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The Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network

Student Publication Journal

Editors: Dr Joanne Josephidou (The Open University) and Dr Tim Clark (University of the West of England)

ecsdn
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.

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

Once again it has been a real pleasure to read the latest submissions for the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network Journal. We have four papers to include this time from four different universities in the UK. The successful authors are at different stages of their university journeys and are drawing on very different experiences and interests. However, as you might expect from those studying Early Childhood their papers address common themes and concerns. Themes such as inclusion, the role of the adult and the learning environment, concerns such as social justice and the impacts of poverty on young children. Student authors took on board feedback as part of the reviewing process to develop their work and we hope you enjoy reading their important contribution to important discussions.

Emily Morgan chose to explore ideas around reading aloud to babies (called infants in the international literature) and toddlers in a paper that will be of interest to practitioners, parents, and carers. She draws on her own experience as a practitioner to reflect on how she engages in this activity with the children in her care but wanted to find out more about what the potential impact on the children could be. She has reviewed some of the research literature to try to discover evidence of impact and sets out the benefits she has found there for us, including the impact on young children's language development. Drawing further on the literature, she also reflects on how book sharing with these very young children may support warm, attuned relationships and therefore is important for a very young child's sense of wellbeing and emotional development. Given the importance then of book sharing with very young children, Emily suggests it is essential for both practitioners and parents to know how to do this effectively, including how to choose a good book and how to provide a literacy rich environment. She notes her considered responses to these important ideas from what she is found out in her focused reading on the subject.

Like Emily Morgan, Jo Hilliard is concerned with provision in the environment and her specific interest is what happens in the ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) setting. As Jo reflects on the complex ways in which engaging and interesting environments can influence young children's learning and development, she is discussing an issue that is of high relevance to early childhood practitioners and hopefully will inspire them to reflect on their own practice. Her thoughtful reflection includes a consideration of the choices,

opportunities, and possibilities for practitioners to extend and enhance young children's learning within the environments they provide. Jo describes an interesting activity carried out by a group of online first year Early Childhood students, herself included, who were asked to share photographs of learning environments and then reflect on them. Within her discussion, Jo draws on ideas of risk taking within enabling environments and also considers one aspect of inclusion i.e. working with children who are bilingual and supporting their interactions within the learning environment. Jo includes the activity photograph for the reader's benefit, and this provides a useful illustration of some of the key points she is making.

The idea of enabling environments continues in Tamsin Harcourt's work; she also chooses to focus on the idea of appropriate spaces, including those which support risky play, for young children. Her paper reports on a small-scale research project about Forest Schools. She reminds us that, although this type of pedagogy has gained a great deal of popularity within the UK context since it was introduced in 1993, it remains an under researched area. Motivated by her experiences as a practitioner, she was interested to find out more about children's perspectives of this kind of environment, capturing their views through the Mosaic informed approach to methodology she adopted. It was so good to see one paper that had included the voice of the child, and the snippets of children's conversations and choice of photograph really brought the report of the empirical study alive. We also appreciated the fact that Tamsin had taken a critical approach to her review of the literature so that she decided to problematise the concept of Forest Schools including some consideration of inclusion. One issue, she notes, is that of social justice and the fact that access to outdoors and nature is not equitable for all children, regardless of how this is promoted as being of benefit to them.

Kate Banks' choice of topic is particularly relevant currently and reflects the importance of equality and justice which is at the heart of the discipline of Early Childhood Studies. She provides a synthesis of literature on her chosen focus 'The effect of poverty on children and their development'. Included in this discussion is a consideration of how a practitioner may

respond and support children and their families who are living in poverty. Within her review of the literature, she cites some examples of policy and also some useful, if at times shocking statistics, such as 'Of the 4.3 million children living in poverty, 71% have at least one parent who is employed (Haglund, 2023)'. She concludes her piece by calling on the government to both recognise and do much more to mitigate the impact that poverty has on children's lives including their prospects.

Our chosen student papers demonstrate the importance and impact of Early Childhood Studies Degrees for those working with young children. The Student Publishing Opportunity, now in its seventh year, continues to celebrate the learning and reflection of our amazing students. Approximately 150 students have now had their work published. Once again, we are grateful to our team of reviewers who have given up their time to engage with the reviewing process and give feedback that is both helpful and respectful. All papers have been reviewed anonymously by a minimum of two reviewers who are all academics in the field of Early Childhood. Many thanks also to our student authors who were brave enough to want to showcase their work – we are delighted that you did!

Dr Joanne Josephidou, Associate Head of School, The Open University

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

Reviewers

Kerrie Lee

Tim Clark

Jenny Robson

Glenda Tinney

Carly Blackburn

Sandra Lyndon

Jo Josephidou

Contents:

Article 1

Exploring Young Children's Perceptions of Forest School

About the author:

Tamsin Harcourt

Author biography:

I recently completed my final year of a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood at UWE, an experience I have thoroughly enjoyed. The pandemic motivated me to make a career change after seeing the impact of lockdown on children and young people, including my own teenagers. I believe that natural environments have a powerful impact on wellbeing and am driven by a passion to give children more time and space to play outdoors. After graduation I plan to gain more experience in Forest School settings and to explore how we approach environmental education with young children.

Level of study:

Six

Membership institution:

University of the West of England (UWE)

Introduction

My research explored young children's perceptions of Forest School (FS), an outdoor pedagogical approach gaining popularity in the UK (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012; Knight, 2016). I was motivated by my experiences as a practitioner in an outdoor setting. The study took place at a private FS preschool in Bristol and was underpinned by an epistemological standpoint recognising children as experts in their own lives (Clark, 2017), and as rights-bearing individuals with views worthy of respect (Christensen, 2004). There were three main research questions:

- What is young children's understanding of the Forest School concept?
- What do young children enjoy about Forest School?
- What do young children find challenging about Forest School?

The literature review shows FS positioned as an alternative to mainstream Early Years provision, with FS's greater focus on children's autonomy, as well as time spent outdoors, whereas for my child co-researchers it is simply their preschool. I was interested to learn children's views of FS, as it is a concept much contested by adults (Leather, 2016). Children's voices are not often meaningfully represented in research (Mayne and Howitt, 2015), and this is true of FS literature, with children's perspectives often filtered through adult lenses (Garden and Downes, 2023).

