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## The Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network Student Publication Journal



Editor: Dr Tim Clarke (University of the West of England)

  
Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network

# The Research and Knowledge Exchange

## Research and Knowledge Exchange Statement

- To develop the next generation of researching graduate professionals to make positive contributions to the care and education of babies, young children, and their families.
  - To develop a community of practice for early childhood students and academics.
  - To develop confidence in students to provide a voice for their research findings.
  - To promote early childhood research with the aim of informing and improving policy and practice.
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## Aims:

- To offer an opportunity for ECSDN members & students to share their research with each other.
  - To enable the opportunity for development of shared research projects. • To create opportunities for members to collaborate on publication
- 

## Themes:

- Young children's perspectives of forest schools.
- Environments, wellbeing, and inclusion.
- Reading aloud to babies
- The effect of poverty on development

## Editorial

**EDITOR:** Dr Timothy Clark (University of the West of England)

Welcome to the 2026 Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN) student journal. It has been a pleasure to read so many excellent submissions this year, with six successful papers included from students and graduates representing different universities from across the UK. Supporting opportunities for student publication via the journal is an important and valuable part of the work of the ECSDN. Through providing a platform to showcase and support high quality academic work, it aims to contribute to enhancing the status, aspirations, opportunities and contributions of early childhood students and graduates. Previous authors have used their published papers to support further progression through conference submissions, job applications and even in a TED-X talk, and the growing online archive of papers acts as a reference point, illustration and hopefully an inspiration for current cohorts. Whilst traditional approaches to higher education teaching and assessment typically grounded in the 'future scholar' (Wong & Chiu, 2019) model (i.e. learning to write like an academic) are increasingly subject to scrutiny, particularly with growing focus on the role of Gen AI, supporting the development of rigorous, critical and reflective academic writing remains an important part of early childhood degrees. Writing acts as an important form of thinking, learning and reflection (Menary, 2007) and opportunities to write for wider audiences have been shown to have empowering and motivational impacts for students (Adams, 2019).

The successful authors this year are Orla McAtee (University of Portsmouth), Amalie Abdali (University of the West of England), Nicole Peh (Northampton University), Princess Souassou Tsiagbe (The London Institute of Early Years), Elena Comber Davies (University of Staffordshire) and Beatrice Wagstaff (Norland College). Their work addresses a wide range of important early childhood topics, including children's emotions, professional growth and leadership and perspectives on the role of digital technology.

Orla McAtee's paper '*The importance of quality leaders in Early Childhood Education and Care*' explores how effective leadership influences the quality of care and education in early

years settings. Using Lewin's change theory alongside other reflective frameworks, she analyses a case study from her practice to propose strategies for resolving leadership challenges and fostering team cohesion. This paper will be of value for early childhood professionals, students and leaders who are interested in leadership theory and its practical application in improving outcomes for children and families.

Amalie Abdali provides *'An exploration into children's perspectives on strategies to support the expression of their emotions'*. Within this, she investigates how young children perceive strategies that which aim to help them express their emotions, placing children's voices at the centre of the research. Through a small-scale study using the Mosaic approach, she explores tools including feelings flashcards, storytelling, and "How I Feel" wheels, highlighting the importance of emotionally enabling environments and adult support. This work will interest practitioners and students seeking child-centred approaches to emotional development and inclusive practice.

Nicole Peh's work explores *'The importance of paternal relationships in young children's lives'*. Nicole examines the impact of paternal emotional involvement on children's social and emotional development, drawing on attachment theory and an interactionist framework. Her cross-cultural study considers how factors such as parenting style, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms might influence father-child relationships, and the implications of this for young children. This paper will appeal to those interested in working with families and strategies to strengthen paternal engagement.

Princess Souassou Tsiagbe's paper is titled *'Early Years Practitioners' Perceptions of Digital Technology Integration: A Practitioner-Led Case Study'*. Princess investigates how early years practitioners perceive the integration of digital technology within EYFS settings, using a mixed-methods approach to uncover both enthusiasm and hesitation. Her findings explore the potential benefits of tools like interactive whiteboards and programmable toys, alongside barriers such as limited training. This paper will be of interest to students exploring the intersection of pedagogy and technology, and to those considering how leadership and professional development can shape digital practice in early childhood education.

Elena Comber-Davies interestingly titled paper *'Under the Surface: A Fire Shrimp's Reflection on Professional Growth and Identity in Early Childhood Education'* offers a deeply reflective and creative exploration of professional identity through the metaphor of a fire shrimp. Weaving personal experiences with theoretical frameworks such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory her paper highlights the emotional and ethical dimensions of early years practice, the tensions between policy and relational care, and the transformative power of reflective learning. This piece will resonate with students and practitioners interested in professional growth, inclusion, and the role of creativity in shaping educational identity.

Beatrice Wagstaff's work concludes this collection with *'The Impact of Sensory Play on Self-Regulation in Children: A Qualitative Case Study into Home-Based Experiences'*. Beatrice examines the role of sensory play in supporting children's self-regulation, drawing on a home-based case study to foreground children's voices and parental perspectives. Her research explores how sensory experiences may promote focus, relaxation, and emotional resilience, while also considering environmental influences such as sibling interaction and technology use. This paper will appeal to readers interested in play-based learning, wellbeing, and the practical strategies that underpin holistic development in early childhood.

All of these student papers have been blind-reviewed by at least two early childhood academics, with each author using their reviewer feedback to support the development of their work. As always, the ECSDN is very grateful to these reviewers for giving up their time to support the student journal – and to the lecturers who have supported and encouraged students to submit their papers. Finally, a big well done to these six students who have put significant amounts of work into their papers and shown the bravery, ambition and enthusiasm to share and showcase this to a wider audience. I very much hope that you enjoy reading their important and thoughtful contributions.

Dr Tim Clark, Director of Research and Enterprise, UWE Bristol

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## Reviewers

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**Article 1**

**The importance of quality leaders in Early Childhood  
Education and Care**

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### **About the author:**



**Orla McAtee**

### **Author biography:**

My name is Orla, and I have recently graduated at the University of Portsmouth with a BA honours Early Childhood Studies degree. My experience on placement in various early years settings encouraged me to delve deeper into notions of professionalism and leadership within the sector. I am keen to use my knowledge and skills learnt through the degree to make an impact in early years settings and develop practice in new ways, for the benefit of children and practitioners alike.

### **Level of study:**

Six

### **Membership institution:**

University of Portsmouth

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## **Introduction**

This work will present a critical analysis and informed approach on how to lead and manage quality care and education for children and families. It addresses a potential issue that has risen within a private day nursery and provides a solution to the problem. The importance of professionalism within early childhood education and care (ECEC) will be discussed, and how notions of professionalism impact leadership and management. Using Lewin's (1952) theory of change, the model consisting of three areas unfreeze, change and refreeze provide a clear and concise action plan for the nursery. Other theories such as Driscoll's (2006) reflective model, Herzberg's (1968) motivation hygiene theory and Tuckman's (1965) team performance theory will be explored and applied to the scenario, to analyse the situation and inform a solution. Finally, the action plan will end with discussing the importance of communication for successful leadership and management and will evaluate the outcome and effectiveness of the leadership change put forward.

## **Background**

As a deputy manager of a private day nursery that cares for 120 children, it has come to my attention that there is an issue within one of the toddler rooms. A new room leader was appointed due to a staff member going on maternity leave, and their behaviour has changed since being appointed this new role. The new room leader has become authoritarian and has been telling staff to 'do what they are told' which has caused other staff members to become unhappy. Additionally, the new room leader has enforced a change in the routine of the children, limiting the amount of outdoor play they have. Other staff members have commented that the new routine is not as engaging for the children and as a result there have been some challenging behaviour incidents with the children. Parents have also started to comment negatively about the change within the toddler room. I have been reflecting on this change and have thought deeply about leadership and management theory, motivation and reflective practice. This case study will use this as a foundation for approaching the meeting with the staff member, to provide a clear resolution to the problem to improve the practice for the benefit of the children and families in our care. It may be said that as a setting, it is our responsibility to provide guidance during an induction for the new room leader, as they may not have the skills or knowledge ready for this role. Therefore, it is important that a solution is found to support the new room leader and ensure that best practice is being upheld for the children in the setting.

## **Professionalism In ECEC**

It is now widely recognised that quality ECEC is determined through quality leadership (Nuttall et al., 2023). A key strategy in developing quality leadership is implementing quality standards and increased qualifications for the professionalisation of the workforce (Irvine et al., 2024). Professionalism, a long-debated term within ECEC, can be argued to be a challenge to define due to the lack of formal pay structure, lack of professional registration body and variation of work titles and roles (Miller & Cable, 2008; Chalke, 2013). This fragmentation causes difficulty when trying to adopt a professional identity for those working in the ECEC sector. It could be argued that it is the responsibility of ECEC practitioners to use their voices to clarify the professional values and competencies they embody (Havnes, 2018). Through reflexive practice, practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of their practice and enable the articulation of professional skills and definitions, to claim their own professional identity (Chalke, 2013). Through stating clear professional standards and values for the practitioners working within the nursery setting, this can allow for a united understanding of the professional identity which can provide staff with the confidence needed to understand their roles. As a graduate and deputy manager, it is my responsibility to continually reflect on my own and the other practitioners' practice, to shape the professional standards for the nursery. This in turn will contribute to professionalisation of the sector from the ground up, in order to improve practice, pedagogy and unite the ECEC community in getting the recognition it deserves (Havnes, 2018).

## **Unfreeze**

The first phase within Lewin's (1952) theory of change model is 'unfreeze'. This includes recognising the need for change, creating plans and alerting other members of staff of the

need for change (Hayes, 2022). To unfreeze the situation, Driscoll's (2006) reflective model, What? So What? Now What? could be applied to the scenario in the nursery, to clearly highlight the need for change. Reflection is an ongoing process and attitude which enables practitioners to learn from experience and provides strategies to deeply review events or experiences from many angles (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). By using Driscoll's (2006) model, and understanding the importance of reflective practice, it is possible to identify what the issue is with the toddler room, the impact this is having on children and staff, and what could be done to provide a solution. Through reflecting on these points as a deputy manager, but also with the other staff members, this can allow a readiness for change, to help the staff move forward and embrace the future (Rodd, 2014). A guided reflection with the staff members can create an environment where all staff have the opportunity to reflect on the situation and think deeply about the quality of practice within the setting. Visualisation may be used as a tool when applying this reflective model, as mind maps for each stage can be used to reflect on the situation in a straightforward and accessible way. Implementing this reflective practice for all staff, according to Rodd (2014), will embed this into future practice, to build confidence when addressing bigger issues or day to day events, to improve the quality of ECEC in the nursery. It is evident reflecting on the situation that the team is going through a period of 'storming' as theorised by Tuckman (1965). The staff are becoming frustrated with the authoritarian style of the new room leader and the reality that a new room leader is taking over is sinking in. As deputy manager, it is my responsibility to ensure that the team move forward into the next phase of Tuckman's (1965) theory, 'norming', where roles and tasks are made clear, and team cohesion is restored. It is also my responsibility as deputy manager to be reflexive, a skill which involves questioning my own beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions and prejudices (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Embodying reflexivity will allow for a higher level of self-awareness and allow me to identify the deeper-rooted issues that need to be resolved to provide the best outcome for the children in our care. It should also be acknowledged that my own beliefs and values as a leader may impact the way forward for the setting, which demonstrates the criticality of reflecting as a team, to ensure multiple viewpoints and reflections are considered. The critical reflection about the current issue in the toddler room enables the staff to recognise the need for change and begin to visualise a more desirable future for the staff and nursery atmosphere itself.

## Change

The second stage in Lewin's (1952) model is 'change'. This involves implementing new attitudes, beliefs and modifying the systems within the organisation that shape behaviour (Hayes, 2022). One-way new attitudes can be restored in the staff is through motivation. Herzberg's (1968) hygiene motivation theory can be used to understand the factors that contribute to staff job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Factors such as recognition, growth, and responsibility can motivate staff to improve their work performance (Martin, 2017). Hygiene factors, such as low salary, can cause lack of motivation and unstable interpersonal relationships between staff members and with managers can cause dissatisfaction and low morale. In relation to the scenario at hand, it is evident that there has been a breakdown in the interpersonal relationships between the staff members in the toddler room, as they are

becoming unhappy with the new room leader's style of leadership. Moreover, the staff members may feel that their work is going unrecognised, as the room leader position was assigned to someone else. The new room leader themselves may also feel unhappy with the new responsibility or working conditions, which could also lead to their lack of motivation. Through using theory of motivation, the situation can be broken down, and it can be easier to identify reasons why the atmosphere has turned negative within the nursery and find solutions. Ensuring that both hygiene and motivation factors are present for all staff will have the most positive impact on staff motivation for them to perform at their best for the benefit of the children in the nursery (Martin, 2017).

Additionally, leadership style can also impact how change is introduced and received in the setting. Leaders are vital as they influence others, have followers and a clear idea of what they want to achieve (Rodd, 2013). The current room leader is adopting an authoritarian leadership style, which involves a high level of control, with all decisions made by the leader, and the main concern is for the task to be completed (Lindon & Lindon, 2012). This style of leadership is becoming ineffective in the nursery, as the staff are unhappy with being told what to do and are displeased with the change of routine for the children. As deputy manager I would adopt a democratic style of leadership, including open communication, shared leadership and team responsibility for developing best practice (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016). Through embodying this style, this will consider the staff's perspectives to make appropriate changes to motivate the staff so that they perform at their best. It is also my responsibility to communicate this with the new room leader, so that they understand how their leadership style is affecting the team and how to lead efficiently, as it is likely they have not had the opportunity to be trained on this as the room leader position was filled quickly.

