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), how it is manipulated to achieve specific effects and to meet specific agendas and drawing meaning in terms of conversation or

culture (Shaw & Bailey, 2009). When applied critically, its purpose is to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimise social inequalities (Mullett, 2018). It can become a form of social action (Edley, 2001). Post-structuralism, feminism and sociological theory will shape the lens through which these discourses are viewed.

A purposive sampling method was applied to the data selection process. Purposive sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling in which researcher judgement is used to select data (Patton, 2002). Researcher judgement may impact the perceived reliability of the sources sampled and credibility of the research findings as it can never be free from bias. To ensure feasibility, a criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was adopted which included the following criteria: all data must have been published between 1st and 31st January 2021, all sources should be politically 'neutral' and considered credible, based on scores assigned by Ad Fontes Media, a media watchdog organisation, which measures media bias and reliability. A selection of newspaper articles, written and recorded interviews, policy and letters to the government were included in the data selection. *See Appendix 1 for selected data sources.*

The rationale behind the chosen timeframe was that data would be representative of the social and political context in relation to the research question. To understand the construction of the early years worker during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was essential to analyse discourse generated during that moment in time in which to draw conclusions. During the third national lockdown in England, changes to education were put in place, resulting in new policy, government guidance and media attention. Data gathered during this time could therefore provide the most valid data in relation to the research question.

The source of the texts are first verified, including the company or newspaper, the author and editorial staff involved. Notes are made on the style of the journalists, the general political position of the source, its affiliation with the government and the education sector. Following on from the background checks on the source, notes are made on the medium and genre of the discourse which shapes the meaning to the reader.

Interviews and video footage were transcribed. MAXQDA 2020, a software package for qualitative and mixed methods research analysis allowed discourses to be analysed for themes, repeated words or phrases using a colour coding system. Language was analysed for context and interpretation prior to code assignment. Codes were referred back to the data upon completion of each text analysis, and again after all texts had been analysed to ensure that the correct codes had been assigned. 'Smart Coding' allowed related codes and subcodes to be categorised together in a coding frame. The data was analysed for relationships among the codes and categories and themes were identified and developed. Although discourse analysis is interpretive and often intuitive, a coding programme was used to create order and allow for change and adaptations in the research if necessary following engagement in reflexivity, rather than as a means of carrying out analysis.

Resulting themes and patterns from analysis were reviewed and interpreted. Interpreting the data involves placing the findings in the broader context in relation to the research question, identifying who may benefit from this analysis. Following interpretation, conclusions were drawn in relation to the research question.

Ethical Considerations

Reflexivity, and an awareness that personal feelings, experiences, and beliefs can impact the research process (Haynes, 2012), must be applied throughout the research process, including data selection and interpretation. Consideration has been given to the sources which were selected; however, they may not be as credible, unbiased, or knowledgeable as each other. Some may have undisclosed political agendas affecting the selection and omission of information, show bias through language, headlines and placement, and may give misinformation, misinterpret data, or give false impressions (Fields, 2006). Data that does not support the research question or fit in with identified themes, must not be omitted to serve the purpose of collecting findings that provide a neat answer.

It is unknown whether there were any power imbalances, inadequate trust or time spent on building relationships with the participants interviewed. These factors could contribute to the participants not giving an honest self-representation of themselves (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). It

is also unknown whether participants felt that they were fairly represented following the editing process. Using secondary data in the public sphere, eliminates the possibility of seeking consent.

Although ownership of the data must be acknowledged, for data that is made freely available on public forums, such as in newspapers, television, and social media, further use and analysis is implied (Tripathy, 2013).

During interpretive research, particularly one in which is heavily contextualised, socially and in terms of both time and place, inferences drawn from data may not lend themselves well to replicability or generalisability (Leavy and Harris, 2019). Due to the nature of the social context, the research may not serve well to make any predictions about the future. Conversely, conclusions drawn from analysis may expose power relations and inequalities, bringing to light various forms in which inequality presents itself. Identifying these may cause uncomfortable feelings. It is impossible to know how someone may interpret findings from research. However, research oriented towards social justice is important for exploring subjective and collective experiences to increase understanding of how societal structures work (Charmaz, 2005). Social justice research can be the start of identifying injustices and bringing around tangible change.

Power relations and binaries such as male/female can be problematic and seen as normalising gender binaries, rather than acknowledging gender as diverse and fluid (Leavy & Harris, 2019). Where inequalities are found based on gender, the intention is neither to privilege nor marginalise individuals. For the purpose of this study, 'woman' and 'women' refers to those who are female and female identifying. When addressing 'gendered assumptions' or 'gender inequalities', gender is referring to biologically defined sex characteristics.

Data Analysis and Findings

Through analysis of discourse using a colour coding system, three clear themes emerged. The first theme is that the early years sector were subject to unjust treatment by the government including late and inconsistent guidance, a lack of financial support and being treated as an afterthought. These feelings are important as they are directly from those working in the sector.