Literature Review

Literature searching was initially based on research into UK FS settings, but as this is limited (Garden and Downes, 2023), the decision was made to include literature on the wider subject of outdoor play in natural environments. The review draws out four key themes: the complexities of defining FS, the impact on children, nature connection, and critiques of FS.

Defining Forest School

The term Forest School (FS) was first coined by lecturers and students from Bridgwater College in 1993 after a study trip to Denmark (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). Arguably, there are links to older pedagogical theories, particularly Froebel, and a heritage of outdoor learning in the UK including Isaacs and the Macmillan sisters (Cree and McCree, 2012). Since, there has been discussion around how precisely the concept of FS should be defined and applied in practice. 'Forest School' has no protected legal definition, any provider can label themselves as such (Weinstein, 2015). However, the Forest School Association (FSA) was formally constituted in 2012 by a community of FS practitioners to act as a professional body for the growing sector, although registration remains voluntary. Settings

registered with the FSA agree to abide by six guiding principles, which are summarised here (FSA, 2020):

- sessions run by qualified level 3 FS practitioners
- long-term regular contact with a wooded environment
- a child-centred pedagogy where children learn to manage risk
- a high adult to child ratio
- observations of learners used to scaffold learning
- care for the natural world

In addition, there has been criticism that attempts to standardise the FS experience could mean that FS simply becomes a marketing badge (Leather, 2016), with FS leaders trained in delivering prescribed activities without deeper understanding of underlying principles and pedagogy. There are undeniable commercial pressures on the early years sector, with preschool settings viewed by government as a market like any other (Robson and Martin, 2019). Knight (2011; 2012; 2016) has written extensively about FS and argues that the approach is a separate philosophy from other outdoor learning. It should also be remembered that FS is a grass roots movement (Sackville-Ford, 2019) of 'micro-communities' built collectively by children, families, and practitioners (Blackham et al., 2023).

Impact on Children

The Forest School Association website makes impressive claims for the beneficial effect of FS including that it "develops confidence and self-esteem" (FSA, 2020). An often-cited study by O'Brien (2009) draws out positive impacts for children including improved social skills and better concentration. Recent research in English primary schools found FS represented a break from school routines, with more freedom and autonomy for children (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). However, Garden and Downes' (2023) recent systematic review argues there is limited evidence to support these claims, and highlights the scarcity of research into UK FS settings. Finally, the chance for children to experiment with risk is a strong theme within the literature and is often suggested as a positive impact. FS practitioners view risky play as an essential part of healthy child development (Knight et al. 2024), believing that opportunities to take small risks help children overcome difficulty and develop resilience (Harper and Obee, 2021). Gill (2010) suggests that FS can provide a unique environment for practitioners to support children to develop an approach of risk/benefit analysis, in a UK society that is increasingly risk averse.

Nature Connection

FS offers children the opportunity to spend extended periods of time in natural environments (Knight et al., 2024), and there is a growing body of research highlighting that access to nature is integral to children's health and wellbeing (Chawla, 2015). However, children are spending less time playing outdoors than previous generations (Kemple et al., 2016; Bento and Dias, 2017), leading to what Louv (2005) dubs 'nature deficit disorder'. In addition, access to nature is an issue of social justice, where children living in lower-income urban areas are less likely to have access to green space (UN, 2013). Waite et al. (2016) suggest early experiences in nature are foundational if children are to learn to care for the environment, and Harris (2021) discusses how FS offers this opportunity to children by developing an emotional attachment to natural environments through regular visits. FS therefore provides young children an accessible way to learn about the abstract concept of climate change in contrast to the 'education through catastrophe' in mainstream school (Nugent et al., 2019) and develop their 'ecological identity' (Boyd, 2019).

The 'problem' with Forest School

Some authors argue that transplanting a Danish concept into the UK's very different social and political context is problematic (Waite, Bølling, and Bentsen, 2016). It is also difficult to obtain accurate data on UK FS settings (Davies, 2015) and therefore to gauge how many children are participating. However, it seems reasonable to propose that FS settings represent a minority provision in the UK, which raises questions about access for all children. The marketisation of the UK early years sector is presented as offering parents a choice (Burgess et al., 2020) however this is based on local affordable availability. Finally, an issue of relevance to this study is a lack of research representing children's voices (Mayne and Howitt, 2015). Although FS has a child-centred philosophy and democratic approach (FSA, 2020) much research only offers children's experiences filtered through adult perspectives. However, there are a few notable exceptions (see Ridgers et al., 2012; Bradley and Male, 2017). The child's perspective is more visible in Scandinavian texts, perhaps due to a positive positioning of the child within Scandinavian culture (Klaar and Ohman, 2014; Norðdahl and Einarsdóttir, 2015; Jorgensen, 2018).

To conclude this section of the paper, it is clear there are many debates surrounding FS beginning with definition and progressing through the uncertainties of fully enacting the approach in a risk-averse UK. Claims are made for positive impacts on children, including improved social skills, increased self-esteem, and confidence managing risk. In addition, early experiences in nature can be foundational (Chawla, 2015) and FS can allow children to develop their 'ecological identity' (Boyd, 2019). However, there are tensions between the passionate grass roots nature of FS (Sackville-Ford,

2019) and calls for rigorous research to back up claims made for its impact on children (Garden and Downes, 2023). Furthermore, FS is a minority provision in the UK, addressed fleetingly in the EYFS (DfE, 2024), raising questions of access for all children. Finally, children's FS experiences are often filtered through adult lenses, leaving a gap in research centring children's voices.

Methodology

Applying an interpretivist paradigm was underpinned by my epistemological standpoint that real world understanding, and knowledge is constructed based on children's social experiences, where knowledge is not passively received, but is built through social experience in which children play an active part. However, I am aware of the constant calls for 'evidence based' practice in the early years sector (Penn and Lloyd, 2007), and reflected that this sometimes feels like pressure to move to a more positivist position. Positivism suggests that there is one 'right' answer to be found, which is at odds with a qualitative study of the social worlds of young children. Therefore, my construction of children is that they are capable, competent, and experts in their own lives, creating their own knowledge through experience and interaction (Clark, 2017).