## **Refreeze**

The final phase of Lewin's (1952) change theory is 'refreeze'. This includes reinforcing the and embedding the new behaviours and attitudes to integrate change into routines and practices of the nursery (Hayes, 2022). An important strategy to solidify the changes is clear communication. Effective communication includes active listening, constructive feedback, confidence, respect and non-verbal messages (Falcone, 2022). This is important to use in order to monitor the changes and provide feedback to the staff on their practice. Strategies that involve the staff are argued to lead to a higher level of sustainability and commitment rather than changes that are imposed onto the staff (Hayes, 2022). Therefore, communicating clearly and collaborating with the staff to implement changes and discuss issues is vital. This will allow the staff to clearly understand and feel involved in the process of change. Change is a cycle of learning, and through communicating Lewin's (1952) theory of change, breaking it into small understandable tasks can make this more achievable for the staff in the nursery (Rodd, 2014). Therefore, as a recommendation to solve the situation from the deputy manager perspective, I would chair a meeting with the new room leader to discuss the issues and work on a solution. Ensuring that the feedback is constructive toward the new room leader is essential, focusing on the behaviour not the person, and making it clear about what we need to achieve (Lindon et al., 2016). Additionally, meeting with all the staff in the toddler room is also necessary, to ensure that the staff are working together as a

team. Teamwork involves effective leadership and collective responsibility (Rodd, 2006). A learning culture which breaks down barriers that restricts growth needs to be supported in the nursery, to sustain effective change (McDowall & Murray, 2012). Relating to the issue in the toddler room, the staff need to be aware of the breakdown in relationships that have occurred and the changes that will be put in place to resolve the problem and improve practice for the children in the nursery. This will involve reassessing the leadership style the new room leader adopts, having an open discussion about the children's routine and time outdoors, and understanding more about what the staff would like to see from their new room leader and vice versa. Through implementing this leadership, the staff can understand clearly what has gone wrong and what needs to be done, to improve the quality of care and ethos of the nursery for the children and families involved.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this piece of work has analysed how leadership and management theory can be applied to a scenario in a nursery. Using Lewin's (1952) change theory, a clear approach to resolving the issue within the toddler room has been demonstrated. In ECEC, effective leadership is essential to the quality-of-care children receive in a setting (Carroll- Meehan et al., 2019). As deputy manager, it is my responsibility to reflect on the issue within the toddler room to provide a solution, make changes and motivate the staff in order to improve the care the children receive. Ongoing reflection from all staff members in the nursery is vital to learn from experiences from multiple angles to understand and acknowledge good practice as well as what needs to be improved (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Using Driscoll's (2006) reflective framework, the issue in the toddler room is clearly identified and unpicked. Only then can change be planned and using theories such as Herzberg's (1968) motivation theory, Tuckman's (1965) performance and leadership theory, these can be useful in order to understand the dynamics within the nursery and identify the issues. Applying these theories will allow the development of an effective solution for the nursery, to improve the practice and environment for both the staff and children within the setting.

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Article 2

## An exploration into children's perspectives on strategies to support the expression of their emotions

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### About the author:



**Amalie Abdali**

### Author biography:

My name is Amalie and I have recently completed my final year of a BA(Hons) Early Childhood degree at UWE which has been a joy from start to finish. I have found a passion through this degree for researching children's emotions and how to assist children with their emotional expressions. I have been working with children in various fields for around 8 years now and wish to carry on studying to eventually get a PhD to become an educational psychologist and continue to work with children for the foreseeable future!

### Level of study:

Six

### Membership institution:

University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol

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## Introduction

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) suggests that through adult guidance children can learn to understand and manage their own emotions and regulate their behaviour accordingly (DfE, 2024a). However, can we truly expect children to do so effectively without emotionally safe environments and meaningful opportunities for expression? This research explores strategies that support young children’s emotional expression, directly from their perspective, to identify what they find most helpful.

Emotional expression is defined as the ability to describe one’s own or others’ emotions in a certain context (Li, 2023) and is key to making the “inner world accessible to the outside” (Grund and Holst, 2023, p.2). Children begin to use emotional language from two years-old (Grosse et al., 2021) and yet, while over “75% of 4-6 years-old children can understand emotional words such as happiness, sadness, anger and fear” (Li, 2023, p. 25), children can benefit from the support of an attuned adult as they learn to articulate and regulate their emotions (DfE, 2024b). This study therefore aims to address these challenges in emotional articulation.

Given the growing concerns over children's mental health (WHO, 2024) and calls for a “meaningful and balanced education” which includes emotional well-being (Cefai et al., 2018, p.28), the findings aim to guide practitioners, caregivers, and policymakers in achieving this. Additionally, this study aims to place children’s voices at the foreground of research to deepen our understanding of how to create inclusive, emotionally supportive environments.

This study evaluates three strategies to help children identify, understand, and positively express emotions. Conducted with six 4–5-year-olds in a reception class in Bristol, including children with English as an Additional Language, the study aims to amplify children’s voices in shaping emotional education. The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. What do children perceive as the role of the adult in supporting emotional expression?
2. What strategies do children identify as effective for their emotional expression?

3. What role does play, and creative activities have in helping children express their emotions?

## **Literature review**

### **Defining emotional expression**

Emotions are widely recognised as a “fundamental part of human experience” (Peluso and Freund, 2019, p.421), and yet there is no commonly accepted definition (Scarantino, 2016; Dennison, 2024). Emotional expression is typically defined as the external display of internal feelings (Mathews et al., 2016) but due to different theoretical frameworks offering varying interpretations of this, the concept is complex and multi-faceted. Scarantino (2017) takes an evolutionary view, seeing emotional expression as a communicative signal of intentions. In contrast, psychotherapeutic approaches view it as a task aimed at emotional understanding and resolution (Peluso and Freund, 2019). Philosophical, behaviourist, constructivist, and cognitivist perspectives also contribute distinct definitions based on their core principles. However, an emerging approach shaping contemporary research is affectivism. Dukes et al. (2021) argue that behaviourism and cognitivism overlook affective processes, positioning affectivism as a more comprehensive framework for understanding emotion and behaviour. This potential paradigm shift may reshape how emotional expression is defined in future research.

### **Theories**

Scarantino’s Theory of Affective Pragmatics (TAP), rooted in affectivism, proposes that communication can occur through emotional expression alone, without the use of language (Scarantino, 2017). This emphasises the importance of recognising non-verbal emotional expressions, especially in children who express their emotions in diverse ways which may not be verbally (Chaidi and Drigas, 2020). Although TAP was not designed to understand children’s languages and behaviours, its principles remain applicable.

Basic Emotion Theory (BET) is another influential framework which suggests that people have a small number of “biologically and psychologically ‘basic’” emotions (Gu et al., 2019, p.2), which are easily identifiable through facial expressions which have “evolved” to match certain emotions (Poenitz and Román, 2020, p.3). The theory’s simplicity aids early emotional development (Grosse et al., 2021), but it is critiqued for being overly reductionist in many areas (Wang and Pereira, 2016; Ortony, 2021). This theory has, however, inspired

the characters in the children's movie *Inside Out* (Wardiah and Burhamzah, 2024), proving to significantly influence children's emotional understanding.

A socio-cultural alternative, narrative competence, highlights how prior emotional experiences shape future emotional understanding (Gallagher, 2006; Mathews et al., 2016), broadening emotional expression beyond basic categorisations.

### **Role of the adult**

As emotional competence is increasingly recognised as an integral component of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Grund and Holst, 2023), it is essential to consider the contextual factors influencing its development. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) emphasises that a child's emotional development is shaped by interactions within their immediate environment (Antony, 2022), particularly the microsystem which includes parents, practitioners, and settings. Furthermore, the perceived emotional safety of these environments is critical, as it directly affects children's capacity to express emotions (Grund and Holst, 2023). Although the EYFS framework promotes enabling environments (DfE, 2024a), it does not explicitly account for the need to support emotional expression.

Park, Tiwari, and Neumann (2020) highlight a lack of research on how practitioners teach emotional expression, a process they describe as 'emotional scaffolding' which is linked to Bruner's scaffolding theory of adult modelling. Secure attachments further support emotional development and regulation (Housman, 2017; Cooke et al., 2019), yet Brooker (2010) argues that all children experiencing secure family attachments is unattainable. Using Bronfenbrenner's theory, Vaezghasemi et al. (2023) found that children in disadvantaged contexts face greater socio-emotional challenges. Brooker's 'Triangle of Care' (2010) therefore proposes a collaborative model between parents, practitioners, and children to address this. Despite adult perspectives being well-represented, children's own views remain undervalued which is an important gap this research aims to address.

### **Gender**

Gender is considered an influential factor in understanding emotional expression strategies (Chaplin, 2015), yet research findings in this area are mixed. Veijalainen et al. (2021) found that girls more frequently expressed calm and happy emotions, whereas boys showed more excitement, curiosity, and, occasionally, anger. However, these results are context-dependent

and should be interpreted alongside other studies. In contrast, Prosen and Smrtnik Vitulić (2017) found no significant gender differences, suggesting that reduced gender-stereotypical responses within that environment may explain this. These differences highlight the impact of socio-cultural factors on emotional expression.

Both studies used quantitative methods, focusing on the frequency of emotional expressions by gender. While statistically significant, this approach lacks the depth of participatory methods and may overlook subjective emotional experiences. Sanchis-Sanchis et al. (2020) argue that gender differences are not inherent but shaped by environmental interactions. Chaplin (2015) also notes that children's emotional regulation strategies may be subconscious, with Sanchis-Sanchis et al. (2020, p.2) adding that this therefore challenges the validity of self-reported data in these studies due to “social desirability” and “poor introspection”.

### **Additional considerations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on children’s socio-emotional development, particularly for those born just before or during the crisis. Mask-wearing during critical early years disrupted babies’ ability to read facial expressions and develop emotion recognition skills, which underpin emotional expression (Salvadori et al., 2021; Barisnikov et al., 2021). This also hindered emotion language development (Pejovic et al., 2024), which has arguably “exacerbated some of the existing inequalities in language learning opportunities” (Zuniga-Montanez et al., 2025, p.570).

In response, recent studies have proposed strategies to support emotional expression, particularly for children with additional needs (Conner et al., 2019). However, many do not compare different approaches (Beck et al., 2020), and most lack children's perspectives. This adult-led focus limits understanding, highlighting the need to amplify children's voices in emotional education research.

### **Methodology**

The epistemological stance of this research is rooted in a socio-constructivist view, which sees knowledge as a collaborative construct. It emphasises children’s competence to be involved in discussions (Saleem, Kausar and Deeba, 2021), allowing them to be capable and active co-constructors in understanding (Kara et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023). Recognising

children's "competence and expertise in their own lives" (Brown and Kara, 2025, p.3) upholds Article 12 of the UNCRC and their participatory rights. A constructivist epistemology aligns with my personal views of children as unique, capable and independent, which Punch (2002) argues will impact the way the research will be undertaken. Therefore, the study adopts an interpretivist paradigm focusing on qualitative data, collecting subjective perspectives to make meaning (Farrell et al., 2016, p.292). Qualitative data allows for "depth, nuance and complexity" (Mason, 2018, p.55) and provides "detailed insight" into a topic (Mukherji and Albon, 2023, p.82-3). Due to the time-intensive nature of qualitative studies, my study included just 6 participants found through convenience sampling. Aligning with the theme of researching with children rather than on children, the Mosaic approach has been chosen as the methodology for this research. Clark (2017) explains that the Mosaic approach blends conventional qualitative methods with participatory methods, actively involving children by allowing them to shape and discuss the research material, therefore giving them agency in the research process and empowering them as individuals. The aim is to build a rich, child-centred understanding of children's worlds. Recognising that emotional expression can be non-verbal, the mosaic approach supports the use of diverse communication methods rather than relying on written and verbal data (Rogers and Boyd, 2020). The three support strategies I used were: 'feelings flashcards', storytelling, and 'how I feel wheel'. The data collection methods used were conversations, observations, storytelling and drawing. While observations and interviews were used across all strategies, the wheel also incorporated drawing, and storytelling functioned as both a strategy and a data collection method.

### **Ethics**

Given the rising recognition of "children's rights and competences" (Ericsson and Boyd, 2017, p.300), contemporary research is increasingly accounting for children's ability to assent particularly when investigating their views (Urbina-Garcia et al., 2021). My research took a strong focus on the ethical consideration of informed consent and ensured that both parents and children were fully aware of the study's purpose, their role within it, and what participation would entail. I obtained ethical approval for this study through the University of the West of England (UWE). To support the children's agency and understanding, they were invited to indicate consent by drawing their current emotion in a box next to their name on a

consent poster, aligning with the study's focus on emotional expression. While Oates et al. (2021) advocate for the use of happy or sad faces to indicate consent, I deliberately avoided this to prevent consent from being interpreted as a positive or negative action, which might influence the authenticity of their consent. To adhere to confidentiality guidelines and the Data Protection Act 2018, I kept all digital data associated with the research in a password protected folder which only I had access to, and all physical data in a locked cabinet. I also provided the gatekeepers with a copy of the privacy notice and data regulations so they were aware of how the data would be processed. To uphold anonymity, I followed BERA's (2024) guidance on anonymisation through pseudonyms. I initially assigned each child a name based on characters from *Inside Out*, reflecting the influence of *BET*. However, I reconsidered this approach to avoid reinforcing a power imbalance and to prevent children from internalising potentially negative associations with specific emotions (Ortony, 2021). Therefore, to maintain the children's agency, I invited them to select a colour, which I then mapped onto the characters. The resulting pseudonyms were: Anger, Joy, Fear, Disgust, Anxiety, and Sadness. Upon reflection, the school's ethos prioritised destigmatising emotion words, therefore the children in this study expressed enthusiasm toward the proposed pseudonyms, particularly given their association with a film they found appealing. Due to this, caution must be taken in transferring these pseudonyms to other settings as this ethos is not currently widespread, therefore they could be viewed as problematic because of the meanings they hold. I undertook a familiarisation period which enabled trust to be built between myself and the children and offered time for the children to engage with me and become comfortable with my presence (Barley and Bath, 2014; Huser, Dockett and Perry, 2022). This process was central to my research as Murray (2019, p.2) argues that if the researchers do not know the children in the study well, it can "hinder" their voices from being heard.