The second theme is that early years workers are expendable, whether to the needs of others, or in terms of their safety. The final theme to emerge is that early years workers hold less value and status than other educational professionals and teachers, who were well financed, supported, acknowledged and praised throughout the pandemic.

Theme 1: Unjust treatment by the Government

The overwhelming theme that emerged in relation to the research question was the poor and unjust treatment of the sector by the government who felt forgotten, overlooked, undervalued, abandoned and 'hung out to dry'. The sector has had "no words of support, reassurance, direction, explanation, encouragement or recognition. Nothing but utter disdain" (David Wright, Day Nurseries, 5th January 2021). Government guidance for the sector was often published late and was 'risky, vague and inconsistent' (Jedidajah Otte, The Guardian, 18th January 2021)."We're just

forgotten, we're bottom of the pile – they don't seem to care" (Christine Berry, The Guardian, 28th January 2021).

Despite a full national lockdown due to the dangerous spread of the COVID-19 virus, early years settings were expected to remain open. Financial blackmail by the government meant that settings that closed would be penalised. A DfE spokesperson said, 'As the PM set out, all EY settings should remain open, and we would encourage them to stay open. Settings that choose to close will not receive early entitlements funding as they will not be delivering places' (Catherine Gaunt, for www.nurseryworld.co.uk, 5th January). "Add to this the fact that the government is providing minimal financial support to help providers get through this incredibly difficult period and it's hard to think of many other sectors that have been asked to do so much while being been treated with such disdain" (Neil Leitch for the EY Alliance).

Just as New Labour did in 1997, this conservative government has labelled the workforce as key workers essential in supporting the country through a global pandemic, whilst publicly being told how to do their job properly, imposing financial penalties and continuing to offer little funding or support. All this whilst receiving low pay, suffering from poor working conditions and being afforded little status or recognition (Osgood, 2009). This belittling of the profession though mainstream media texts will contribute to subtle and unconscious biases (Chang-Kredl et al, 2019).

The poor treatment, lack of support and financial penalties continues the discourse of derision (Osgood, 2006b). In doing this so publicly, the dehumanising of the early years sector is reinforced and becomes an act of violence against the workforce. The sector continues to be classed, gendered and depicted as unskilled and lacking (Ailwood, 2008; Osgood, 2009; Tronto, 2013). Despite this, and without support, responsibility has been placed on the early years, as it was with New Labour, to reduce and tackle poverty, social inequality and disadvantage (Dahlberg & Moss 2007; Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2009). Financial penalties act to place blame on those in the sector. By doing this, the government are exerting power over the workforce and silencing alternative discourses (Moss2006; Osgood; 2009).

Interpretation of the theme, in relation to the research question, is that that government action and policy has little regard for the early years worker, consequently constructing the early years worker through policy and media as of little worth. These views have emerged from the voices of professionals in the sector. This theme infers the resentment of the sector for the publicly poor treatment they are suffering as a result of government action and highlights the power imposed on the sector by the government.

Theme 2: Early years workers are expendable.

The second theme to emerge was the early years worker as expendable. The early years were 'asked to remain on the frontline during the most worrying period of a global pandemic with no PPE, no testing and no access to vaccinations'. The sector publicly voiced their fears: 'Most of us are scared, I've definitely had my moments where I've just sat in bed and cried', (Carolyn White, ITV, 21st January 2021). Despite this, the government removed financial support stating that 'clinically vulnerable can still go to work, which means they can't be furloughed' in a move that appears financially driven and shows no regard for people's lives. This is despite evidence suggesting that an estimated 1 in 10 early years workers contracted COVID-19 in December 2020 with some dying (Christine Berry, The Guardian, 28th January 2021).

The working-class women making up the majority of the sector continue to be there for the disposal of higher value workers, (Osgood, 2009) and continue to be exploited by middle-class customers who see childcare as work that is beneath them (Chang-Kredl et al, 2019).

The government's decision to keep the early years sector open is about 'protecting employment rather than protecting children' (Emma Hallett, BBC News, 6th January 2021), treating early years workers as "cannon fodder so 'higher value' work can go on" (Christine Berry, The Guardian, 28th January 2021). The regard for the safety of the early years workforce has been outweighed by the government's desire to ensure that at least some parents are able to continue to work.' (Neil Leitch, 5th January). The perception of the early years worker as of little value is mirrored in the views of parents. When one setting were short staffed because staff members had contracted COVID-19 and they expressed their fears, they were told that they were 'milking the pandemic' (Jan Stillaway, quoted in Jedidajah Otte, The Guardian, 18th January 2021).