As a result of this positioning, I recognised the power differentials between adults and children in research (Punch, 2002) and aimed to ensure children's voices formed a significant part of my research process. I was motivated by a children's rights approach, particularly the right of children to be consulted on matters that affect their lives (UN, 1989). My work is informed by the 'new sociology of childhood' (Morrow and Richards, 1996), where children are viewed as beings rather than becomings. However, this is not always easily enacted, and although researchers aim to be co-constructors of knowledge and equal partners with children (Jordan, 2009), we cannot ever fully enter their worlds, even though we have been children ourselves (Lahman, 2008).

I chose a modified form of Clark's (2017) Mosaic Approach as her concept of deeply listening to children using a range of creative methods aligns with me personally and professionally. Methods included child-led photo tours, clay modelling and drawing sessions, child conferencing, and observations. The participants were 3 years old during data collection and had been attending the setting for 4 months. Throughout, I drew on Hart's (2008) ladder of participation, to consider how I conducted my research to avoid tokenism and allow children to fully participate.

Ethics

I adhered to BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) and gained ethical approval for the study through the University of the West of England (UWE). However, I recognise that although guidelines and formal processes are an important starting point, they are not a guarantee of ethical practice (Bourke, 2017). A truly ethical approach is an active and reflexive process that continues throughout the project (Mortari and Harcourt, 2012; Shepherd et al, 2022). As trusting relationships take time to develop, I allowed a generous familiarisation period in the setting before introducing my research (Barley and Bath, 2014). I also considered how I withdrew from the field to minimise the impact on the children (Mackey and Vaealiki, 2011).

The issue of informed consent by young children is much debated (Brown and Clark, 2023). I adopted Lahman's (2008) concept of children as both vulnerable and competent, in need of protection from harm, but also competent to make their own decisions. Written consent was obtained from primary carers, but gaining assent from children was an active and ongoing process (Huser, et al., 2022) where I answered the children's questions about my research, and frequently sought their permission to note down contributions. I looked for enthusiastic involvement from children, in body language as well as in speech (Cooks, 2006), respecting when they did not want to participate. Finally, I intended the children to choose their own pseudonyms, as this can give children a sense of ownership (Flewitt, 2005), but this proved to be a difficult concept for them to grasp. Therefore, I randomly allocated the top ten trees in the UK as pseudonyms to protect children's anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis

I used inductive analysis which "permits theory and hypotheses to evolve from the data" (p.358, Coolican, 2019). However, I am aware that describing themes as emerging can be seen as passive and can downplay the influence of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I made brief notes to capture patterns within the different responses and used this initial analysis to reflect on themes for further exploration, using Geertz's (2016) concept of 'thick' descriptions, where small actions have meaning in a complex cultural context. I was interested in the overlapping in children's worlds of the real and the imaginary, the way places are familiar for children because they have an associated game or story (Klaar and Ohman, 2014). Recalling my research questions, I felt that this idea of *The FS 'Space'* was one worth investigating. The theme of *Rules, Routines and Welly Boots* also contributed to the understanding of children's concepts of FS, whereas *Mud and Imaginary Snails* helped me consider

what they most enjoyed at FS. It was harder to draw out answers to “What do children find challenging at FS?”. For this reason, I included a final theme of *Relationships and Tricky Bits*.

The FS ‘Space’

The children showed that they were building an intense familiarity with their outdoor environment. They often focussed on small details, for example a slightly raised bank in the base camp area, a small hole that filled with water after rain, Elder’s ‘always here’ tree. This is supported by Norðdahl and Einarsdóttir (2015) who suggest that children focus on seemingly insignificant aspects of the environment that adults can overlook. The forest could be seen as offering support to the children, endlessly adaptable to what they needed.

	“I like this because it’s always here” Elder demonstrates how they can use it to pull themself up the slope.

Fig. 1: Extract from Elder’s photo tour

I wondered whether the ‘FS space’ consisted of the relationships between the children, the adults and the landscape, a space that is being actively created. This resonates with Klaar and Ohman’s (2014) sense of nature as a 'home' and a place of opportunity for creative play, and the FS space as a ‘micro-community’ that was being constantly constructed (Blackham et al., 2023). The space was also a place of excitement, an opportunity for freedom and joy in movement. This was evident in my many observations of running, climbing and sliding. In this extract, Hazel showed their eagerness not just with speech but the whole movement of their body:

> Walking down across open parkland, Hazel points straight ahead at a thickly wooded area “I wanna go into the woods”, they quicken their pace.

Rules, Routines and Welly Boots

Wellies and waterproofs were a key part of FS for the children. They recognised that being dressed in their warm layers, waterproofs and welly boots allowed them the freedom to play, and to take risks. Data collection was during a very wet February, where children (and adults) slipped over in the mud. In this extract, Hazel has just fallen over:

> "I'm OK" Hazel calls cheerfully, pulling themselves to their feet confidently, using a sapling to help. Hazel walks over to me.
> Hazel: "Cos I got my wet trousers on". They point first at their boots and then at their waterproofs.

It could be suggested that the appropriate wet weather gear was not just of practical use, but provided psychological support too, a sense of being ready for anything. During the photo tours, several children were interested in photographing their own rucksacks or boots. I was struck by the similarity to Jorgensen's (2018) ethnographic study in a Scandinavian setting, where the outdoor kit was linked to a sense of identity and independence for the children.

Rules and routines are double-edged in settings. On the one hand, the FS rules introduced at the start of each day provided a sense of familiarity and comfort for the children, of belonging to the FS 'micro-community' (Blackham et al., 2023). But on the other, boundaries were being constantly negotiated. For example, whilst exploring the parkland, Ash deliberately ignored the calls of a practitioner and walked out of sight, their regular glances back showing their awareness that they were breaking a FS rule. Later Ash asserted their autonomy in the research process, wanting to fill up all the pages in my clipboard with their drawings. FS provides children with the opportunity for freedom and autonomy (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) but there are limits to this.