### **Findings and analysis**

Given the comparative nature of the study, I used each strategy as a basis for analysing my data thematically. This qualitative analytical approach allows for the identification, interpretation, and comparison of patterns across a diverse set of findings (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis also aligns with my paradigm as the depth of individual meaning is not removed in a coding process like in content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

**Strategy 1: Feelings flashcards**

Flashcards were used to introduce the children to a broader emotional vocabulary. Open conversations were initially held to discuss the meanings of any flashcards they were not familiar with, followed by semi-structured conversations in which they could refer to the cards to support their responses. Findings were gathered through both conversations and observation.



*Figure 1: Examples of the feeling's flashcards used to support the children's responses*

**1.1 Gender**

Observations and conversations with the group revealed that the boys took a greater interest in the resource than the girls. Initially, the children's emotional expressions reflected the findings in Veijalainen et al.'s (2021) study as the boys were curious and excited, whereas the girls remained calm and peaceful around the resource. However, as the conversation went on, as shown in extract 1, the boys became almost reliant on the cards to answer the

questions where the girls did not interact with them at all and instead expressed their answers through general conversation.

Me:	If you feel sad or angry, what do you do?
Joy (boy):	*Holds up 'included' card*
Me:	What makes you feel included when you're sad or angry
Joy:	Playing with my friends
Anger (boy):	*Holds up 'cuddly' card*
Me:	Do you like a hug to feel better?
Anger:	*Nods*
Anxiety (girl):	I would cry and then I would go and find my water bottle

*Extract 1: Gender differences example*

### 1.2 Non-verbal engagement

A key observation from this strategy was the children's ability to use the resource nonverbally, engaging in conversation without spoken language, just emotional expression, reflecting the TAP (2017) criteria. Given that mask wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic hindered emotion word recognition (Pejovic et al., 2024), it is plausible that the children were using the resource non-verbally as their emotion language development was affected (Erbay and Tarman, 2022), and needed the resource to help them to identify the emotions they were feeling, reinforcing the usefulness of the resource. However, considering children share their thoughts in different ways, as explained by Malaguzzi's poem *The Hundred Languages of Children* (1996), this non-verbal engagement could simply be children thinking differently, rather than the effects that mask wearing has had.

### 1.3 Evaluations

In search of the children's opinions on the effectiveness of the resource to answer my research question, their answers reflected the gender differences noted during the use of the resource, with the boys unanimously agreeing the resource was useful, and both girls answering with "I'm not sure". To further explore the children's views on its effectiveness, I showed the resource to the whole class and observed my participants explaining the flashcards to their peers. Sadness told a classmate, "It's really good for telling people what you're feeling," reinforcing their earlier opinion that the resource is effective.

## Strategy 2: Storytelling

Brinton and Fujiki (2017) explain that books portraying characters “learning to express feelings appropriately” support children to relate to and manage their own feelings through indirect guidance. The book *Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad* was selected for its depiction of an emotionally supportive environment, allowing the protagonist, Jackson, to freely express his emotions. The aim was to encourage children to reflect on their own and their peers’ emotional expressions. This strategy used observations, conversations and storytelling as the data collection methods.



Figure 2: "Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad" by Laura Henry-Allain (2024)

### 2.1 Experiences

Me:	What might you do in this situation if you were also Jackson’s friend?
Joy:	Cheer him up
Disgust:	Try and be happy and help him to take deep breaths when your sad and angry
Fear:	Go and tell a teacher
Sadness:	Make him happy with some funny games

*Extract 2: Example of emotional competence*

A key theme emerging from this strategy was the influence of prior experiences on children's emotional responses. Their reflections demonstrated emotional competence through recognising and managing emotions (as displayed in extract 2), often drawing on previous experiences. These responses were likely shaped by adult-led emotional scaffolding, highlighting the critical role of adults in creating safe, enabling environments. This supports McLaughlin, Aspden and Clarke's (2017, p.3) finding that when teachers provided a "positive and supportive emotional environment," children could express their emotions more effectively.

In contrast to the flashcard activity, gender differences were less evident, likely due to the setting's emphasis on emotional scaffolding, corroborating King's (2021) argument that gender differences in social-emotional competence are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This aligns with Prosen and Smrtnik Vitulić's (2017) assertion that stereotypical gender responses can be removed. My findings also echo Li's (2023) discovery that emotion-themed picture books help children recognise and express emotions by connecting with characters and understanding they are not alone with the emotions they feel.

## **2.2 Evaluations**

During conversations, the children unanimously affirmed the value of storytelling in supporting emotional expressions. Joy commented, "I love stories," likely reflecting the familiarity of storytelling as a daily routine. To further explore the adult's role in emotional expression, I adapted a question from Clark's (2017, p.35) study, asking who they would approach for help with their emotions. Most children identified a trusted adult, such as a teacher or parent, highlighting the relevance of the 'triangle of care' in facilitating emotional expression through partnership working, as advocated by the EYFS, to make positive emotional expression more accessible.

### **Strategy 3: 'How I feel' wheel**

The DfE's 'Help for Early Years Providers' webpage emphasises the importance of supporting children's self-expression through exploration in "an active and participatory way" (DfE, 2025). Aligning with this, the 'how I feel' wheels were child-created, being provided with blank templates to design freely. This reflects Brown and Kara's (2025, p.1) suggestion that

offering participants greater choice “leads to richer data and more robust findings”. I also engaged in the activity alongside the children to facilitate deeper participant observations. This strategy used observations, conversations and drawings as the data collection methods.



Figure 3: The children’s finished ‘how I feel’ wheels alongside the one I completed with them

### 3.1 Context

Me:	Which emotions do you think you will include on your wheel?
Joy:	What were the emotions in the movie again?
Me:	You don’t necessarily have to do the same emotions as the movie, which emotions do you feel all the time?
Anxiety:	I feel happy and sad and angry and loved
Sadness:	But I want to do ‘deep dark secret’ like in the movie
Me:	Is that an emotion you feel?
Sadness:	Well I keep lots of secrets so then I can show when I have a secret
Disgust:	Oh yes I have lots of secrets too I’m going to do that

Extract 3: Importance of context example

Clark (2017) stresses the importance of documenting both the context and individual responses in child interviews, a principle which became central to this strategy. Carried out

during Children's Mental Health Week, the strategy followed a viewing of *Inside Out 2* which, as identified in the literature review, was informed by BET. Consequently, the children's discussions were largely shaped by the emotions portrayed in the film. As shown in extract 3, Anxiety's answer displayed an example of BET in practice. However, given the critiques that the theory is too reductionist (Wang and Pereira, 2016), this strategy aims to extend children's emotion vocabulary beyond the 'basic' ones, supporting children to pinpoint the emotions they are trying to express.

### **3.2 Enabling environments**

A key theme emerging from this strategy was the importance of enabling environments in creating safe spaces for children to freely express a range of emotions. While similar to the flashcards activity in supporting emotion identification, this approach, like storytelling, revealed minimal gender differences. The impact of the setting's emotionally supportive culture was evidenced by existing similar strategies, such as daily 'check-in cards', which likely contributed to the familiarity and effectiveness of the activity. When asked what their teachers do to help with their emotions, all children replied, "I don't know," suggesting that adult-led strategies had been seamlessly embedded into daily routines, reinforcing the significance of an emotionally enabling environment.

### **3.3 Evaluations**

In discussing the effectiveness of the 'how I feel' wheels in supporting emotional expression, all children responded positively. Fear commented, "if you don't want to talk, you can just point the arrow," highlighting the value of accessible, non-verbal resources, similar to the flashcards, in promoting inclusivity. To further evaluate the strategy's impact, I carried out a non-participant observation later that day. Fear approached me multiple times to indicate her emotions using the wheel, while Joy and Anger shared their wheels with peers, explaining its functions and giving personal examples. This active engagement reflects Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harme's (2023, p.112) suggestion that combining multiple methods within the Mosaic approach enables a deeper understanding of "children's priorities." In this context, those priorities emerged as emotionally safe and enabling environments that empower children to express emotions freely and collaboratively share strategies with others.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This small-scale study highlights the central role adults play in creating a supportive environment for children's emotional expression. The children predominantly viewed the role of adults as helping them to be happy, reflecting their need for safety, happiness, and freedom to express their emotions openly. Importantly, this view resonates strongly with existing theory on emotional competence and scaffolding, which further highlights the significance of caregiver support in developing children's ability to regulate and communicate their emotions effectively.

The strategies used in this study were broadly well received by the children, although there was some gender-specific preferences. The "How I Feel" wheels were particularly popular; children responded enthusiastically to this interactive, creative tool, suggesting it successfully supported their expression of emotions in a way that was both accessible and enjoyable. The children's preferences for this approach align with perspectives in the literature that advocate for multi-modal and child-centred strategies, methods which empower children to reflect on their own emotions and communicate them safely and openly.

Although the role of play and creativity in helping children express their emotions was not directly investigated in this study, the popularity of the "How I Feel" wheels highlights the potential of interactive, visual, and creative methods to enhance engagement and expression. Furthermore, this emphasises the necessity of practitioners using a range of strategies to accommodate children's preferences and individual needs.

This study displays the importance of gathering children's perspectives when designing and implementing strategies to support their social and emotional development. It highlights the necessity of practitioners reflecting on their own roles and practice, and adapting their approaches to align with children's perspectives and preferences. Nevertheless, the small sample size, ethos of the setting, and analysis from predominately adult lenses, all limit the generalisability of these findings.

Future research should aim to explore these strategies in a range of settings, with more diverse groups of children, including those with SEND. Action research and longitudinal studies could provide valuable insight into how children's preferences and needs evolve over

time. Furthermore, investigating the role of play and creativity in this context, and developing strategies to empower children's voice, will be key to strengthening practice and policy in the future. Ultimately, this study emphasises the importance of listening to children and making their perspectives central to developing effective and supportive strategies for their emotional expression.

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Article 3

## The importance of paternal relationships in young children's lives

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**About the author:**



**Nicole Peh**

**Author biography:**

I chose this topic for my dissertation after discovering a gap in the field for children with low paternal involvement. Many articles found tend to focus on the paternal figure's departure and its impact on the children's development. This research aimed to fill that gap and raise awareness about the importance of paternal figures' involvement.

**Level of study:**

Six

**Membership institution:** University of Northampton

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**Introduction**

Much research points towards the importance of a positive “father figure” in a child’s life (Sivak and Smirnov, 2019; Diniz et al., 2021). However, mothers are found, in general, to be the primary caregivers with more responsibilities and involvement in the child’s life (Cabrera et al., 2018). Research has found paternal figure-child interactions establish an intimate

bond that impacts the child's interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and may result in children with higher risks of mental health issues (Zhou et al., 2024) if parental bonds are not effective. This paper explores the effects of paternal emotional involvement and considers the implications should children not have this connection.

Developmental theories such as attachment theory support the dynamics of the father-child dyad (Cabrera et al, 2018, p.153). Attachment theory explores the impact of caregiver-child interactions. Bowlby (1969) proposed that children instinctively form attachments to primary caregivers through frequent interactions. Attachments provide a foundation for security in children to feel safe in the world (Wilson-Ali et al., 2019) and Feeney and Collins (2019, p.182) concur by highlighting that the attachment figure's availability provides protection, comfort and support. It is therefore crucial that the father-child relationship is a supportive one. However, it is worth noting here that there are no specific guidelines for how paternal figures can be supportive (Jessee and Adamson, 2018, p.3).

This paper takes an interactionist stance when considering its conceptual framework, as the discussions that follow recognise the importance of interactions to support healthy emotional development (Bowlby, 1969). The paper adds to the literature in this area through the cross-cultural approach to the study. Participants were selected from across the world and this provides insight into an international viewpoint of this crucial area.

Throughout the paper, the term 'paternal' and 'father' will be used interchangeably to discuss those with a male role model; a paternal figure, regardless of whether that person is biologically connected to them or not. The paper's definition of unemotional involvement is discussed in the section that follows.

### **Literature review**

According to the literature, there are various criteria for a father to be considered as being involved in their child's life. According to Peeper et al., (2015, p.127) although physical presence contributes to the quality of emotional involvement, it does not necessarily equate to being emotionally involved. A father can be engaging in activities with children but be emotionally disconnected when giving support and encouragement. Paternal emotional involvement consists of being engaged, enforcing discipline, being responsible, and being attentive to the immediate emotions in the environment and responding accordingly (Arslan

and Demircioğlu, 2022). Bowlby described the availability and responsiveness of an attachment figure (e.g. parent) as providing children with the confidence and tools to overcome issues (Bowlby, 1969).