Parents accessing childcare when working from home because 'it is hard to concentrate' (Kara Willetts, quoted in Emma Hallett, BBC News, 6th January 2021), highlights the privilege afforded to higher value workers as early years workers suffer on the frontline with no PPE, testing or vaccinations. This dominant discourse infers that the early years is something to be there for the convenience of others and reinforces the gendered and classed stereotype that working-class women are at the disposal of the middle-class whose needs they should be serving (Vincent & Braun, 2013). This too is consistent with findings that consumer needs are emphasised over the rights of the workforce (Chang-Kredl et al, 2019; Duffy, 2005; Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2012).

Interpretation of the theme, in relation to the research question, is that little regard has been given to the safety of those in the sector, they have been made expendable to the needs of others and hold little value in society.

Theme 3: Early years workers are not 'real' teachers.

The third theme to emerge is that early years workers are less important and less valued than teachers and not considered a part of the education system. Early years settings were forced to open, with no evidence that it was safe to do so, when all other schools, colleges and educational establishments were able to close to protect children and staff.

When addressing the public, the education secretary, Gavin Williams, each time, failed to mention the early years sector. He does, however, consistently praise the 'magnificent efforts of all the leaders, teachers and staff in all of our schools, colleges', and the 'fantastic teachers' describing how his 'admiration for teachers and all that they do has reached an even higher level' (Gavin Williamson, The Mail on Sunday, 2nd January 2021). He fails to mention, let alone give thanks or recognition to the early years sector, on the frontline and putting their lives at risk who were left having to 'fight to be given anywhere near the same level of treatment as schools every step of the way', for parity and for equity (Neil Leitch, EY Alliance, January 2021).

Omitting the early years from education discourse, conveys the message that early years work is 'childcare', not education, and early years workers are not educators. Despite policy reform and recommendations to improve the status of the workforce by focusing on the educational aspect of the sector, the education secretary has failed to follow his governments own agenda. This continues the dominant discourse of the early years as 'childcare', biologically determined women's work (Ailwood 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Osgood, 2006; Randall, 2000; Yarrow, 2015)

lacking in any real skill. This makes it implicit that the workforce is both gendered and classed (Osgood, 2006) and perpetuates the idea that work with children is a default career for the unintelligent, working-class woman.

The disparity of status, working conditions and pay between early years workers and teachers degrades the profession (Osgood et al. 2017) and widens the divide between early years workers and teachers (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010). Continued public praise for teachers in schools and colleges with no mention of, nor gratitude expressed for those working in the early years, does little to close this divide. This supports earlier findings that early years teaching is considered of lowest value in comparison to all other teaching professions (Chan, 2012).

Interpretation of the theme, in relation to the research question, is that the dominant discourse in the construction of the early years worker is that of low value, holding extraordinarily little societal or professional status.

Reflection on Findings

Conducting this study using secondary research posed some limitations, such as the opportunity to speak directly to those working in the sector to gain a deeper understanding of how it felt to be a part of the sector during this time. Sensationalism in media journalism is used to present stories in particular ways to provoke emotive feelings and public interest, usually at the expense of accuracy (Goran & Karamarko, 2015). Consideration should be given to the impact of public anger on journalistic bias and the heightened emotions of those working in the sector caused by the pandemic.

Although preconceived ideas of the findings were held, analysis has increased the understanding and focus of inquiry, particularly regarding the highlighting of structural injustices for those working in the sector. These research findings can therefore be beneficial in communicating wider understanding of the injustices and the prejudices imposed on the sector which can bring focus to ways in which to enact change.

Further primary research should be undertaken into the impact these findings have on those working in the sector, including mental health and wellbeing and the impact on their professional identity, with a focus of creating an action plan of support. Further research opportunities should look at intersectionality to uncover further power structures that marginalise groups within the already marginalised workforce.

Early years workers have long understood the place afforded to them within society. However, the obvious poor treatment and disregard appears to have escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many feeling that they have no choice but to leave the workforce. Acknowledging that they are unvalued, and their lives disposable has caused great damage, leaving a sector at breaking point and with little hope. For real change to occur there must be a move away from the 'childcare' terminology towards that of 'early childhood education' placing the sector firmly as part of the educational journey. This recognition must be reflected in fair pay, better working conditions and higher levels of funding and support. The government must recognise and acknowledge the power, oppression and structural injustices they impose upon the sector, give early years workers a voice and work alongside them to co-construct a new narrative for positive change.