Mud and Imaginary Snails

The dataset showed the children's fascination with the natural world and the other creatures sharing the FS space, with frequent mentions of worms, snails, and the occasional spider. Sometimes this was visible in children carrying out close investigations of creatures and plants, at others it was represented more playfully, as with Hawthorn's imaginary snails on a tree trunk. Here were children enjoying those foundational experiences in nature (Chawla, 2015). I coded mud as a loose part (Nicholson, 1971) as its fluidity and flexibility lent itself to open-ended play. I found the children had an ambiguous response:

> I ask the children what they think about mud, they shout “yuck!” and grin.

The children are perhaps trying to work out what sort of response I am seeking, assessing what I might consider the ‘right’ answer (Flewitt, 2014). They have absorbed the concept of dirty/clean and the unacceptability of being muddy in some situations, but they have also experienced the enjoyment of mud:

> Oak says to me unprompted “Mud!” and points at the floor. I ask what Oak likes about mud. “Scooping with tools”. Oak crouches down to demonstrate with a small trowel.

However, I became aware as I spent time in the setting and talked with practitioners, that there were children who found it more difficult to be muddy. Children with sensory processing difficulties can find the sensation of mud on their hands distressing, and this required sensitive support. This raises ethical questions about the wellbeing of all children in FS settings and could be an area for future study, as children with additional needs are often overlooked in research (Cooks, 2006; Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

Relationships and other tricky bits

Developing social skills is often mentioned in the literature as a benefit of FS (O’Brien, 2009). Although I found many examples of cooperative play in the data, I was initially surprised to find only one specific mention of friendship, when a child pointed out and named their friends. I noted much existing FS literature focusses on older children, but also reflected whether I was privileging spoken language, focussing on specific utterances, when my observation data gave me plenty of examples of what children do. For example, Elder playing with helplessness:

> Elder is lying on their front in the mud at the base of the mound, wriggling around and crying out “Ah! Help me, [other child]! Elder turns their head to look back at me and grins, to show me that this is a game.

Similarly, when talking about what was important at FS, children did not mention practitioners. However, I noticed the log circle appeared prominently in photo tours, an implicit allusion to time

spent together as a group. Photography can be a powerful tool for young children to highlight what is important to them without words (Cook and Hess, 2007).

Other tricky bits include the ethics of observing children (Papatheodourou, 2013). There were several occasions where a particular child was resistant to putting on outdoor clothes and I felt it unethical to record a formal observation, even though it was part of an answer to what children find challenging at FS. On other occasions I found my carefully prepared open-ended questions met with silence, which Spyrou (2016) considers a valid component of child 'voice'. Ultimately, I followed Lahman's (2008) guidance to 'hang out' with children, trusting that all the different ways they chose to communicate had meaning.

Conclusion

This study used the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2017) to illuminate children's perceptions of FS, a concept much debated by adults (Knight et al., 2024). The project made me slow down, observe, and focus on small details, and I carry this experience into my practice. It provides a rich collection of young children's experiences at a FS preschool, which helps to explain how children define their own concept of FS. It has shown the things that the children found important; mastery over their own bodies, the freedom to run and climb, open-ended play, and a curiosity about the natural world. It has shown too that boundaries are complicated things, sometimes frustrating autonomy, but also providing a sense of security. It adds to research centring children's voices.

Limitations

This study represents a snapshot of one FS setting, and the findings should not be generalised. The participants are self-selecting and are unlikely to be demographically representative of the UK, or even of the neighbourhood of the setting. In addition, weather plays a significant part in outdoor settings, and collecting data during different seasons of the year may affect the data collected. Therefore, research during other seasons at the setting would be interesting. Finally, whilst every attempt has been made to accurately represent the children's voices, I acknowledge that as the researcher I have ultimate control over what data is selected and how it is presented (Mukherji and Albon, 2023).

Recommendations

FS settings are under-researched in the UK (Garden and Downes, 2023), and so more research into FS would be welcomed, including more longitudinal research to strengthen the evidence base of the

benefits to children (Ridgers et al, 2012). In addition, despite academic discussion of a rights-based approach that values children as equal participants, there is still a lack of research that truly centres children's voices (Mayne and Howitt, 2015), and this is also evident in FS research. Tentative findings suggest that FS can be particularly beneficial for autistic children (Bradley and Male, 2017) but there is very little research focussing on children with additional needs in FS settings. Ethical research practice calls for all children's voices to be represented (Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

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Article 2

Children's environments, well-being and inclusion

About the author:

Jo Hilliard

Author biography:

My name is Jo and I have worked with children for the past decade, firstly in various volunteer capacities, before joining a small rural primary school as a preschool assistant working with two- to four-year-olds. In September 2023 I completed my level 3 Teaching Assistant apprenticeship, passing with distinction, and I have now finished my first year of study towards a BA(Hons) in Early Childhood with the Open University. I have a real passion for the early years and a particular interest in the benefits of outdoor learning and environments that both nurture and challenge children as individuals.

Level of study:

Four

Membership institution:

The Open University (OU)

This paper will explore an activity carried out by a group of online Early Childhood students who were asked to share photographs of learning environments. The first section of the paper will discuss the photograph I chose to share including a discussion of learning environments more broadly including the importance of risk taking. I will then look at one aspect of inclusion i.e. bilingualism and discuss how this links to considerations of the learning environment. For my photograph, I chose to share an image of the indoor construction area at my setting which contains large wooden blocks, smaller wooden bricks, log slices, small rings, carpet squares, cardboard tubes of various size and natural loose parts including pinecones and conkers.

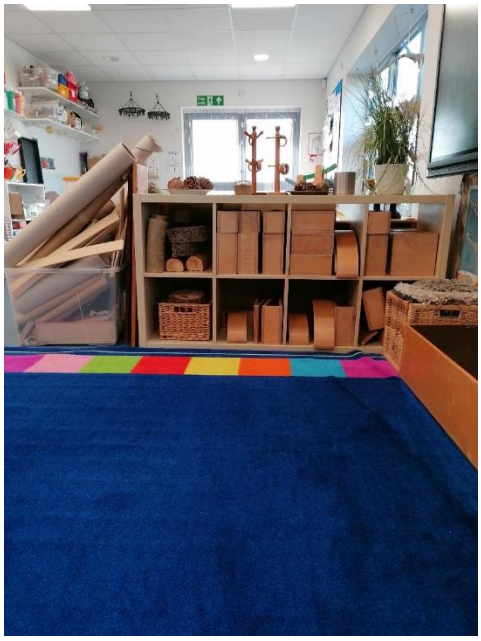

Figure 1: An example of a learning environment for young children

I chose this image because I feel it demonstrates a positive learning environment in that the open-ended resources available spark creativity and curiosity; enabling children to use their imaginations to create whatever space they wish to engage with. Resources which allow for flexibility and individual interpretation encourage deeper thinking and exploration, provoking creative thinking and facilitating 'hands-on' experiences (Parry and McLachlan, 2016, p.115). Much like the example of the 'whatever you want it to be place' (Broadhead, 2006, cited in, Parry and McLachlan, 2016, p.117), the children in my setting are free to

explore and make their own possibilities without adult interruption; they are able to learn at their own pace in an area which is accessible to all regardless of gender, ability or personality, enabling them to make links between different areas of interest through their play (Parry and McLachlan, 2016).