Based on the above, this paper defines emotional involvement as paternal figures being physically engaged and providing appropriate responses during interactions with children. Such interaction may support children in forming attachments and establishing nurturing positive relationships. Conversely, unemotional involvement is the opposite of this, for the purposes of this paper, in that the paternal figure is not emotionally available in a supportive and nurturing manner.

### **Factors influencing paternal emotional involvement**

Ainsworth found that attachment was influenced by the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions (1989, p.710). It is widely recognised that the paternal emotional investment influences children's adaptability in peer group settings; potentially linking to children's social competence and mental health (Torres et al., 2014, p.190). It has also been researched and documented that paternal involvement affects sons and daughters differently (Haritha and Devi, 2022, p.2101).

In different cultures, the idea of gender is correlated with cultural and traditional practices. According to Kaushal and Muchomba (2018, p.1), many Chinese families invest more from both a care and financial perspective on sons. Ng et al. (2014, p.134) proposes that Asian fathers are stricter and more controlling with firstborn children due to having higher expectations, potentially leaving a cold father-child interaction with firstborn children. Across studies, Asian fathers were involved in their children's educational lives however other activities (e.g. play) were not seen as essential interactions by fathers (Li et al, 2021). Indian fathers share similar parenting characteristics to Chinese fathers, such as low emotional expression (Gupta and Srivastava, 2021). Interestingly, Robinson et al. found conflicting results when studying relationships in western-individualist populations, where a father's over-interception resulted in lower social competency (2021, p.7).

Conservative fathers often carry an authoritarian parenting style (Yaffe, 2023) exhibiting high demandingness for compliance and resorting to punitive solutions (Sarwar, 2016, p.231). According to Zeinali et al. (2011), punishments and inconsistent care resulted in insecure

attachment leaving children to have difficulty with self-esteem and social skills. Self-esteem may reflect the child's views of self-worth and perception of others on the self (Krauss et al., 2021, p.463).

According to Rathi et al. (2024, p.9), poor finances may hinder a father's involvement in their child's life, potentially due to the father working. However, some literature presents socioeconomic status (SES) as having inconsistent results on social and emotional development (Rakotomanana et al., 2021). Fathers within the upper classes are more child centred as they are more flexible to invest in children's development (Fofonoff, 2018, p.60). Higher income was found to lower financial stress on parents which correlated to children's emotional well-being (Qi and Wu, 2020, p.6).

Trends found by Fofonoff (2018, p.57) revealed that fathers with low SES had more children, compared to those with higher SES. Fingerman et al. (2015, p.7) mentioned that children in big families had lower paternal involvement, providing inconsistent support. This may result in children developing insecure attachment (Fraley and Roisman, 2019, p.26). Low SES and involvement correlated with children experiencing adverse childhood experiences due to external stressors (e.g. financial instability) reflecting on the child's well-being and mental health (Guhn et al., 2020).

Middle-class fathers were found to be more involved than the working class due to differences in social capital (e.g. job type and money) (Strømme and Helland, 2020, p.994). However, according to Gottzén (2011, p.621), middle-class fathers mainly engaged with their children's lives in "public" and engaged less in childcare at home; this may be due to the social-cultural perception of fatherhood (Shows and Gerstel, 2009, p.170). Inconsistent care could lead to the development of an insecure attachment (Turner et al., 2019, p.4), which in turn, as mentioned previously, impacts on emotional development.

The more children there are in a family, the more divided the attention of a father will be. According to Combs-Orme and Renkert (2009, p.401), second-time fathers were likely to be less involved in a newborn's life due to the existence of a prior child. Some literature supported this, reporting that fathers were more likely to be involved and may provide more opportunities to first-born children (Giordano, 2023).

### **Conclusion to literature review**

The literature discussed in the section above indicates that there are many factors which influence the relationship that a father can have with their child and how this can impact on emotional development. The interactionist approach (Hoehl and Bertenthal, 2021, p.4) adopted throughout this study recognises the importance of individuals and interactions to support children to maximise their opportunities and it was on this basis that the study detailed below was founded.

### **Methodology and methods**

This research was undertaken within an interpretive paradigm, ensuring that views and opinions were sought and analysed to draw conclusions, placing it into the qualitative vein (Robson, 2024). A mixed-method case study approach was undertaken in which questionnaires (n=32) and interviews (n=3) were used to explore the nature of a paternal emotional involvement (Crowe et al., 2011). Participants were recruited online from various social media platforms (i.e. Instagram) without any conditions regarding gender, ethnicity and age. Participants' ethnicity consisted of mixed races, Indians, Chinese, Malays, Europeans, Japanese and Filipinos. Interviews were conducted physically, and questionnaires were distributed online.

### **Ethics**

This research adopted ethical principles from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines in the design and procedure of research. All data was anonymised and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms (Dooly et al., 2017, p.354). Being aware of the sensitive nature of this research topic, questions were asked in a considerate manner, with the overall principle of "do no harm" remaining paramount throughout the study. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time after submitting the questionnaire. During the interviews, it was explicitly stated that all information would be kept anonymous, and participants had the right to withdraw if they wished to do so.

## **Findings and analysis**

Data were thematically analysed (Clarke and Braun, 2014, p.1950). The themes identified were: effects of paternal involvement on social development, types of paternal involvement, parenting styles and environmental factors. These themes will now be explored further.

### **Effects of paternal involvement on social development**

The data suggested that paternal emotional involvement influences children's social skills and self-esteem, with 66% of respondents stating that this has caused social stress with participants responding, "fear of change"; "I don't really have fears, [It is] just that I want them to like me? So, I'm worried they're judging me?". However, there were responses that showed a positive social interaction "slight social anxiety depending on specific scenarios. [It] Depends on my mental state at times, if I'm in an ok mood I don't have fears with socialization.". 22% reporting that it had resulted in mental health issues. Social stress and mental health included being afraid of meeting new people, feeling judged and social anxiety. Torress et al. (2014, p.190) explained that this could be due to the father-child interactions impacting their social adaptability. These findings suggest that attachment styles may have affected their self-esteem correlating with social adaptability (Peyper et al., 2015; Zeinali et al., 2011). Krauss et al. (2021, p.463) explained that paternal involvement influences children's self-esteem and their discernment of being socially accepted.

### **Parenting style**

When discussing how they themselves were parented, (n=7) of questionnaire respondents talked of having an authoritarian father. "Maybe? idk i don't remember much. he was always just so angry."; "no but i felt emotionally neglected a little bit because he can't control his anger so i'm not really open to him as a child and i still carry that feelings till now". The literature showed that this parenting style negatively influenced self-esteem, attachment, and social and emotional development (Krauss et al., 2021). The literature found that too much control in the child's life may impact social and emotional development (Robinson et al. 2021, p.7). Some participants reported that they felt that they had an emotionally neglectful father. One participant responded, "I don't feel much" while one responded with conflicting feelings "I love them, but they may not be emotionally in tune with me or even available".

The literature found this parenting style can be unresponsive to emotional needs and lacks motivation for involvement (Wong et al., 2021). However, there may be cultural influence towards this parenting style which in turn influences care (Thrasher et al., 2022). This may result in a lack of support and care for the development of prosocial behaviours, well-being, and self-esteem (Wong et al., 2021). Some participants (n=19) discussed how their father were 'involved' or a 'good role model'. One participant responded, "he always showed up for me, even when he was busy and would spend a lot of time with me". "no, because he always showed up for me, even when he was busy and would spend a lot of time with me".

The literature shows that high involvement resulted in secure attachments and social and emotional reliance (Wong et al., 2021). One participant responded, "[He was] nice to me but not so close, not very expressive of love but through actions". Another responded, "since i have become an adult the relationship has gotten better". These responses suggest an inconsistent involvement which can result in an insecure attachment style (Turner et al., 2019). While the responses may not reflect a close relationship, the literature suggests different environmental factors that contribute to the father's emotional involvement (Wong et al., 2021).

Additionally, the findings and literature suggest ethnicity and culture to influence parenting style (Krauss et al., 2021; Zeinali et al., 2011). The literature explained that Asian families are usually concerned with education rather than emotional expression and perceive this as showing care, adopting an authoritarian parenting style (Yaffe, 2023). Participants from different ethnic groups had responded with varying results regarding unemotionally involved fathers. Participants of Asian background responded to open-ended questions suggesting an unemotionally involved father. "I love them, but they may not be emotionally in tune with me or even available."; "he does not do much/ support financially. i also feel like he does not care as much". In addition to this, some participants who had a British or European background responded wanting more paternal involvement, "show up to events i may have e.g award ceremonies"; "spent more time and effort". The literature contradicts the findings, as it found European and Black fathers to be involved and supportive (Thrasher et al., 2022). The parenting style adopted may have influenced the relationship between the participants and their fathers, linking to attachment theory, and impacted the social development of each individual accordingly.

### **Types of paternal involvement**

When participants were asked to suggest ways to improve paternal involvement, the responses demonstrate the importance of emotional involvement. These suggestions included 'Self-improvement' (N=10), 'Quality time' (N=25) and 'communication'(N=13), which highlight the areas in which respondents felt that their father figures were lacking. 16 participants responded that they wanted their fathers to be involved through 'financial support'. The literature did not support this method, demonstrating that there was little correlation between financial status and positive social and emotional outcomes (Qi and Wu, 2020), however the findings here contradict this. This raises questions that are beyond the realms of this paper but would be worthy of further exploration in future research.

### **Environmental Factors**

Gender perception was found in both the findings and the literature to be a factor influencing paternal involvement (Sivak and Smirnov, 2019). All participants with oppositegender siblings responded along the lines of getting treated differently. The literature illustrated that fathers were more involved with sons compared to daughters (Sivak and Smirnov, 2019).

The literature suggested that fathers with lower SES had financial stress and were less involved as a result (Fraley and Roisman, 2019). 25% of the participants were in the lower or working class. One participant stated, "Yes, coming from a big family that was poor my parents never really cared about me / my siblings emotional development". Most participants (31%) identified themselves as middle-class. The literature suggested that middle-class fathers were more involved in their children's outside lives than at home, resulting in inconsistent care and insecure attachment (Turner et al., 2019). However, the findings disagreed with the literature, responding that their fathers provided consistent care (either low involvement or high involvement). One participant who experienced high levels of involvement responded that their father was usually busy with work but would compensate over the weekends, engaging in activities such as going out for meals. This may suggest that regardless of the SES, the level of emotional involvement remains stagnant, suggesting there was an inconsistent correlation between SES and development (Gaertner et al., 2007).

13% of participants identified as upper or upper-middle class. The literature suggested high SES correlated with high involvement due to low financial stress (Qi and Wu, 2020). However, the findings showed an inconsistent response, with half of the participants responding with high involvement and the others responding with low involvement. This reemphasizes that there are multitudes of factors contributing to a father's emotional involvement.

## **Conclusions**

This research aimed to explore the effects of a father's emotional involvement on the social and emotional development of children. The small-scale study has highlighted that there may be a correlation between a father's emotional involvement and social and emotional outcomes of children (Diniz et al., 2021). However, some findings disagreed with the literature suggesting that there may be contextual factors unaccounted for. Literature surrounding paternal involvement tends to have been researched within a Western or European context (Ainsworth, 1989; Adkins, 2003) and it is noted that the cultural differences can influence findings.

Limitations of this research emerged from the questionnaire design. Responses revealed confusion when interpreting questions, making it apparent that the term 'paternal' may have been confused with 'parents'. Fortunately, this was restricted to a small number of participants. It is also recognised that this is a small-scale study and the results can therefore not be generalised to the wider population.

In conclusion this study found correlations between paternal involvement and perceived social and emotional outcomes. The study found paternal involvement was influenced by culture, gender perception, birth order and socioeconomic status. As a result, it is suggested that professionals consider organising peer support groups and provide encouragement to fathers. Through this small-scale study it is recognised that paternal figures play a significant role in a child's life and contribute to life-altering developmental outcomes. This is therefore worthy of attention.

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Article 4

# Early Years Practitioners Perceptions of Digital Technology Integration: A Practitioner-Led Case Study

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## About the author:



**Princess Souassou Tsiagbe**

## Author biography:

I am an experienced Early Years practitioner and former deputy manager with over a decade of experience in Early Childhood Education, most recently at the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF). My work has focused on nursery leadership and creating engaging spaces that support children's learning and wellbeing. I am passionate about exploring how digital technology and creativity can enrich early years environments and strengthen community learning spaces. I hold a BA in Early Childhood Studies from the University of Wolverhampton, and I have just begun an MA in Education and Technology at the UCL Institute of Education.

## Level of study:

Six

## Membership institution:

The London Institute of Early Years (Part of the London Early Years Foundation) – University of Wolverhampton

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I reflectively explore my experience as a practitioner researcher, investigating how practitioners perceive the integration of digital technology in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The study was prompted following spontaneous observations, where I identified the absence of digital technology in my own setting and sought to understand the views across the sector on the benefits and challenges of digital technology implementation.

Using a pragmatic mixed-methods paradigm, I collected data through an online questionnaire which canvassed 20 practitioners who worked in early years settings or school-based settings. I was able to gather qualitative insights through semi-structured interviews with a Room Manager/SENDSCO and a Nursery teacher who held Qualified Teacher Status. The findings showed there were generally positive attitudes towards digital technology with participants highlighting the potential of digital technology to support communication, creativity, and social interaction through tools like interactive whiteboards and programmable toys.