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Appendix 1 – Selected Data Sources

Title/Description	Where the sources can be accessed	Source
Covid-19 has turned back the clock on working women's lives.	https://amp.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/10/covid-workingwomenpandemic-childcare-issues	The Guardian
Covid stress 'driving hundreds of childcare workers to quit profession'.	https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/31/covid-stress-drivinghundreds-ofchildcare-workers-to-quitprofession	The Guardian
'Show us it's safe' to be opensay nursery staff.	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/education-55574297	BBC
BBC Breakfast speaks to Neil Leitch on government decision to keep early years open during lockdown. Neil Leitch is the chief executive of the Early Years Alliance and a highly regarded Early years sector representative.	https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=X0813gQNFzs	BBC
Nursery staff are being treated like cannon fodder so 'highervalue' work can go on.	https://amp.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/28/nursery-staff-workcovidcrisis-early-years-support	The Guardian
'Risky, vague, inconsistent': nursery teachers in England lament Covid strategy.	https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/18/risky-vague-inconsistentnurseryteachers-in-england-lamentcovid-strategy	The Guardian

Letter from Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Early Years Alliance to Gavin Williams, Education Secretary.	https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/alliancewritesgavin-williamson-over-appallingexclusion-eyschools-reopening-debate	EY Alliance
Article by Neil Leitch: Alliance responds to government's inability to justify decision to keep nurseries open.	https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/allianceerespondsgovernments-inability-justifydecision-keepnurseries-open	EY Alliance

Nursery staff 'torn between duty and fear'.	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/ukenglandsomerset-55542831	BBC
Government Policy. Education Secretary sets out school contingency plans for England.	https://www.gov.uk/government/speech es/education-secretary-sets-outschoolcontingency-plans-for-england	Government website
Gavin Williamson: We must all move heaven and earth to get children back into the classroom.	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/articl e9107141/amp/GAVIN-WILLIAMSONheavenearth-children-classroom.html	Exclusive interview: Daily Mail
A letter from the NEU, representatives for the education and early years sector, to Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary.	https://neu.org.uk/media/14031/view	National Education Union
Covid: Nurseries 'forgotten by government' as cases soar among staff.	https://www.itv.com/news/2021-0121/covidnurseries-forgotten-bygovernment-as-casessoar-among-staff	ITV Includes recorded interviews with sector workers
Nurseries get 'no words of support'.	https://www.daynurseries.co.uk/news/ar ticle.cfm/id/1640319/nationallockdowngovernment-keeps-nurseriesopencloses-schools	Day Nurseries

A workforce in crisis saving our early years. A report looking at the sustainability of the sector after COVID-19.	https://www.cache.org.uk/media/1863/a workforce-in-crisis-saving-our-earlyyears.pdf	The Early Years Workforce Commission
Michael Gove says early years providers remain open to "support key workers" A BBC report covered by the EY Alliance.	https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2021/01/michael-gove-says-early-yearsprovidersremain-open-support-keyworkers	EY Alliance
Early years workers express fear and frustration over Government decision to keep nurseries open.	Early years workers express fear and frustration over Government decision to keep nurseries open | Nursery World	Nursery World

Disney and Children's Perception of Gender Roles and Expectations

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Research and Knowledge Exchange

Student Papers: June 2021 **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

The aim of this article is to examine the role Disney may play in contributing to children's early understandings of gender identity. Rather than relying upon adult perceptions or using conventional data collection methods to gather children's views, a creative participatory approach is used to capture children's views and lived experiences. This topic is worthy of consideration as gender is socially constructed which suggests certain behaviours each sex is expected to portray (Putri, 2017). Gender stereotypes have many negative outcomes, preventing children from participating in what they enjoy due to expectations to conform. With regards to early years settings, it is essential that practitioners encourage children to accept and respect all individuals, no matter their gender or whether they 'fit in' with society's expectations. This article is based on research 'with' children not 'on' children to reduce the adult-child power imbalance and to provide children more ownership of their views and experiences as they are the experts within their own lives (Roberts-Holmes, 2018).

Chapter 2- Literature

Before examining the influence of Disney on young children's understanding of gender, it is important to consider how children develop gendered identities, attitudes and behaviours. Theories tend to fall into two domains - biological and sociological (the 'nature or nurture' debate). Although there is not room within this article to explore this in any depth, some consideration will be given to social learning theories due to the focus of the study.

Social learning theories claim that boys/men and girls/women, and ideas of masculinity and femininity, are the result of culture and society. According to gender schema theory (Bem 1981, 1983), social agents deliver rules and cues to children as to what it means to be a 'girl' or a 'boy' (Soylemez, 2010), promoting gender-based schemas in young children. Mass media, including children's film and literature, is a particularly powerful socializing agent as it constantly transmits deeply embedded cultural norms relating to gender (Spinner et al 2018). Judith Butler extends the social learning theory through her concept of 'performativity' (she also applies her theory to sexuality). She asserts that gendering starts from birth when infants are expected to 'perform' and construct their gender in line with what is socially expected of what it means to be female or male (Duignan, 2020). These performances happen so often, it may suggest the idea that gender is biologically determined (Hamilton, 2021). However, post-structuralist theory argues that attention needs to be given to power relations, the fluidity of identity, children's agency and intersectionality. Although many children adopt behaviour that follow traditional gender norms, some ignore or reject certain aspects of masculinities or femininities (Hamilton, 2021).