In contrast to my photograph, most of the images shared by the other students depicted outdoor areas with a range of different spaces shown including natural areas, purpose built outdoor facilities and smaller 'set-ups'. Much of the discussion around the images related to the inviting spaces and resources provided for the children to explore, helping them to identify opportunities for play which is a key aspect of a positive learning environment (NCCA, 2010, p.56). The more natural areas shared demonstrated opportunities for risky play and for children to practice their agency, other key elements of a positive learning environment (Horsley, 2016). Two images which particularly interested me were of outdoor kitchen areas both titled 'learning environments': one was a very open ended, messy, natural looking area and the other, a clean, pre-planned, 'set-up'. It interested me because they show a similar area used in different ways; the first enables autonomy and freedom to explore whilst the second invites and provokes a set way to play: both of which can be argued as a positive learning environment (Parry and McLachlan, 2016).

This activity has shown me that whilst I can value my practice and justify a positive learning environment in my setting, it does not mean that environments presented in different ways are any less positive, highlighting how significant the perspective of the adult is and how our own values reflect the practice we provide. Furthermore, it has cemented the knowledge I have gained from my reading in Parry and McLachlan (2016), in that children need to be provided with many different ways to explore and engage with their environment and that these should be reflective of the children's cultural backgrounds and varying interests. Leavers (2005) suggests that a positive learning environment is one which offers 'diversity and depth' and I agree that by offering children may ways of experiencing our settings, we provide them with the most effective spaces to nurture, celebrate and support learning.

A learning environment can be defined as any space where children learn, taking many forms ranging from small, purpose-built areas to vast, natural spaces. These environments

may be indoors or out, accessed individually or collectively and they may be filled with resources or resourced only with the environment itself. A significant part of our role as adults in the lives of young children is to create and maintain positive learning environments, a challenge perhaps, given the scope of spaces which could be created and the differing perspectives of the adults who create them. This paper explores three key elements which make a positive learning environment; the adult's role in letting children make decisions (Parry and McLachlan, 2016), risk taking (Horsley, 2016) and supporting bilingualism (Jones and Drury, 2016), demonstrating how they support children's well-being and inclusion.

When adults allow children to make their own decisions in play, we are enabling them to use their interests as a starting point for learning, facilitating their natural curiosity and making their learning more enjoyable, which all forms a positive learning environment. If we are flexible in our approach to allowing children to move and utilise resources as they choose, we recognise that children learn holistically and support them in making meaning and exploring connections with the world around them (Parry and McLachlan, 2016). In the example of Jackie, a nursery manager, described in Parry and McLachlan (2016) we see how allowing children to participate in decision making about how their play space is set up and resourced, enables them to shape their experience so that it means more to them and provides richer opportunities for play and discovery. In addition, by providing open-ended resources and creating opportunities for 'hands-on' experiences (Parry and McLachlan, 2016, p.115), we encourage children to use their imaginations and creative thinking to form links between ideas and discover new ways of doing things, making a positive learning environment. Furthermore, open-ended resources are accessible in their nature and because they can be anything the child chooses, they can be used for many different purposes and by all ages, genders, abilities and individual personalities (Parry and McLachlan, 2016).

Despite the benefits of allowing children's decision making, it remains a challenge for many practitioners to step back (Parry and McLachlan, 2016), and finding a balance between being flexible and recognising agency, whilst also fulfilling responsibilities under policy and curriculum restraints, is difficult to navigate. Clark (2012) suggests a good starting point to enable children's decision making in this way is through listening to ideas and observing how

children interact with their current environment. This is done in my own setting, where we use group circle times to talk about what the adults have seen the children doing today and encourage them to reflect on their experiences: “Today, I saw ‘Sally’ and ‘Jenny’ making soup in the garden, can you tell us about it?” ..... “What did you like about making the soup?” ..... “Was there anything you didn’t like?”. These suggestions and ideas can then be used to adapt and enhance the environment. It is clear that letting children make decisions about their play provides a positive learning environment which supports well-being and inclusion by facilitating participation, ensuring accessibility for all and enabling children to feel a sense of belonging.

Enabling risk taking, particularly in the outdoors, is another key element in providing a positive learning environment for children. Pioneer Margaret McMillan was an advocate for outdoor learning and is quoted as saying ‘the best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky’ (highlighting her values of outside play as beneficial for children’s overall physical and mental well-being, an approach which is still celebrated today. When children are free to take risks, try new experiences and manage their own failures, they are active participants in their learning, making meaning of the world around them (Horsley, 2016). In addition, learning environments such as forest schools which encourage children to explore and take risks, recognise that ‘risk is inherent in human endeavour’ and allowing children to assess and manage their own risks is a fundamental part of life (Moss and Petrie, 2002, cited in Tovey, 2007). When we embrace risky play, we recognise our children’s agency and allow them to make choices about how to engage with their environment, test their own theories and manage their own mistakes (Horsley, 2016). This all helps to build a positive learning environment which develops key characteristics in children such as confidence, self-esteem, resilience and persistence: skills which enable children to fully participate. Furthermore, the unhurried approach of such environments are inclusive, enabling own pace learning and providing rich and varied opportunities for all children to develop their skills (Horsley, 2016).