However, the data also demonstrated barriers to implementing digital technology such as limited training opportunities and a lack of age-appropriate digital applications.

Discrepancies in access and leadership support influenced practitioners' confidence in digital technology use.

This paper reflects on how conducting this research reshaped my own leadership practice and challenged my current thoughts about digital play in the early years. It concludes with recommendations for the sector to be more intentional with digital technology use, and widening participation through supportive professional development, and for digital play to be embedded into each organisational ethos across the sector.

## **Introduction**

As a former Deputy Manager in a London based nursery, I have witnessed firsthand the growing presence of digital technology in young children's lives and its use in early childhood settings. For the purposes of this study, digital technology refers to screen-based and programmable tools such as tablets, touchscreen computers, interactive whiteboards,

programmable toys like BeeBots. These tools use digital interfaces or software to support communication, problem-solving, creativity and early digital literacy within developmentally appropriate EYFS environments. Technology has firmly become embedded in children's everyday experiences, from touchscreen interactions to digital stories and video communication (Aronin and Floyd, 2013). Yet, I have also observed that it is not consistently promoted in early years practice; whereas some practitioners recognise its benefits and use it to enhance children's learning, others remain hesitant, if not outright averse. In 2017, the Department for Education defined the purpose of technology as "children recognise that a range of technology is used in places such as homes" (DfE, 2017), a category from Understanding the World. However, in 2021, technology was redacted from Understanding the World in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Internally, I found myself supportive of implementing age-appropriate technological education, that complements rather than competes with traditional play methods. Within the current EYFS, technological play is increasingly recognised as a means of enhancing children's learning experiences, fostering problem-solving, creativity, and digital literacy when integrated thoughtfully into the curriculum (Edwards et al., 2020; Plowman et al., 2012). Technological resources such as interactive whiteboards, tablets, and educational apps are becoming more common in early years settings, however, practitioners' perceptions of how these tools should be used remain a prominent feature behind their success (Aljaberi, 2021).

This conflict raised deeper questions for me as a pedagogical leader. Why were some of my colleagues hesitant to use technology? Why did some view it as a hindrance rather than an aid to learning? What was I doing as a leader to dispel or reinforce these perceptions? To what extent was the assumption that children were really "hooked on screens" or using technology without any learning intent determining early years practice? I recognised that in every instance of reflection – technology was overlooked due to fears of screen overexposure. Rather than seizing the opportunities technology provided in the findings by Plumb and Kautz (2016) held true, caution and scepticism overshadowed the immense benefits.

These reflections prompted a small-scale undergraduate research project investigating early years practitioners' perceptions of technology integration for children aged 3 to 5, and the barriers to its implementation. The study aimed to garner insights into practitioners' attitudes, identify gaps in training and digital competence, and inform my development as a pedagogical leader capable of fostering effective technological practice within and beyond my professional setting. To guide this practitioner-led study, the following research questions were developed to focus specifically on digital technology use within EYFS settings.

My research was guided by three research questions:

1. How do early years practitioners perceive the integration of digital technology in EYFS settings?
2. What benefits do early years practitioners identify when using digital technology to support children's learning and development?
3. What challenges or barriers do early years practitioners face when implementing digital technology in EYFS practice?

Having established the contrasting perspectives, and without formalised training or a shared ethos on technology – practitioners were often left guessing. I also realised that, despite believing in the value of technological exploration, I had not contributed as effectively as I had assumed within my own setting.

This paper is a reflective account of how conducting practitioner led research into technology integration shifted not only my understanding of digital pedagogy, but my approach to leadership in early years. With the benefit of the growing literature on this subject matter, and my colleagues' insights, I was able to challenge assumptions and take practical steps to working towards changing how technology is embedded in ECE.

## **Literature Review**

### **Practitioners' beliefs and perceptions about technology use**

Today, many children grow up with access to various digital technologies that form part of their everyday lives. It is therefore crucial to examine how children engage with technology at home and in Early Childhood Education (ECE). In the early 2000s, digital technology in ECE settings mainly referred to computers, which practitioners often employed as supplementary

tools to support learning (Edwards et al., 2020; Undheim, 2022). However, longstanding beliefs about play, and especially the emphasis on open-ended and exploratory experiences, have been identified as barriers to the integration of digital tools into early years practise (Edwards et al., 2020; Undheim, 2022).

Despite increased access to technological devices, its classroom use remains infrequent, especially in ECE (Blackwell et al., 2013). Fler (2011) argues that traditional views of childhood contribute to practitioners' hesitation. Edwards et al. (2020) and Undheim (2022) note that many practitioners still favour traditional play models, which hinder meaningful technology adoption. Even when tools are available, practitioners' personal beliefs and confidence levels play a crucial role in whether they are used effectively (Blackwell et al., 2013). Theodotou (2010) observed that variations in pedagogical approaches significantly influenced the developmental benefits of technological play. Therefore, it is evident that professional development and pedagogical shifts are needed to support integration.

Many lack the confidence to use it in learning environments and may not see the need to develop those skills unless they value its relevance (Blackwell et al., 2013). Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010) argue that internal barriers like pedagogical beliefs and external barriers such as a lack of training directly affect technology adoption. practitioners open to digital tools tend to engage in more professional development and adapt their practice, while those with traditional views may see it as a distraction (Fler, 2011).

Furthermore, ICT training often ignores the developmental needs of young children, leaving practitioners unprepared (Blackwell et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2020). Purposeful training, grounded in early years pedagogy, is necessary to help practitioners integrate digital tools meaningfully. Addressing both internal (beliefs, confidence) and external (resources, training) barriers is essential to support practitioners in implementing technology that enriches learning.

### **Barriers and Challenges to Implementing Technology Use**

Plumb and Kautz (2015) found that a lack of IT equipment and resources, such as laptops, computers, scanners, cameras, projectors and internet access is a major barrier. Without this equipment, there is little opportunity for practitioners to integrate technology into their work practices (Wood et al., 2008; Fenty & McKendry Anderson, 2014; Plumb & Kautz,

2015). A further issue is the lack of access to appropriate educational software. Ihmeideh (2009) echoes this, stating that most preschool practitioners believe software related issues are the most serious barrier.

Practitioners also express concerns that early technology exposure could negatively impact social, emotional, or physical development (Blackwell, Lauricella & Wartella, 2014). Rooted in traditional pedagogies that value open-ended, outdoor and sensory play, some practitioners see digital tools as incompatible with early childhood best practice (Edwards et al., 2020).

The absence of clear policies creates uncertainty about when and how to use technology appropriately (Plumb & Kautz, 2015). Without guidance, practitioners rely on personal judgement, leading to inconsistent practice across settings (Pappa, Georgiou & Pittich, 2023).

Overall, existing literature consistently identifies three key issues:

1. Unequal access to digital tools.
2. A lack of pedagogically grounded training.
3. Mixed practitioner attitudes shapes by beliefs about childhood and play.

These factors frame the challenges observed in many EYFS settings today.

### **Digital Technology for Learning and Development**

Research shows that when integrated thoughtfully, digital technology can enhance key areas of children's learning within the EYFS. Touchscreen tools, for example can support engagement, comprehension and early problem-solving when used in short, purposeful sessions (McManis & Gunnewig, 2012). Programmable toys such as BeeBots have been found to promote sequencing, collaboration and early mathematical reasoning through hands on exploration (Misirli & Komis, 2014; Komis, Romero & Misirli, 2017). These tools encourage children to test ideas, work together and reflect on outcomes, aligning well with the EYFS principles of play based learning. However, the effectiveness of digital technology depends on practitioner confidence and pedagogical intent (Ihmeideh, 2009). Studies consistently emphasise that digital tools do not automatically improve learning, instead they extend learning opportunities when embedded within meaningful, adult led play (Edwards et al., 2020; McManis & Gunnewig, 2012). Blackwell, Lauricella and Wartella (2014) highlight

the need for coherent digital strategies, leadership support and ongoing training to ensure digital technology is integrated purposefully and appropriately in early years settings.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, which was appropriate for addressing the practical question of how EYFS practitioners perceive and use digital technology in their settings. Mixed-methods research enables the combination of quantitative and qualitative data to produce insights that are both broad and detailed, rather than being tied to a single methodological stance (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). This flexibility aligns with practitioner led enquiry, where research methods are selected based on their usefulness in exploring real issues within one's own setting (Lambert, 2012).

Using this approach allowed me to examine not only what practitioners reported about digital technology use, but also their values, professional identities and contextual experiences shaped their confidence, hesitations and everyday decision making. The mixed methods approach design provided a richer and more practical understanding of the factors influencing digital integration within EYFS settings.

P1 was a Room Manager and SENDCO with around 20 years of experience in EYFS practice, working in a private nursery setting. P2, is a nursery teacher holding QTS with over five years' experience working in a school-based nursery. I used purposive sampling (Adeoye, 2023) to recruit practitioners working directly with children aged three to five. The sample purposively included early years practitioners in private nurseries and teachers in schoolbased EYFS settings, ensuring diversity in setting type and experience (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). In total, 20 practitioners completed the questionnaire.

### **Data collection**

- Semi-structured interviews (20–40 min, in person or via Microsoft Teams) explored familiarity with digital tools and institutional support (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with consent.
- The questionnaire (Microsoft Forms) combined multiple-choice and Likert items on benefits, barriers and frequency of usage. Completion averaged five minutes; an attached consent statement guaranteed anonymity. My questionnaire

included Likert scales (Willits, Theodori & Luloff, 2012) so I could quantify attitudes while my interviews added depth to the research.

### **Data Analysis**

I applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to the interview transcripts. Using both inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), I generated themes such as technology integration, perceived benefits, barriers, confidence and training needs. For the questionnaire data, I calculated descriptive statistics—mean, median and mode—to gauge confidence levels and perceived benefits and challenges (Boone & Boone, 2012). Combining thematic analysis with statistics provided qualitative depth and quantitative clarity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Validity and Reliability**

All interview and questionnaire items were aligned with the focus of the study and piloted with an experienced nursery manager to ensure clarity and relevance. Consistency was maintained by asking each interviewee the same core questions before using prompts when appropriate. Triangulation of interviews and questionnaires strengthened credibility (Flick, 2018) and member checking of interview transcripts supported accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Although the small sample limits generalisability, the study offers rich, practice-based insight into digital technology use within EYFS settings.

### **Ethics**

By combining interviews and questionnaires within a mixed-methods approach, I captured nuanced practitioner perceptions of digital technology in early childhood settings while maintaining ethical integrity and methodological rigour.

I followed the ethical guidelines set by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) and the EECERA Ethical Code (Bertram et al., 2024) to ensure my research was conducted with transparency and a commitment to protecting participants' privacy and rights. As a practitioner and researcher, I was mindful of maintaining ethical standards throughout the research process to safeguard the wellbeing of participants at every stage.

Participants were fully informed about the aims and procedure of the research. They received an information sheet and consent form explaining the purpose of the research, what their involvement would be and any potential risks. I made it clear that the

participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason and without facing any negative consequences.

To maintain anonymity, all identifying information was removed from transcripts and questionnaire responses. Interview participants were assigned codes such as P1 and P2. I ensured that all data was securely stored and only accessible to myself and my academic supervisor. This was done in compliance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). I obtained gatekeeper consent from headteachers and nursery managers, in line with BERA (2024).

I ensured participants had autonomy and flexibility throughout. Interviews were arranged at times and either in-person or via Microsoft Teams that suited each participant. I reminded participants during the interviews that they could pause or stop at any time. Questionnaire links were posted across professional networks and completed anonymously in the participants' own time and without pressure.

This research received full ethical approval from the University of Wolverhampton. Reflecting on the ethical dimension of my research by creating a respectful and transparent process, I aimed to build trust with participants and ensure that their voices were represented ethically and accurately.

## **Discussions and Findings**

### **Digital Technology Integration in Early Years Settings**

Both P1 (nursery) and P2 (nursery teacher with QTS) supported digital technology integration, describing purposeful use of iPads and interactive whiteboards. P1 explained that appropriate supervision ensures positive use, whereas P2 highlighted the importance of effective planning:

“Children should be introduced to technology... It’s good for them to be supervised.”

P2 noted technology must be planned carefully:

“We have iPads... but it has to be planned effectively.”

Despite this shared support, the participants contexts differed. The nursery teacher with QTS reported more consistent access of digital tools, whereas the nursery practitioner described a decline in usage over time due to shifting organisational priorities. Questionnaire

responses showed that while 68% of practitioners reported access to tablets and apps, only a few used digital tools like programming or outdoor ICT. This suggests a shift toward apps and communication tools over hands-on tech. This highlights how setting type shapes digital technology implementation. These findings address Research Question 1, providing insight into how digital technology is present in EYFS settings but used unevenly, shaped by organisational ethos and practitioner independence (Blackwell et al (2013)).

### **Benefits and Challenges of Digital Technology Use**

Practitioners described many benefits. P1 had observed that digital tools increased children's focus, pride, and collaboration.

P1 said:

“The children would focus... show excitement, satisfaction, and pride in their work.”

P2 discussed using BeeBots to promote problem-solving and social skills:

“It gives them a lot of opportunity to work together and talk with their peers.”

These align with McManis and Gunnewig (2012) and Misirli and Komis (2014), who found that well designed digital tools can support engagement and early problem solving.

However, challenges emerged, particularly a lack of support from leadership: P1 identified leadership ethos as the biggest barrier:

“The biggest challenge... is the company ethos or their approach to learning.”