In many western countries, Disney is one of the most popular sources of media involved in children's everyday lives. Although many parents see the Disney as a safe source of entertainment, it could result in children creating stereotypical views. Guo (2016) argues that princess movies reinforce traditional female stereotypes. Within the older princess movies such as Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, the women continuously cook, clean and await rescue from a male. Studies indicate that many young girls watch these movies repetitively and are influenced by the princesses (Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Girls who watch these movies tend to enjoy traditional activities, put less effort into challenging tasks and compare themselves to the unrealistic body image of the princesses (Dinella et al, 2014; Coyne, et al 2016). Disney have started to create more princess movies such as Mulan and Brave, where females are independent and participate in activities which may be seen stereotypically as a male's role. However, Islam and Akter (2020) argue gender stereotypes are still intimated throughout many new films. Whilst analysing the effects Disney may have on girls, it is as equally important to consider the impact it may have on young boys. In Beauty and the Beast, Gaston a key character, continually refers to how well built he is. Messages like this could result in young boys feeling they have to be largely built to be able to be called a 'man' or to impress people. Research suggests that within media there is a relationship between males being larger, stronger, taller and being more popular (González et al, 2020). This is portrayed by Disney characters such as Maui, Tarzan and Hercules. González et al (2020) assert that males shown in this way creates a negative body image for boys and contributes to gender stereotypes.

Disney characters have exposed children to negative body image (Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Due to Disney's high standard in appearance of their heroes and heroines, many girls feel a pressure to be kind and caring to others, to be a certain weight and to please people by acting in a certain manner (Golden and Jacoby, 2018; Guo, 2016). If skills and accomplishments are highlighted rather than the character's looks, children may be more determined to achieve academically instead of focusing on how others judge them physically (Guo, 2016). Research suggests Disney still contains sexist views and outdated traditions (Guo, 2016; Mouzakis, 2020). Kurniawati (2020) claims that even in the newer princess movie Brave, Merida's appearance is still very feminine despite Disney's efforts to challenge the 'normality' of their previous princess stories. Guo (2016) discovered that throughout most Disney princess films and literature 55% of comments which the princesses receive are focussed on their looks and only 11% are about their achievements. Although there is more Disney could do to challenge appearances and attributes of the main characters, Mouzakis (2020) states that the newer princesses could be seen as a good example for young girls as they go against their parents will, normally the father, to follow their own destiny, breaking down traditional 'norms'. This is shown in films such as, Moana, The Little Mermaid, Brave and Mulan.

Children's media and literature play a major impact in the views children have (Coyne et al, 2016).

What humans learn and experience throughout their childhood will have an impact on their future (Bourdieu, 2017). Disney may be working towards changing stereotypical traditions but original movies including Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, are still very popular amongst the younger generation (Golden and Jacoby, 2018).

Chapter 3 - Methodology
Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative stance as the aim of the study is to examine children's perceptions of Disney characters and whether they have any gender stereotypes. Being interested in the shift away from research 'on' or 'about' children towards ideology which recognises that children are experts on their own lives (Bolshaw and Josephidou 2019), an artsbased educational research (ABER) approach was selected. As with the participatory Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), ABER can help to elicit the many diverse voices of children, balance the power relationship between the child and adult researcher (Canosa et al, 2018), while also enabling children to express their lived experiences in a way which is more familiar, playful, enjoyable and worthwhile to them (Harris and Manatakis, 2013; Barton, 2015).

The research was undertaken in one primary school located in a low socio-economic status area in North-West England. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the number of children attending the school was limited, resulting in mixed age classes and, decreasing the number of children available. In total eight children, aged five to eight years old, all white British, were involved in the study (four boys and four girls).

Data Collection

Before working with the children, they were informed that the activities were designed to explore some of their favourite Disney characters and that there were no right or wrong answers. The two approaches used to collect data were 'draw and talk' and an 'image-values line' and a written narrative of children's comments. They were asked if they had any questions before each activity began. By doing this the children were made aware that the research intentions were to work 'with' them not 'on' them (Alderson and Morrow, 2020).

Okada and Ishibashi (2017) demonstrate that when children are asked to draw on their own a more subjective piece of work is created, as when drawing around others, some children may feel encouraged to use other's work as inspiration. This could also apply to opinions shared during group discussion; some children may mirror the answers of others (Powell and Smith, 2017), or even learn the stereotypes which other children hold. Thus, the decision was made to conduct the activities on an individual basis to ensure that the children could express their own views and drawings without the influence of others, whilst also giving quieter children an opportunity to express their opinions.

For the draw and talk exercise, each child was provided with paper and pens and asked to draw their favourite Disney character. A discussion then took place with previously prepared openended questions in a way which fit into the conversation taking place. Questions were based around why the character was their favourite, what they do within the movie/story which influences this choice and whether they would still have the same thoughts about the character if they were the opposite gender. Noonan et al (2016) encourage 'draw and tell', asserting that this open method, where children are free to discuss their drawing, allows children to put across their personal views and

opinions, rather than the views of adults. However, Lyon and Carabelli (2016) state although artwork may empower children and put them at ease, 'non-artistic' children may feel uncomfortable or dismissive with the task.