Risk taking in positive learning environments

However, embracing risk taking comes with challenges and the adult’s perspective and control over the play can become a barrier. Parents and practitioners alike have their

children's safety as a priority so it can be hard for adults to 'let go' and allow children to explore and take risks for fear of injury or upset (Horsley, 2016). An example of this is highlighted in an evaluation of a forest school programme by Maynard (2007) where early years teachers joined in partnership with forest school leaders to experience the benefits of risky play. The teachers were found to be reluctant to relinquish control and let the children explore out of sight, with both groups of adults holding very different beliefs and values about childhood. If adults can remove the barriers to risky play and overcome their insecurities, the skills developed within it can support future participation, and the physical and mental benefits of outdoor play will combine together to provide a positive learning environment which supports well-being and inclusion.

The learning environment and supporting bilingualism

The final element discussed in this paper is supporting bilingualism. Inclusive settings recognise and celebrate the individuality of each child: valuing and respecting them for who they are regardless of any perceived difference (Jones and Drury, 2016). When we support bilingual children, we can do this in an inclusive way by viewing a child's mother tongue as a resource and embedding the child's home language and literacy into our curriculums: thus enriching the provision and creating a positive learning environment for all children, not just those with the additional language (Jones and Drury, 2016). Further to this, by ensuring a provision supports 'additive' rather than 'subtractive' bilingualism, practitioners will recognise the importance of the child's home language and seek to add English to the child's language 'repertoire' through the daily routines of the setting, rather than attempting to replace the mother tongue (Jones and Drury, 2016). An example of this is given in Horsley (2016) where Samia, a four-year-old bilingual girl, adopts the role of 'teacher' to her brother and plays out the routines of her nursery day in both English and her home language, Pahari. Samia moves confidently between the two languages, using correct structures and contextually accurate narratives, highlighting how she is able to construct meaning and gain a deep understanding of her new language from participating in nursery life.

Despite the benefits of supporting bilingualism, it can remain a challenge for some practitioners to take this approach. The status of a particular language can play a role in how much value a practitioner puts on embracing that language within a setting. For example, a

'high status' language in the United Kingdom, such as French, is commonly viewed as an asset whereas the mother tongue of an ethnic minority group is often seen as a disadvantage or barrier to learning (Horsley, 2016). In addition to this, practitioners may shy away from speaking in an unknown language for fear of making a mistake but Horsley (2016), argues that even adults who are not bilingual play an important role in constructing joint meaning with non-verbal communications and the sharing of books and pictures. It is clear that in embracing bilingualism we can build a cultural context within our settings which celebrates modern day diversity and fosters a positive learning environment where respect and inclusion are at the foundation. This in turn supports inclusivity and well-being by increasing children's sense of belonging, helping to establish individual identities and enabling participation for all.

This paper has illustrated how three elements; letting children make decisions, risk taking and supporting bilingualism, can create positive learning environments for young children. Using examples, I have illustrated how these support well-being and inclusion by celebrating diversity, developing individual children's sense of identity and belonging, enabling participation for all and offering opportunities to support children's physical and mental health. Across the three elements there is a clear theme highlighting the challenges which stem from the adult's perspective and how their beliefs and values can impact how much children are allowed to explore and shape their own learning. If we, as adults in the lives of young children, can step back and put aside our own insecurities or constraints to allow children to realise their agency and practice their autonomy, we release the potential for the learning environments we provide to have a full and positive impact on the well-being, inclusion and future of all our children.

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Article 3

What are the benefits of reading aloud to babies and toddlers and how can practitioners, parents and carers do this effectively?

About the author:

Emily Morgan

Author biography:

My name is Emily Morgan, I am 21 and recently finished my degree studying Early Childhood Studies at Oxford Brookes, class of 2024! I am currently a student teacher at Oxford Brookes, but I have been working with young children for a little over three years. I hope to become a primary school teacher in the near future. I am passionate about children's mental health and well-being as well as children's literature and the importance of reading for pleasure. I see myself as a very positive and hard-working person and I absolutely love working with children.

Level of study:

Six

Membership institution:

Oxford Brookes University

This paper explores reading aloud to young children at home and in nursery settings, how this practice can impact on babies and toddlers, and how practitioners and parents can do this effectively. I chose this topic because, during my experience as a nursery assistant, I have read many books to children from ages six months to nearly two years without really knowing what impact this had. Butler (1998) argues that providing books to babies is essential for them to become happy adults and if adults did not introduce babies to books, they would never encounter them on their own. This highlights the importance of reading aloud to very young children as well as having the knowledge to read effectively. The benefits of reading to young children have been endorsed by the Book Trust (2024) with their Bookstart scheme which "gives a free book pack to every baby born in England and Wales" (Book Trust, 2024). In this paper, I intend to explore what recent research states about the effects and impact of reading aloud to young children. I will then move on to how this can be done effectively by practitioners and parents and finally I will discuss what types of books babies and toddlers enjoy reading or listening to. For the purposes of this paper, I define babies as children under 18 months and toddlers as between 18 months and 24 months.

1. What are the benefits of reading aloud to babies and toddlers?

Reading aloud to young children teaches them early on in their lives what books are and how they work, as stated by Butler (1998, p. 11): "To begin with, she will learn that a book is a thing…". This will eventually lead to which way up to hold a book and how to turn the pages (Cecil, Lozano, and Chaplin, 2020).

1.2 Language Acquisition and Literacy Skills

Salley et al. (2022, pp. 127-128) state that sharing books with babies and toddlers significantly enhances language development, particularly in their first year. Compared to other routines, book sharing naturally fosters language-rich interactions and joint attention, promoting vocabulary growth and even new word learning from a single book. Towell et al. (2019) argue that reading aloud helps children understand words and concepts which improves listening comprehension essential for literacy and that quality children's books with rhyme, rhythm, and repetition are crucial for babies and toddlers, enhancing language development and phonemic awareness, vital for early literacy. Furthermore, according to Lorio, Delehanty and Romano (2021) reading books to young children strongly predicts children's future language skills, both in speaking and understanding.

Literacy can be argued to be an essential skill for life. According to Spencer (1988), reading and writing are essential social activities in communities where written language is part of our society. For example, literacy is needed to apply for jobs, understand instructions, read signs and communicate with others. Developing key literacy skills ensures children have the best chances in life (Gilbert et al., 2018). When these skills are introduced from a young age, this provides young children with a valuable head start.