P2 cited time constraints as a barrier to planning tech-integrated lessons.

The third challenge was the lack of age-appropriate educational apps. These issues align with Ihmeideh (2009), who found access to suitable software limited technology use.

“Some of the apps... are more for entertainment than education.”

Despite these concerns, questionnaire data showed only 21% agreed that limited resources were a significant barrier, suggesting institutional culture, confidence and planning, may hinder effective use. These findings address Research Question 2 by highlighting both the benefits and the structural barriers practitioners face; leadership culture, planning constraints and limited training.

## Professional Development Needs and Leadership Support

Both participants emphasised a lack of training. P1 said:

“I have not had any (training)... there should be training... what’s appropriate.”

P2 added:

“I think a bit more training would help... just a bit of guidance.”

This aligns with findings by Pappa et al. (2023), who suggest practitioners may support digital technology integration but lack confidence without proper training.

Questionnaire responses confirmed this uncertainty, with many selecting neutral or negative responses when asked if they felt well-prepared.

Figure 1 revealed that while 47.3% felt supported by leadership, 31% disagreed. This mixed feedback highlights gaps in institutional support, addressing Research Question 3 on the barriers to implementation. It highlights that training gaps and inconsistent leadership expectations significantly influence digital technology use.

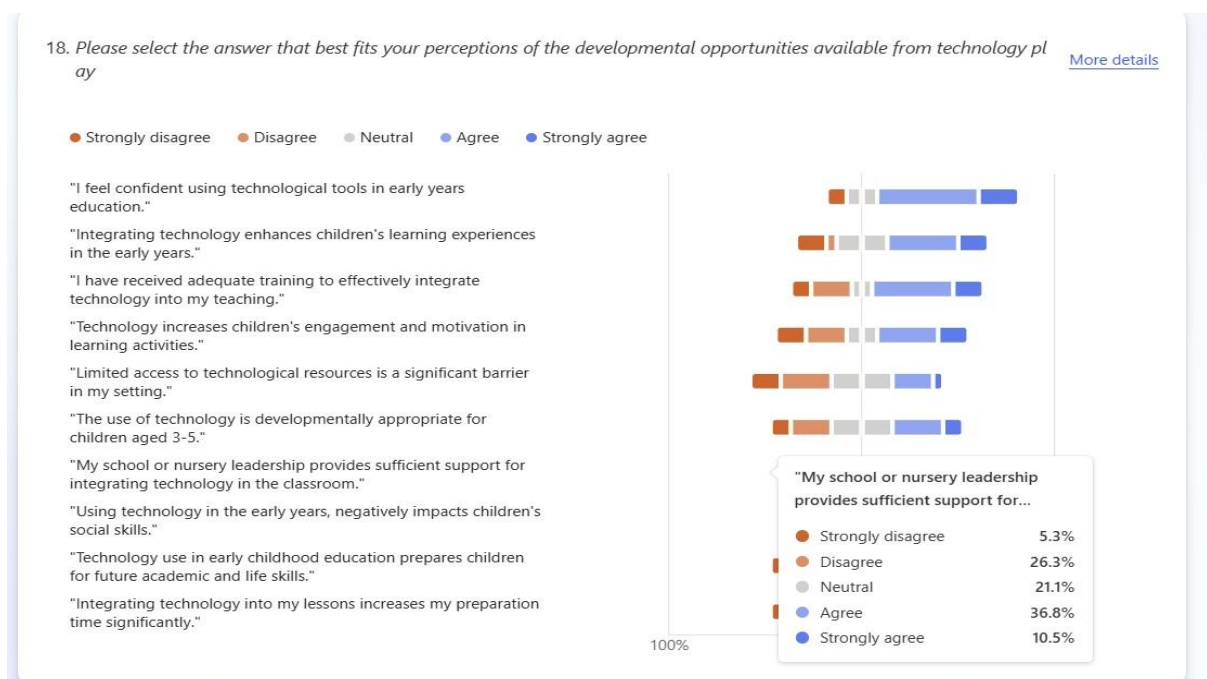


Figure 1: “My school or nursery leadership provides sufficient support for integrating technology in the classroom.”

### Perceived Benefits for Learning and interaction

Although the study did not measure children’s development directly, practitioners perceived digital tools as supporting collaboration, communication and engagement.

P1 noted that children would demonstrate focus and collaboration with each other.

“The children would focus... it was a chance to share, take turns...”

P2 praised BeeBots for encouraging discussion:

“It’s a problem-solving tool... they work together and talk with their peers.”

This aligns with Edwards et al. (2020), who found that digital tools can enhance interactions between peers when integrated into play-based learning.

Questionnaire responses in Figure 2 also identified ‘engagement’ and ‘communication skills’ as key perceived benefits.

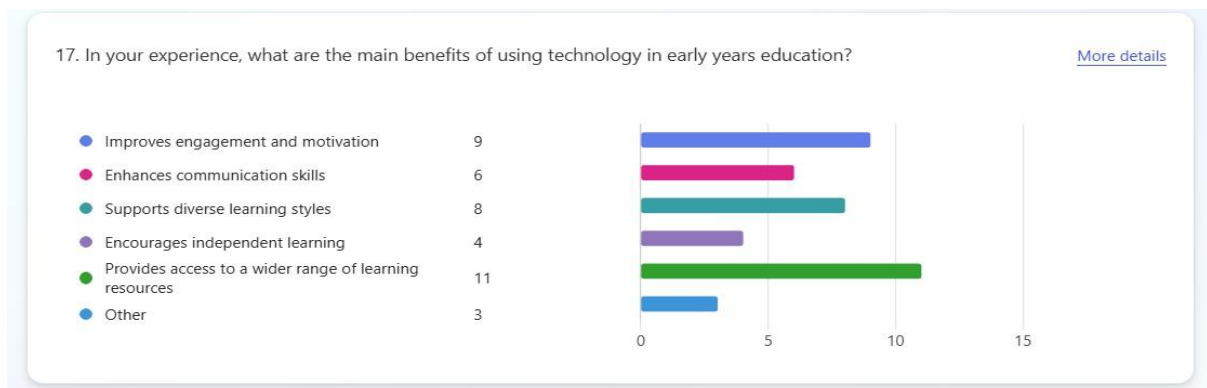


Figure 2: “What are the main benefits of using technology in early years education?”

### Future Aspirations for Digital Integration

Both interviewees wanted more structured and consistent digital integration. P1 advocated for embedding digital tools into daily routines:

“We teach them communication... we should teach them technology.”

P2 called for more developmentally age-appropriate apps:

“There should be more apps... specifically catered to children.”

These perspectives echo UNCRRC (2021) recommendations for equitable digital access in childhood, reinforcing that practitioners value purposeful digital technology use and want it embedded meaningfully in the curriculum but need clearer expectations, training and leadership support.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored practitioners' perceptions of digital technology integration within EYFS settings and examined the perceived benefits and challenges of using tools such as iPads, BeeBots and interactive whiteboards with children aged three to five. When used purposefully, practitioners described digital tools as supporting engagement, collaboration and early problem-solving, echoing findings from McManis and Gunnewig (2012) and Misirli and Komis (2014). However, these positive examples were highly context dependent, and the small sample size limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Even so, the study provided valuable insight into the factors shaping practitioners' confidence and decision making.

Despite interest shown for digital tools, practitioners reported significant barriers to consistent integration, including limited training, insufficient time for planning, and variable leadership support. These findings mirror wider research showing that practitioner confidence and organisational ethos strongly influence how digital technology is used in early years settings (Blackwell et al., 2013; Pappa et al., 2023). Without sustained professional development and clearer expectations, digital practice is likely to remain uneven across settings.

Overall, the study highlights the need for purposeful and pedagogically aligned digital integration in the EYFS. This needs to be supported with training, leadership guidance and access to developmentally appropriate resources. Strengthening these areas may help ensure that digital technology can be used meaningfully and confidently by early years practitioners.

Moving forward in practice, leaders need to prioritise clearer digital strategies, invest in sustained CPD, and support practitioners to reflect critically on how digital tools align with play centred pedagogy (Plumb & Kautz, 2016).

### **Limitations**

The small sample size and nature of the study, compounded by participant withdrawal, limited the extent to which the findings can be generalised (Denscombe, 2014). In addition, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of social desirability bias (Mertler, 2019). Nonetheless, the study provided meaningful insight into practitioners' perceptions, even where their views differed. I also recognise that it would have been valuable to include parents' perspectives to better understand the home environment and the types of digital technology children are exposed to.

While the study suggests that early year's practitioners generally value digital technology, significant barriers were identified, including inconsistent training, variable leadership expectations and uneven access to appropriate resources. One limitation is the study's small scale; sample size and geographic location, as the sample was predominantly based in London which means the findings may not be representative of all EYFS contexts. Future research could broaden the participant demographic, explore emerging forms of digital technology and examine how digital tools are used at home and across settings.

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Article 5

## A Fire Shrimp's Reflection on Professional Growth and Identity in Early Childhood Education

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### About the author:



**Elena Comber-Davies**

### Author biography:

I am a mature undergraduate student at the University of Staffordshire, studying BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies. With a background in healthcare and business administration, my transition into education was inspired by my experiences as a mother. I am committed to advocating for the rights and wellbeing of all children, with particular interest in inclusive practice and support for those with SEND and/or who have experienced trauma. I aspire to become an Educational Psychologist, combining relational care, critical reflection, and research to make a meaningful and lasting difference in the lives of children and families.

**Level of study:** Four

### Membership institution:

University of Staffordshire

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## **Introduction: Into the Depths**

This reflective account explores the emotional, ethical, and intellectual undercurrents shaping my development as an emerging educational practitioner. Drawing on work-based learning, hybrid journal entries, and moments of insight and challenge, I present three symbolic themes reflecting key transformations in professional identity. The structure integrates metaphor, creative reflection, and academic enquiry to explore the emotional and cognitive processes involved in professional learning.

Informed by Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (2013), this work is grounded in psychological, sociological, and philosophical theories, alongside key frameworks including the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory (EYFS) framework (Department for Education (DfE), 2024) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE and Department of Health (DoH), 2015). Ofsted's evolving emphasis on emotionally intelligent and reflective practice has informed my understanding of professionalism as relational, responsive, and ethically grounded (Ofsted, 2024a; 2024b; Taggart, 2016). Influences from Mezirow (1990), Vygotsky (1978), Goleman (2006), and Freire (2017) support this critical reflection.

Metaphorical reflection can represent complex experiences with nuance and meaning (Bolton, 2006). Recent studies show metaphors support reflective identity work in educational practice (Wegner, Burkhart and Nückles, 2021; Schellings, Koopman and Beijaard, 2024). Like the fire shrimp, often unseen yet resilient, I invite the reader to look beneath the surface of visible actions and consider the lived complexities shaping identity and care in education.

## **Navigating Undercurrents: Inclusion and Complexity**

Early in my practice, I supported a child looked after child (Smith and Rawson, 2025) with complex SEND in a home-based setting. Though uncertain, I instinctively drew on nurturing principles. A journal reflection noted: '...what this child truly needs is Early Years expertise, a nurturing and therapeutic approach that I was providing.' The EYFS (DfE, 2024) emphasises positive relationships and attuned

responsiveness. Despite the child's progress and positive parental feedback, the placement was abruptly terminated due to my lack of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

The tutoring was arranged through an agency, and although I had been transparent about my qualifications, the QTS requirement only emerged during a formal review of the local authority contract. The agency ended the placement, despite the child's progress and the parental support.

From my perspective, this prioritisation of status over relational connection conflicted with the inclusive, person-centred values of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) and the UNCRC (1989), particularly Articles 2 and 23.

The withdrawal disrupted the child's developing trust, critical in the context of attachment and developmental trauma (Nock, 2022). Van der Kolk (2015) notes premature disruption to early caregiving efforts can trigger stress and reduce confidence. This would also increase parental strain. The parent had already left employment due to a lack of suitable provision; my presence had offered structure and emotional relief. Such experiences are common, with families facing emotional and financial strain when SEND provision is withdrawn (Murray, 2024; Corrigan, 2025; Davis, 2025).

Professionally, I felt powerless; the lack of closure or consultation left me disheartened. Duyvendak, Knijn, and Kremer (2006) explore how systemic decisions can undermine practitioner autonomy and fracture care continuity. This experience challenged my assumptions and deepened my understanding of inclusion, not as a theoretical concept, but as lived, relational practice.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) underscores the importance of microsystem stability. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises learning through sustained, responsive interaction. Freire (2017) reminds us that when decisions are made at a distance from those most affected, the voices of children and practitioners' risk being silenced. As Knight (2016) suggests, educational systems would benefit from conversations that transcend transactional exchanges embracing empathy and authenticity to foster meaningful relationships within educational communities.

In this context, the contract's premature end exposed a troubling disconnect between policy ideals and practice realities. While frameworks advocate person-centred care, systemic processes may still exclude when status is prioritised over relational skill. This tension between bureaucratic structures and human connection remains a key learning point for me.

This experience left an impression and remains a powerful reminder that inclusion must be lived, not just legislated (Harkins, 2013; Goodall, 2020; Long and Guo, 2023).