For the second activity the children were provided with twelve picture cards of Disney characters: six male characters and six female characters, from modern and original Disney films. The children were asked to use an image-value line (numbers 1 to 12) to rate the characters from their favourite to their least favourite. This activity followed with a discussion to explore why the children had put the characters in this order, concepts within the film/story which cause them to make this decision and whether they would place the characters in a different order if they were the opposite gender. Visual methods and fun, interactive activities often make children more responsive and, the conversations held more detailed (Nyumba et al, 2018), resulting in more reliable results (Bakar et al, 2016).

Ethics

An information and participant consent form which included a description of the research, what the children would be asked to do and their rights, were given to the class teacher. The researcher asked if the forms should be distributed to parents, but due to the nature of the study the teacher did not feel this to be necessary, as there were no obvious factors which would cause the children harm. However, the British Educational Research Association (2018: p.15) advises that where an individual's age or circumstance may limit the extent to which they 'understand or agree voluntarily to participate' the researcher should 'explore ways in which they can be supported to participate with assent'. Thus, before undertaking the exercises with the children, a verbal explanation was given outlining the purpose of the research, and continuous checks were made to ensure that the children knew they could withdraw at any point and had the right to decline any questions asked.

To maintain other ethical concerns, the activities were conducted in the same room as teachers to ensure the safeguarding of the children. With regards to the drawings produced by the children it was only ethically right that they had ownership of their data. Children were asked what they would like to do with their drawing and were not made to feel under any obligation to leave their work with the researcher. Anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained by referring to the children as 'Girl 1', 'Boy 1'. Once data was collected it was kept in a password-protected computer to ensure that any information given was secure.

Limitations

There are some limitations which may question the validity of research outcomes. The first factor to consider is an unfamiliar face working with the children. When an unfamiliar face visits a setting, many children may act differently causing inconsistencies (Powell and Smith, 2017).

One of the main disadvantages was due to Covid-19. As most of the children were taking part within online learning, it meant that there were not many children left in the school to complete the

activity with. For the age group the study was aimed at, there were only four boys available, meaning only four girls could also be selected, reducing the size of the group to eight children.

Using artwork may have caused limitations. Children who feel they lack art skills may have worried or felt pessimistic (Blaisdell et al, 2019), negatively impacting on their views.

Recording everything the children said during the activities was challenging to do by hand and the children would sometimes have to repeat themselves. Using a digital recorder or video may have allowed more opportunity to observe the child throughout the activity, not only what they said, but the way they acted too.

Analysis

Once data had been collected it was coded to categorise themes which occurred across the discussion, artwork and image-value line. The technique included scrutinising the data by arranging it into a systematic order (Chen et al, 2018); a process of segregation, comparing and grouping, which led to themes (Saldana, 2021). These themes were then compared to academic theories and published literature.

3.   Chapter 4 - Findings and Discussion

The results which follow are based on the views of eight children (four boys and four girls aged five to eight years old) who took part in two activities based on Disney characters i) a draw and tell activity ii) an image-value line activity where the children were given twelve characters to order from their favourite to their least, followed by an informal discussion.

It should be noted, all the boys decided to draw a male character whereas all the girls drew a female character. As some of the children wanted to keep their drawings and no cameras were allowed in the school only four drawings can be presented. During analysis two themes emerged i) the characters' physical appearances and ii) characteristics and behaviours.

Appearance

Throughout both activities, all children constantly referred to the characters' appearances (hair, physical shape, clothing, colours worn). For the girls, hair was one of their favourite features about Disney characters. Girl 1 drew Rapunzel as her favourite character and her friend Pascal who is portrayed as a male. When asked what happened to Rapunzel Girl 1 replied: *"The witch cut off her beautiful long blonde hair. She looked better when she had long magical hair and was sad when it was cut off as it turns brown and short".*

Figure 1 Belle - Girl 4

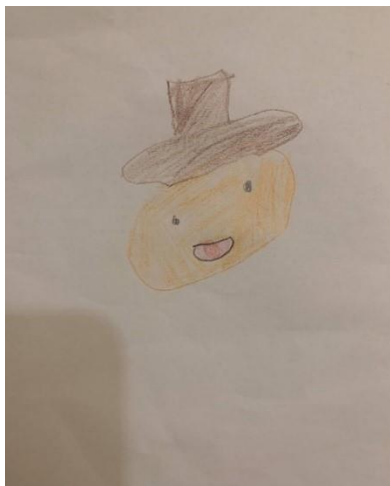**Figure 2 Arialle - Girl 2**
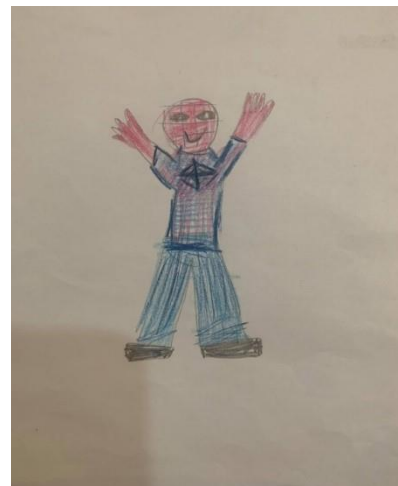