1.3 Comfort and Nurturing Care

Whitehead (2010) states that in our early years, our first experiences with books often involve sharing them with an older person, creating warm memories filled with embraces and a sense of complete security. This is another benefit of reading with young children. Butler (1998) expresses that reading to a baby is a perfect opportunity to spend time with and hold them, which babies love. Wolf (2016) goes a step further to state that babies need physical comfort to survive and that the babies' brains are wired to feel secure through touch and hearing human voices. Wolf (2016) then argues that when children are read to frequently, they associate reading with love and comfort. Cline, Dimmitt, and Gann (2022) found that the love that comes with reading to babies actually starts before birth. They found that pregnant mothers who read to their unborn baby reported feeling the bond forming between them and their baby before the child was even born, many also continued to read the same books to the child post-birth, which created a “special emotional significance” (Cline, Dimmitt, and Gann, 2022 p.171) for the parent and the child. This demonstrates the power that reading has in creating a feeling of comfort and bonding between a parent and child.

As previously mentioned, parents reading aloud to their children creates a sense of comfort and love, however, there is little research into how practitioners in early years settings can use reading to bond with the children in their care. Page (2018) and Purcell, Page, and Reid (2020) suggest that a form of ‘Professional Love’ can help form strong attachments and improve the wellbeing of children in settings. Page (2018) suggests that when ‘Professional Love’ is felt within nursery settings, this is an indication of best practice and that this love complements the love children receive from their parents.

Given that reading provides opportunities for bonding, practitioners could achieve feelings of ‘Professional Love’ towards the children during shared reading times at the nursery, therefore,

making reading aloud to children an everyday occurrence in practice will overall benefit the children's wellbeing. Furthermore, Whitehead (2010 p. 120) states that “in well-planned early years settings” young children such as toddlers will often find a quiet area to read. This provides a sense of independent comfort for the child, rather than with an adult, which can be argued to be equally as important.

1.4 Developing a love of reading

Finally, another benefit of reading to babies and toddlers is developing a love of reading. Having a love for reading is important as it has numerous documented advantages, such as increased reading attainment and emotional literacy and overall increased life chances for children (Morgan, 2024). Therefore, if reading aloud to babies can result in a lifelong love of reading, this could be argued to be giving the child the best start in life.

According to Vallotton et al. (2023), sharing books with very young children establishes a love of books, that could continue into their future. Egan et al. (2022) found that 96% of parents in their study stated that they want their child to grow up loving reading and therefore many of them engaged in shared reading with their babies which they suggested leads to an “intergenerational transfer of a love of reading” (Egan et al., 2022, p.1). This example emphasises the profound impact that parents reading with their babies has on the attitudes and views their children will hold about reading in the future. Encouraging parents to read to their children at a young age may contribute to a love of reading that is passed on to future generations. Rankin and Brock (2015) argue that in order to develop a love of reading in children from birth to five, parents should participate in shared reading with their children but also encourage all family members to read with their baby including grandparents and siblings. It can then be argued that when children are surrounded by loving people who also read with them, they are more likely to develop a lifelong love of reading.

This is relevant to early years practitioners as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2024 p. 10) states that “it is crucial for children to develop a life-long love of reading”. As the EYFS applies to children younger than a year, reading to babies and toddlers in order to develop their love of reading is required by practitioners. However, Torr (2018) found that nursery practitioners in their study participated in shared reading with toddlers, but many of them did not provide opportunities for the toddlers to freely explore the books and scaffold their learning. This

research suggests a need for practitioners to know how to effectively read books with children, which will be explored further in the next section.

2. Reading aloud to babies and toddlers

With clear benefits to reading aloud to babies and toddlers, parents and practitioners must know how to effectively read to these young children, for them to take advantage of these benefits. Issues of keeping young children engaged in reading have been highlighted by Preece and Levy (2020), as they found that parents tended to state that their babies pushed books away or appeared uninterested when being read to, however, perhaps if they were to choose different strategies for book sharing, babies may react differently.

2.1 Creating a Literacy-Rich Environment

When arguing how to effectively read to young children, it can be suggested that the environment in which they are surrounded, has a significant impact. Towell et al.'s (2019) research contains an extensive list of recommendations for effectively reading aloud to babies and toddlers, one of which is for parents to create a consistent shared routine at home and in nursery settings as well as carry books with them wherever they travel (p. 355). This could be described as creating a literacy-rich environment. The ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) highlights how interconnected systems shape children's development. The home environment, known as the "microsystem," has the most significant and immediate impact on children, therefore, improving the home literacy environment (Yang, Lawrence and Grøver, 2022) could be argued to have an effect on how effective shared reading is. Samur (2021) found that 43% of the 16 parents in their study reported they started to read with their children between the ages of 4 and 6. They argue that this suggests many parents are unaware of the benefits of introducing books to young children, as they argue that between the ages of 0-2 is the best time to start.

In an early years environment, practitioners can achieve this literacy-rich environment by creating a 'reading culture'. Creating a reading culture begins in families from birth and extends to school. Samur (2021, pp. 406) argues that the pivotal stage in creating a culture of the love of reading is "preschool (0-6 ages)". According to Vanden Dool and Simpson (2021), reading cultures in classrooms are created by quality reading spaces, diverse materials, and teachers' genuine enthusiasm. Although

this research was conducted in schools, this culture can still possibly be developed within a nursery using the same advice. When this culture of reading is created, children are likely to grasp the significance of reading, and therefore, during shared reading times they may pay more attention and get more enjoyment.

2.2 Using Emotive Voices and Facial Expressions

Another important aspect to consider is using emotive voices and facial expressions when reading to babies and toddlers. Towell et al. (2019) also recommends to “use an animated voice while reading with expression, intonation, joy and excitement”. This is supported by Scardina (2020) who suggests that using different engaging voices for the characters when reading aloud when also combined with emotive facial expressions is a very effective way to engage children and keep their attention. In the first year of a baby's life, they start to learn how to tell apart different facial expressions and use these to understand emotions. For instance, when shown faces with emotions next to calm faces, 7-month-old babies tend to look more at the scared faces than the happy or angry ones (Dela Cruz et al., 2023). Therefore, when attempting to read with very young babies, using emotional facial expressions may help keep their attention, as well as support their emotional development.