### **Heat and Pressure: Mistakes, Emotions and Growth**

During my initial transition into the education sector, I made an anecdotal comment in a conversation outside of work about a situation relayed to me about someone else's experience. The child I referred to shared similar needs to a pupil at my placement school. Although no names or specific details were mentioned, someone familiar with both contexts made an assumption. The comment was relayed to the school, where it was interpreted as a negative reflection, understandably so. This misassociation, though unintended, left me feeling professionally vulnerable and personally disheartened. I recognised that speculating on the misunderstanding risked reinforcing assumptions. Prince-Paul and Kelley (2017) stress the importance of mindful, intentional communication, especially in relationally sensitive environments.

This event triggered anxiety and self-doubt. Clance and Imes (1978, cited in Want and Kleitman, 2005) describe this as the 'imposter phenomenon', where perceived errors are internalised as proof of inadequacy. Want and Kleitman (2005) associate this with selfhandicapping and reduced confidence. Goleman's (2006) emotional intelligence framework highlights the importance of self-regulation and empathy, while Maslow (1943) reminds us that when emotional needs are unmet, learning and growth are inhibited. Viac and Fraser (2020) similarly argue that educator wellbeing is essential to effective practice.

Luthans *et al.*'s (2007) Psychological Capital theory, especially the concepts of resilience and self-efficacy, helped me reframe the incident (Youssef-Morgan and Luthans, 2015). Instead of seeing the discomfort as damaging, I began to view it as a prompt for recalibration. Mezirow (1990) suggests that disorienting dilemmas can spark transformative learning. Brown (2016) encourages educators to normalise discomfort and reframe failure as opportunity. Pink (2023) frames regret as a clarifier of values. Together, these ideas supported my ability to move forward without shame.

The event also reaffirmed my belief in the educator's role as an emotional role model. Children gain psychological safety not only through explicit teaching but also through the subtle relational cues of the adults around them (Rose *et al.*, 2019; Zhikhareva and Kolchik, 2019; McFarland, 2022; Cary and Webb, 2025). The EYFS (DfE, 2024) and OECD (2020) reinforce the importance of warm, responsive adult relationships and the key person's role in emotional scaffolding.

Though unsettling, this incident became a turning point. Marder (2015) reminds us that owning mistakes is not a weakness, but a sign of maturity. By choosing to reflect rather than retreat, I strengthened my ability to support others with care, clarity, and resilience.

### **Bioluminescence: Identity, Creativity and Selfhood**

If the previous phase was shaped by pressure, this stage of my journey feels like bioluminescence, a steady glow formed through discomfort, learning, and growth. It reflects a quiet resilience rather than superficial brightness.

The fire shrimp metaphor offered a lens through which to explore professional identity. Resilient, vibrant, and adaptive under pressure, the shrimp became a symbol of my development. Creative expression, through metaphor, journaling, and embroidery, allowed me to engage with identity as fluid, evolving, and relational (Mezirow, 1990; White, 2021).

Seth (2021) describes selfhood as continually reconstructed through perception and experience. Identity is not fixed, but emergent, shaped by internal processes and external interactions. This aligns with systemic theories that understand identity as embedded in interdependent systems (Dallos and Vetere, 2010; Kaplan and Garner, 2017). Parry (2015) similarly asserts that original thinking emerges through ecological and dialogic interaction. Seeing myself as part of these broader relational networks deepens my attunement to the lived experiences of children and families.

Creative reflection is not separate from pedagogy. In Early Years practice, meaning is coconstructed through story, play, and symbol. Attending to my own identity formation in this way strengthens my capacity to support children in theirs.

This reflective journey has also nurtured a form of symbolic capital, not tied to status but grounded in relational recognition and internal legitimacy. As Bourdieu (1997, cited in Steinmetz, 2006) suggests, symbolic capital is conferred through shared belief and relational meaning.

Gilbert (2015) describes creativity as an act of courage. For me, it has also been an act of becoming. Through creative reflection, I have come to view identity as shaped by empathy, relational care, and reflective integrity. These values guide how I engage with challenge and support others, continually evolving, enabling me to meet learners with presence, care, and connection.

### **Conclusion: Resurfacing with Clarity**

Emerging from this reflective process, my experiences have shaped a more grounded, values-led version of myself. Reflective practice remains central to early years professionalism, strengthening both self-awareness and ethical responsiveness (Dyer and Taylor, 2012; Slade *et al*, 2019). Mezirow (1990) reminds us that transformation is rarely a single shift, but an iterative process of experience and reflection. Through navigating disruption, repair, and creative insight, I have developed the courage to lead with empathy and intention.

My identity is now defined not by role, but by presence, emotional literacy, and creative courage. These evolving qualities shape how I support children and families, with care, authenticity, and purpose.

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Article 6

## The impact of sensory play on self-regulation in children: A qualitative case-study into home-based experiences.

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### About the author:



**Beatrice Wagstaff**

### Author biography:

My name is Beatrice Wagstaff and I have recently graduated with a First-Class-Honours Degree in Early Years Development and Learning from Norland College. I have worked with children for over 12-years, and I am passionate about the role of play within a child's learning. I am currently completing my Newly Qualified Nanny year as the final part of the Norland Diploma, and I look forward to the rest of my career as an Early Years professional.

**Level of study:**

Six

**Membership institution:** Norland

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**Introduction and Rationale**

The first five years of a child's life hold great importance (Hester, Moran and Richards 2021), a time when development is at its fastest rate and experiences possess significant value in preparing children for later life (Crowley, 2017; Conkbayir, 2017, 2021). Play supports children's holistic development and it is important to provide children with a variety of opportunities to nurture this (Stewart, Corr and Henderson, 2023; DfE, 2024a). For example, socio-dramatic play encourages narrative and social skills, while construction play promotes thinking and reasoning skills (Stewart, Corr and Henderson, 2023). Sensory play supports holistic development, and its advantages range from motor development to mathematical skills (Goodwin, 2008; Grimmer and Geens, 2023). This article will specifically explore how sensory play supports child self-regulation, a special power which other play types may not provide.

The modernising society places pressure on early years practitioners to ensure their knowledge is up to date (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmey, 2023). Educational research therefore enables practitioners to improve their professional practice, and the knowledge required to support children in their learning (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). The motivations behind this research project came from a strong interest in sensory play and were influenced by undergraduate placements as part of a degree and diploma course at Norland College. To directly explore the benefits of sensory play on self-regulation, children's experiences have been placed at the forefront of the research process (Clark and Moss, 2011). Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, parental views have also been included as it is valuable to explore the opinions of those who hold great knowledge about the children through being directly involved in their lives.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The senses and sensory play**

The senses are the primary way in which babies and young children explore their environment (Forbes, 2004) and early exposure to multi-sensory opportunities provides a wealth of benefit to a child's holistic development (Cosentino et al, 2019, cited in Manja et al, 2022). Sensory experiences have a direct impact on a child's developing brain as they are vital for neural connections to form (Forbes, 2004; Conkbayir, 2017, 2021). Piaget's (1959) established sensorimotor theory also advocates for the importance of sensory learning opportunities. Macdonald (2022) highlights that children have an innate motivation to play, and this is supported by views of the DfE (2024a). It therefore seems that it is important to provide children with playful opportunities to engage their senses (Gascoyne, 2011).

Manja et al (2022) describe sensory play as any opportunity given to explore the world using any of the five senses, which Prendiville and Fearn (2017) label as olfactory, gustatory, tactile, auditory and visual. Additional senses should also be nurtured throughout childhood to enable holistic development (Cousins and Cunnah, 2018). Firstly, proprioception holds importance as it concerns balance and limb movement (Cousins and Cunnah, 2018). Additionally, the interoceptive sense is the internal system responsible for processing sensory input and enabling the body to feel emotion (Grimmer and Geens, 2023). One main strength of sensory play is its unique ability to allow children to develop their self-regulation skills (Aprianti, 2019). Through diverse sensory exploration, children can identify their likes and dislikes and learn how to communicate these, ultimately aiding their emotional understanding, sense of self and communication (Cousins and Cunnah, 2018).

### **2.2 Self-regulation and sensory play**

Asquith (2020) and Early Education (2021) both highlight that there is misconception surrounding the definition of self-regulation and that it is often incorrectly believed to mean adherence to rules. However, self-regulation is the driving factor behind a child's ability to concentrate, persevere and form social relationships (Asquith, 2020). When children can recognise their own emotions and have the skills to cope with these, they have learnt to selfregulate (Asquith, 2020). The early years are a time in which self-regulation develops, and it is a key skill to prepare children for their future (McClelland et al, 2012, cited in Stewart, Corr and Henderson, 2023). Self-regulation helps children to manage toxic stress,

the long-term consequences from remaining in high states of anxiety for considerable periods of time (Macdonald, 2022). Whilst MacDonald (2022) does not specify, other professionals have suggested these to include aggressive behaviour and unhealthy risk-taking (Heatherton and Wagner, 2012). Macdonald (2022) believes that the primary way in which children can protect themselves from these effects is by developing emotional resilience, which is a child's ability to cope with adverse emotions (Grimmer and Geens, 2023). Aprianti (2019), Asquith (2020) and Macdonald (2022) agree that, for a child to develop resilience, they must experience playful opportunities. Grimmer and Geens (2023) suggest that practitioners nurture this through providing open-ended resources. The open-ended quality of sensory play can reduce anxiety as there is no pressure to create an end product (Asquith, 2020).

Additionally, sensory play has been praised to have a 'calming and soothing' nature (Goodwin, 2008, p.9), demonstrating its positive influence on emotional resilience.

### **2.3 Technology as a sensory stimulus**

Through their cross-sectional study with pre-school aged children, Choe, Lawrence and Cingel (2022) found that high levels of mobile electronic device use and television exposure negatively impact self-regulation in children, particularly their inhibitory control. However, television would be considered as a sensory input due to the visual and auditory stimulation it provides (Forbes, 2004; Gascoyne, 2011), and this contradicts various authors who believe sensory inputs positively influence brain development self-regulation (Gascoyne, 2011; Aprianti, 2019; Asquith, 2020). A similar study conducted by Desmarais et al. in 2021 also discovered that the more time children spend watching television, the more negative their emotional reactivity. These results therefore increase the external validity of Choe, Lawrence and Cingel's (2022) findings and provides argument against the claimed benefits of sensory stimuli when it involves digital or screen-based sensory input.

### **2.4 Summary**

Sensory play is agreed to involve any play which stimulates at least one sense (Prendiville and Fearn, 2017; Manja et al, 2022) and one of its unique benefits is the promotion of selfregulation (Cousins and Cunnah, 2018; Aprianti, 2019). While self-regulation is commonly mistaken for adherence to rules (Asquith, 2020 and Early Education, 2021), Asquith (2020) highlights that it concerns a child's ability to recognise their own emotions and the skill

required to manage these. Self-regulation is also the key to building emotional resilience and managing toxic stress (Macdonald, 2022). Despite this, the use of technology as a sensory input has been scrutinised through the evaluation of research evidence, therefore decreasing the claimed value within a child's learning (Choe, Lawrence and Cingel, 2022). The themes investigated in this literature review informed the research project which investigated the role of sensory play in promoting self-regulation in children. It sought to investigate the impact in the home environment, something which has been identified to be lacking in credible research.

### **3. Outline of Research Study**

This study involved a family of two parents, a 2-year-old and 3-month-old twins. A qualitative methodology was adopted and two approaches to data collection were used. The aims of my research were to explore these questions:

1. What are the benefits of sensory play for a child in the home environment?
2. What does this look like in practice?
3. What are parents' (or primary caregivers') views on sensory play in aiding selfregulation in children?

The research was designed around three key ethical guidance documents (Norland, 2023; BERA, 2024; EECERA, 2025) and received ethical approval from Norland College. I allowed time to build positive and trusting relationships with my participants prior to conducting data collection (Flewitt and Ang, 2020). Informed consent (BERA, 2024) was gathered from the children's parents using signed forms. Assent (BERA, 2024) was also sought from the children prior to each observation. Additionally, a consent booklet was used with the 2-yearold to help them understand their role in the research process (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmey, 2023). Confidentiality was maintained through safe data storage and the use of pseudonyms (BERA, 2024).

### **4. Methodology and Methods**

It was important to me that my personal values underpinned my approach to research (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). When considering the appropriate design for my project, I valued an approach that would allow me to discover descriptive detail about real-life

experiences, something rich in 'complexity and diversity' (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmeey, 2023, p.83). I therefore chose to take a qualitative approach as this allowed me to reveal information about a subject that had little knowledge within existing literature (Rogo, 2024), and ultimately a deep insight into individual experiences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Denscombe, 2021). This allowed me to advocate for children and their experiences as the child's voice would be central to the research process (Norland, n.d.; Bell, 2005; Roose, 2008; Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmeey, 2023).

This was a small-scale research project, and Denscombe (2021) describes the case study approach to lend itself to this, seamlessly making use of naturally occurring settings. Therefore, by conducting a case-study in a home, I was able to address the gap in existing research and gain an insight into a single family's experiences (Denscombe, 2021).

Two data collection methods were pursued. Firstly, I directly focused on children's experiences through overt participant observations of their engagement with sensory play materials. Assent (BERA, 2024) was obtained prior to each observation. By participating as an observer, I could record the children's natural reactions (Denscombe, 2021). Photographs were also taken, where possible, to strengthen the observations (Clark and Moss, 2011) and allowed me to further analyse my findings later on. A semi-structured interview (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmeey, 2023) with a parent then provided a second viewpoint. From this, I gathered personal opinions, and the participant was given a certain degree of freedom in the answers (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmeey, 2023). Using two methods also allowed for cross-analysis and a more comprehensive view, as highlighted by Denscombe (2021).