Figure 3 – Boy 2

Figure 4 - Boy 3

When drawing Pascal, she did not include eyelashes but did include them on Rapunzel. *"Are you going to put some eyelashes on Pascal?"* she was asked, *"No because he's a boy"* she replied, implying that as a male he cannot have eyelashes due to society associating long eyelashes as a feminine trait.

During the second activity, Girl 2 put all princesses at the front of the value line except from Snow White, when asked *"What is it about the other princesses that make them better?"* she replied, *"Because they have long hair, pretty dresses, better patterns. I don't like Snow Whites short hair"*. Girl 1 and Girl 2 implied that having long hair over short hair was important, which could suggest they see short hair as a negative factor. In contrast, the boys did not include hair on their characters. This may link to Bem's (1981) gender schema which indicates that by the age of two children recognise physical appearances and categorise these appearances to fit into a specific gender.

It seems that clothing influences children's perceptions of gender. For example, Girl 2 justified putting Snow White last due to the 'yellow and blue' clothes she wore. When asking Girl 1 why Rapunzel was her favourite character she replied, *"She has a pretty purple dress"* and when asking Girl 4 why she disliked Wreck-It Ralph she replied, *"Because he wears dirty clothes".* Research suggests that many companies use certain colours to attract specific genders (Hess and Melnyk, 2016). Therefore, Disney might use the colours of the clothes which the characters wear to appeal to a certain gender.

The children were asked if the character would look different if they were the opposite sex and whether they would still like/dislike them. Most children mentioned how they would wear different clothes. During the second activity Girl 2 contradicted herself when talking about Cinderella. She was asked *"Would she still be your favourite if she was a boy?"* She replied, *"Yes, because of the dress".* Then when asked if she would look any different, she said "*Yeah, because she wouldn't have a dress, long hair, lipstick or any money".* When Girl 3 was asked if Elsa would still be her favourite character if she was a boy, she replied *"No, she wears high heels."* When asked *"Can boys wear high heels?"* she replied *"No, boys don't do that".* These statements and the drawings imply that Disney's characters clothing portray traditional stereotypes, as most of the females wear dresses and only wear trousers when dressing 'like a man' as shown in Mulan (Murnen et al, 2016). Studies undertaken by Birner (2016) and Block (2019) suggest many pre-school children believe only females can wear dresses and show concern when they see a male or a girl with short hair wearing a dress.

Baker et al (2016) assert many children believe that having an interest in fashion is associated with a female trait. If a male were to wear a dress or focus on clothing, then they may be regarded as 'queer'. Within the study only one boy discussed clothing whereas all the girls mentioned it. Similarly, only Boy 3 included detailed clothing onto his drawing whereas all the girls included princess dresses.

Aladdin, who is physically smaller than the rest of the male Disney characters, was placed last in the children's value lines. The children did not have much to say about Aladdin's his appearance, but his characteristics were discussed by the boys (examined in the next theme). Alternatively, one male character who was popular amongst the boys and girls was Wreck-It Ralph. Only one child did not like him, the rest all brought him up into conversation or placed him at the beginning of the value line. When asked why he was popular, five out of the eight children mentioned how largely built he was. When asked *"What would Wreck-It Ralph be like if he was a girl?"* the children replied:

> Boy 2 - *"He would be polite but not strong".*

> Boy 3 - *"He would have muscles, but they wouldn't be as big".*

> Boy 4 - *"Way different, he would look tiny and small".*

> Girl 1 - *"I wouldn't like him because he would be a strong girl with big hands".*

These comments suggest that the children believe women cannot be as physically big or as strong as a man. This was also found by Brown and Stone (2016) who assert that women who are athletic tend to be targets of harassment or homophobic comments. Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020) support this, claiming women within the sport industry are often labelled as lesbians due to them not physically conforming in the traditional gender expectations.

Characteristics and Behaviours

Children's reasoning for liking the characters also depended on ways they acted. Stereotypically the boys disliked the princesses. They described them as *"clumsy", "boring", "polite", "submissive" "dozy" and "weak"*. Boy 2 said 2 *"There are too many of them and the things that happen to them are all the same"*. In contrast the girls liked the princesses as they *"sing really good"* (Girl 2) and *are rescued by a prince* (Girl 1). Behaviours which the children associated with males were *"fast", "brave", "aggressive" and "funny".* One stereotypical characteristic was linked to voices, men having a lower tone whilst females have a higher tone. Children felt that if the characters were to change sex then they would change their tone of voice. This is an important factor to be addressed as within modern society there are now transgender and non-binary individuals.