## **5. Key Findings**

### **5.1 Behaviour**

As suggested by Zhang (2017) and Denscombe (2021), an iterative journey through data analysis then took place. My aim was to look for themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and this began by familiarising myself with the data through reading and selecting key quotes which sparked interest (Zhang, 2017; Denscombe, 2021). These were then grouped and developed upon each time the data was read (Zhang, 2017) and aided by an inductive approach (Hernández Ortiz and Parra Dorantes, 2013) to reveal the following:

## 1. Areas of behaviour

- a. Happiness and excitement
- b. Focus and concentration
- c. Relaxation

## 2. Environmental Influences

- a. Siblings
- b. Technology

Analysis of the findings suggested that sensory play had a positive impact on the child participants' ability to self-regulate. Three areas of behaviour affected by sensory play were identified. Firstly, happiness and excitement were evident. The children were often observed to "smile and giggle", as well as "dance" and "wave their arms around" (Figures 1 and 2).

Bodily movement is one way in which babies and young children express their excitement (Early Education, 2021), therefore supporting my analysis that the children felt positive emotions. The parent also expressed how they felt that sensory materials and play were "adding a bit of excitement" to their child's day.



Figure 1: Children engaging in sensory play with bubbles



Figure 2: A child engaging in sensory play with a sensory bag

Secondly, focus and concentration was a strong theme due to its consistency amongst the datasets. The children were observed to "concentrate intently", "watch" and "look at what they [were] doing". This is evidenced by Figure 3, in which the child is bent over and reaching into the container. Also demonstrated in Figure 4, they are holding on tight to the resources, suggesting they were fully immersed in their play (Laevers, 2015). The parent also believed that sensory play provided "real focus", which Prendiville (2021) believes stems from children's engrossment in play. As difficulty concentrating is a characteristic of emotional dysregulation (Weinberg and Klonsky, 2009), it can be inferred that sensory play, through enabling the participants to focus and concentrate, supported them to self-regulate.



Figure 3: A child engaging sensory play with oobleck



Figure 4: A child engaging in sensory play with rice

Lastly, relaxation was identified in the data analysis. The adjectives “calm” and “relaxed” appeared numerous times amongst the observational dataset and can be supported by Figure 5, which demonstrates the child’s shoulder to be relaxed. The children were also often observed to be “breathing at a normal rate”. As abnormal breathing is linked to feelings of anxiety (Vidotto et al, 2019), it has been inferred that a steady breathing rate indicates the children were at ease. The parent also reported the child to have had “a lot less tantrums” since having sensory play in the home environment. This could be the result of involvement in the play provoking oxytocin release, ultimately decreasing stress levels and encouraging self-regulation (Moberg and Petersson, 2022). Although this is a tentative finding, as it also could have been the result of my calming and playful presence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).



Figure 5: A child engaging in sensory play with oats

## 5.2 Environmental Influences

A second main theme of environmental influences was identified. Firstly, it was noticed that siblings played an influential role on each other’s involvement in sensory play. The parent expressed that the younger siblings were “watching [the sibling] ...and getting a lot of the benefit too”. They also observed their child to watch their sibling and afterwards “want a go”, reflecting key theoretical views of Bandura (1977) who believes that children observe

and imitate the actions of others, and Bronfenbrenner (1979) who highlights the influence of a child's environment on their own behaviour.

Secondly, withdrawal from technology was found to have a negative effect on self-regulation. The parent stated how their child "gets so upset" and "grumpy" after watching television and ultimately said "it's just not worth the hassle because afterwards his mood is so bad". This is also strengthened by conclusions of other recent studies (Choe, Lawrence and Cingel, 2022; Gillioz, Gentaz and Lejeune, 2025). Withdrawal from technology can be identified as a horizontal transition (Johansson, 2007) and suggests that the child struggled to regulate their emotions during these times. However, technology's negative impact on self-regulation is a tentative finding as there is no support from observational data.

Therefore, there may have been a range of factors contributing to the child's mood, such as adult input or time of day (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Lastly, I looked at the influence of the parent and the nanny on the children's involvement in sensory play. I prepared all sensory materials and created a playful framework by inviting the children to play through spoken word or demonstration. I would often smile at the children or offer supportive phrases, such as "well done!". This was supported by the parent who said, "I wake him up by saying, 'oh, come let's see what has been done!'. He wakes up curious and he's still a bit grumpy, but he's actually excited to see [the sensory play activity]". This phrase demonstrates the positive influence a supportive adult (Rose and Rogers, 2012) has on a child's involvement and is reinforced by the established theoretical views of Vygotsky (1978). Co-regulation (Garvey, 2023) is also evident here, as the parent is sharing their excitement and encouraging their child to do the same.

## **6. Recommendations**

### **6.1 Practice**

This study found a wide range of sensory play activities to benefit the children's ability to focus, relax and feel a sense of happiness. This suggested that sensory play is valuable for enabling children to develop the ability to self-regulate. In addition, the research discovered sensory play to benefit all child participants, proposing that age is not a limiting factor. Therefore, it is recommended that children are provided with a range of sensory play

opportunities from birth, and this should continue throughout childhood (Cosentino et al., 2019).

Withdrawal from television was found to negatively impact the children's mood and ultimately their ability to self-regulate. Supported by findings from alternative research (Choe, Lawrence and Cingel 2022; Gillioz, Gentaz and Lejeune, 2025), a recommendation would be to research and fully understand management of technology prior to its use. This could be done through reading studies or seeking advice from professionals. As the withdrawal takes the form of an emotional transition (Johansson, 2007), parents and practitioners should also seek to help children with this, such as giving verbal or visual countdowns and keeping open communication (Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012).

Another finding from this study was that siblings held an influential role. Parents and practitioners should consider the power of children observing each other in play and partaking in play together. Positive interaction with others not only enhances self-regulation, but also the development of the skills required for co-regulation (Lobo and Lunkenheimer, 2020; Taylan and Çarşanbalı, 2025).

As Early Years practitioners, it is imperative to consider the unique child in all that we do (Rose and Rogers, 2012). This study focused on one family's experience and therefore generalisation of findings must be tentative, especially in the context of early years (RobertsHolmes, Levy and Harmey, 2023). Parents and practitioners should carefully tune into children's needs and consider the best way of supporting their unique development of selfregulation (Montroy et al., 2016).

## **6.2 Further study**

From my experience of conducting this study, there are some recommendations I would make for students or practitioners who are interested in carrying out similar research. Firstly, it is important to place the child at the centre by using methods that promote the voices of themselves and their parents (Clark and Moss, 2011). For example, the children could choose the sensory play types, or the photographs could be shared with the parents to carry out shared analysis (Clark and Moss, 2011). Additionally, longitudinal research would mean that the benefit of sensory play can be measured over time (Fan, Chong and Li, 2024).

### **6.3 Curriculum and Policy**

The findings from this study revealed sensory play to improve children's self-regulation skills, and the importance of this is reflected in non-statutory documentation, such as 'Birth to 5 Matters' (Early Education, 2021). However, sensory exploration is only briefly mentioned in the statutory EYFS document (DfE, 2024a). Therefore, to broaden the awareness of the importance of sensory play, the EYFS could look to expand on the benefit it provides. While Early Years Practitioners often work collectively with parents or other professionals, it is also important for Early Years Practitioners to take on a leadership role to better children's experiences (Pugh, 2006) and advocate for their rights (Norland, n.d.; Unicef, 1989). The DfE (2024b) regularly offer consultations to gain opinions on how the EYFS could be improved. My research and experience play a vital role within this, and if a consultation arose, I would suggest more coverage and emphasis on the importance of sensory play and its role in the development of self-regulation. I also encourage other Early Years Practitioners with their knowledge and expertise, to advocate for children (Osgood, 2011) and engage with these consultations.

### **7. Personal Reflection**

Initially the research process felt daunting, as the current lack of research into my chosen topic suggested that it was a difficult area to study (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmey, 2023). However, early years is an area which is constantly evolving and to improve their practice, professionals must carry out research to reflect upon. Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmey, 2023). This study has taught me valuable information about the role of sensory play and is something that will enrich my work with children going forward.

As recognised by Montroy et al (2016), this study faced difficulty in identifying and evidencing self-regulation due to its multidimensional nature. Therefore, tentative conclusions have been made in relation to behavioural characteristics, and these are based on results of other credible studies, theory and scientific knowledge. In addition, as self-regulation develops with age (Taipale, 2016; Conkbayir, 2023), the young ages of the participants may have limited the depth of data collected.

There is also a current lack of research into the role of nannies (Papatheodorou, Rose and Luff, 2023). However, in many countries, homebased childcare is still a prominently used service and to provide high-quality care for children, it is important that practitioners have

regular opportunities to better their practice (Ang, 2023). This research has allowed me to improve my knowledge and skillset to practice as a nanny through deeply focusing on a subject of interest (Roberts-Holmes, Levy and Harmey (2023)). In addition, nurturing children's wellbeing is a large focus of today's early years practice therefore highlighting the relevance of this study in the current context (Papatheodorou and Luff, 2023). This project has provided valuable knowledge to take forward with me as an early years professional to best support children's development (Norland College, n.d.). Additionally, the process has allowed me to consider ways in which I can develop and improve my practice as a researcher, ultimately benefitting any future academic studies I choose to take.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the impact of sensory play on self-regulation in children and emphasises the importance of its implementation into widespread Early Years practice. Addressing the lack of research into home-based experiences, this study has highlighted the positive impact sensory play can have for children in the home environment. Sensory materials are valuable to enabling children to feel a sense of happiness, focus and relaxation and, in addition, siblings play an influential role in each other's involvement. Studying an under-researched area yet directly focussed on my future career as a nanny, has allowed me to grow as a professional and provide recommendation for other practitioners.

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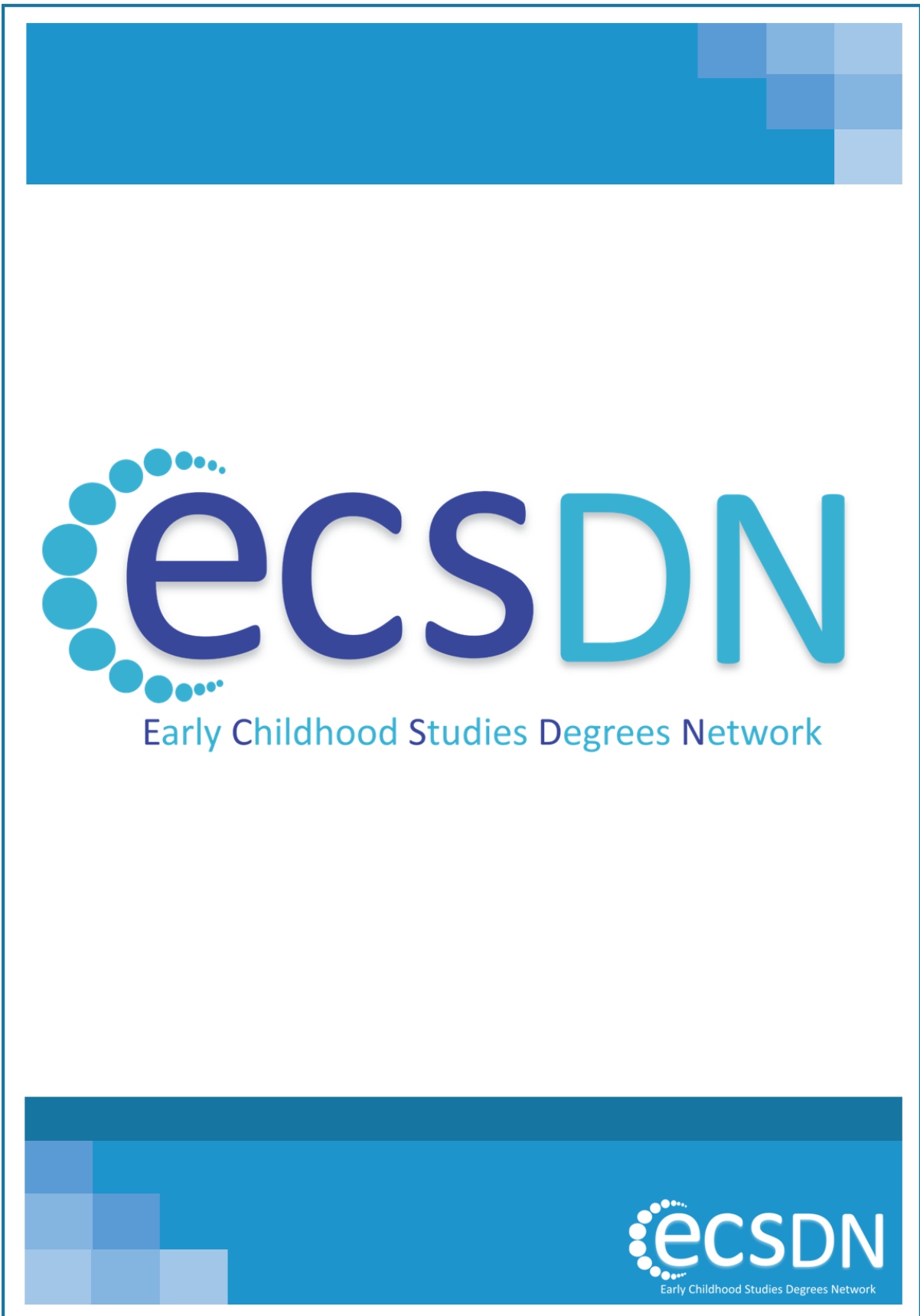
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