From the children's responses, it is apparent that powerful gender roles are represented throughout many Disney storylines related to what women are expected to do: sing songs, wait around to be rescued by a male, lack personality and independence. Resene (2017) states how in many Disney movies the men are at work whilst the women dance and sing. This could give children an unrealistic view of gender expectations and may also relate singing as a female activity. Moreover, boys who may want to sing may be faced with homophobic comments. Reilly and Barry (2020) highlight the impact of discrimination upon males who cross the gender divide and how they may face violence due to what they wear or the way in which they act.

Whitfield (2017) argues that instead of being concerned about who sings, the focus should be on what is being sung. During one song in Mulan an army commander sings about how he is unsatisfied with the men he has been sent and describes them as daughters instead of sons. It also states how challenging physical activities must be achieved to be a worthy man. In Cinderella, the mice repeatedly mention Cinderella's beauty implying that being the most beautiful is a state of importance. In one of the songs a male mouse is not allowed to help with the sewing because he is a male.

Both the girls and boys agreed that Mulan, Merida and Moana were all different to the rest of the princesses. Girl 3 swapped Cinderella and Mulan around in the value line (putting Mulan near the front), when asked for her reasoning behind the change she replied, *"Because Mulan is brave and she's different from the other princesses"*. Boy 1 said, *"Princess are boring, but I like Moana because of the story on the boat"*. Boy 2 said, "*I don't like princesses they all like castles, but I like Moana because she's different"*.

Salden (2019) claims that these three princesses are a breakthrough for Disney, the beginning of presenting women as strong individuals. Mulan starts off by portraying traditional stereotypes as she goes with a full face of make-up in feminine clothes to visit a match maker to find a husband. However, she is not interested in the match maker, but instead her goals are to make her family proud. With this attitude Shehatta (2020) suggests Disney is showing girls that they can be who they wish to be and do not have to follow gender norms. This also relates to the character Brave. However, Streiff and Dundes (2017) argue that Disney still has a long way to go, using Moana as an example. Moana goes on a journey to find her independence against her father's wishes. Her companion Maui has a stereotypical masculine figure and anxieties about Moana's abilities.

Although Moana is a strong heroine some elements of the storyline contain stereotypical similarities to the other Disney princesses (Streiff and Dundes, 2017).

Another stereotype involved Lightning McQueen from Cars. All the girls placed Lightning McQueen near, or at the end, of the value line stating:

> Girl 1 - *"Because he's a boy and my brother like's cars"*.

> Girl 2 - *"I don't like him because it's about cars"*.

> Girl 3 - "*I don't like cars, they're for boys"*.

Most of the boys, however, liked Lightning McQueen and placed him near the front line. Comments included: "I like Lightning McQueen because he's a fast car". (Boy 3) and "Cars are for boys, like mechanics are all boys, only a few girls do this" (Boy 4). Boy 4 suggests he mainly sees this as a job for men. Alfaro et al (2017) and GoldieBlox (2017) claim only 14% of engineers globally are women whereas men represent 86%, suggesting this is due to the toys and literature accessed during childhood. Baker et al (2016) found that 58% of boys believed both genders could be engineers/mechanics but only 35% of girls agreed with this.

Finally, Aladdin was the least liked male character. Slenderly built, Nope (2016) describes him as having "new male" characteristics, where men are sensitive and romantic, rather than traditional traits such as strength and dominance. However, even when stereotypes are challenged, some children might see traits as unusual or negative. For example, placing Aladdin at the end of the value line Boy 1 explained, *"Haven't watched it much, think he falls off a magic carpet"*. This comment could imply Aladdin is seen as weak and monotonous. Boy 2 compared Aladdin against the other male characters, placing him last "All the princesses live in castles, only Aladdin lives in a castl

4.   Chapter 5- Conclusion

It seems that despite Disney's efforts to overcome sexist and outdated views, new storylines still include gender expectations relating to the appearances and actions of the characters. As discussed, children learn society's gender expectations from a young age, from many aspects of culture, Disney being a key factor. With regards to the research questions, it seems children do hold strong stereotypes concerning the appearance, characteristics and behaviours expected of male and female characters. This highlights the importance of monitoring and breaking down traditional stereotypes within popular children's culture such as Disney. Rather than fearing or ignoring Disney movies and literature, it highlights the importance of parents and practitioners monitoring and challenging traditional norms by exploring the negative impact of gender stereotypes with young children. A similar study could be undertaken exploring gender and sexuality as it was apparent many children had stereotypical views about Aladdin appearing more feminine than the other males.

The children involved in the study, show just how much young people may open-up to disclose their views and experiences, when a fun and participatory data collection method is adopted and, the topic is attractive to them.

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