2.3 Interactivity and Interaction

It is suggested that actively interacting with young children while reading to them is beneficial. Ezell and Justice (2005) bring attention to the fact that reading to babies and toddlers requires more input from adults since the babies do not yet need to learn how to read the words, so creating a language-rich experience is more impactful. Salley et al. (2022) build on this by suggesting ways in which adults can engage young children in books, these include: following the child's lead, using a lively voice, naming objects, asking questions, discussing emotions, and rhyming and pausing so the children can attempt to finish the rhyme. This interactivity can be argued to enhance the shared reading experience for the children, compared to simply reading the words. However, Lorio, Delehanty and Romano (2021) highlight the fact that many of the articles providing interventions on how to improve shared reading do not include the specific questions adults should ask young children while reading and therefore suggest that more research needs to be done in this area.

Torr (2019) analysed a series of practitioner-child shared reading activities and the level of interaction each practitioner provided for the child. These interactions (or “messages” (Torr, 2019, pp. 523-525)) included identifying the pictures or talking to the child about something in the book. For example, one practitioner read: “Where could little fox’s tail have gone?” and then said to the child: “Oh, no, poor little fox. Where could his tail have gone?” (Torr, 2019 pp.524-525). This simple interaction is an example of a way to keep a young child engaged in a book. The number of “messages” the practitioners said in this study varied from 25 to approximately 600. This shows the substantial difference between different practices and suggests that many practitioners do not understand the benefits of interacting with young children while reading to them.

2.4 Story Sacks and Props

Another method for keeping babies and toddlers engaged in reading is using props such as puppets or other interactive elements to bring the story to life. This can help maintain their attention and encourage participation, making reading time more enjoyable for both the child and the adult. According to Yonzon et al. (2022) incorporating these props can make the reading experience more dynamic and captivate young listeners, encouraging active participation as they state that props help encourage imagination in toddlers.

A popular resource for picture book props is ‘Story Sacks’, developed by Neil Griffiths (Red Robin Books, 2015). Story Sacks, according to Griffiths (1998, cited in

English and Machin, 2005) integrate various elements to enhance children's love for reading. Each sack contains storybooks, (or non-fiction books), audio tapes, puppets, games, and activities. They state that Griffiths (1998, cited in English and Machin, 2005) promotes them as a fresh approach to engaging with literature, fostering lifelong readership. Parents state that they prolonged play and heightened motivation to read. In classrooms, they increase reading motivation, sustained interest, attentive listening, and boost confidence and self-esteem (English and Machin, 2005). Although research published on story sacks is now outdated and much comes from Neil Griffiths himself, the reported benefits of using them may mean they could still be a handy tool in nurseries and at home to help engage babies and toddlers in reading. However these Story Sacks are expensive, so it may be more efficient for practitioners and parents to make their own.

3. What books do babies and toddlers enjoy reading?

The previous section outlines how to effectively read books to babies and toddlers; it is also useful to understand which books practitioners and parents should choose to read to babies and toddlers. When selecting books for babies and toddlers, it is important to choose age-appropriate, engaging, and developmentally suitable titles.

3.1 Books for Babies

Board Books

Dwyer and Neuman (2008) suggest that due to the development of young babies' pincer grip, board boards are a useful tool as babies can hold them. However, they also suggest that adults may want to introduce paper books, to start to teach the baby that books are not meant to be chewed on. Dulemba (2023) expands on the topic of board books for babies and states that board books, designed with features like small size, durable pages, chew-safe materials, and sturdy bindings, foster a love for books among babies and toddlers, simultaneously nurturing literacy skills. However, Dulemba's (2023) main argument is that board books are increasingly not appropriate for babies at all. Some board books may not align with the developmental needs of young children, but instead cater to adult interests or societal trends. An example of this is 'Who Is Greta Thunberg? A Who Was? Board Book' (Kaiser and Who HQ, 2022). This book contains large amounts of text but is printed on a board book intended for very young babies, which Dulemba (2023) argues is a paradox. This shows the importance of choosing age-appropriate topics for babies, as a book simply being printed as a board book does not necessarily mean it is intended for babies.

Rhyme and Repetition

Boulaire (2023) suggests that when choosing books for babies, books that contain simple rhymes and repetition benefit them by stimulating development, engaging emotions, aiding their understanding, promoting language acquisition, providing sensory pleasure, and preparing them for books they may read in the future. Therefore, books such as 'What the Ladybird Heard' (Donaldson and Monks, 2019), 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?' (Dean Miller and Carle, 1995) and 'Hush! A Thai Lullaby' (Ho and Meade, 2010) are good choices for rhyming baby books.

Haptics

Miller and R. Eric Tippin (2023) argue that baby picture books that contain haptics enhance the reading experience for young children. Haptics is a term used to say, “related to the sense of touch” (Hannaford and Okamura, 2016, p.1063). In terms of picture books, this includes books that “[have] fur and scales, [play] music, [squeak] when poked [and] are shaped like fluffy toys…” (Beauvais, 2023, p.1) as well as lift-the-flap features and other sensory materials in the pages. Miller and R. Eric Tippin (2023) state that interactive baby books provide chances for parents and children to engage equally: they argue that despite being criticised, touch-based picture books are effective tools for sensory and language development in young children.

3.2 Books for Toddlers

Interest and Familiarity

When children reach toddler age, they can begin to communicate by pointing at objects and having an adult name the object can help their development (National Literacy Trust, 2023). Dwyer and Neuman (2008) go on to say that toddlers point to objects in books to indicate their interest and new-found comprehension. This means that it is important to choose books that interest the child and contain images they will recognise. Towell et al. (2019) found that children's engagement with books was strongly influenced by their familiarity with the topics. The children in the study showed a preference for books centered on familiar subjects, whether fictional or non-fictional. Towell et al. (2019) argue it is possible that they connected more with characters who shared traits and behaviours similar to their own. Therefore, choosing books for toddlers will vary depending on the child, but catering the book choices to the interests and personalities of the toddlers will help keep them engaged.

In 2022, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education found that only 30% of children's books featured racially minoritised characters (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2023). This lack of representation can hinder reading engagement for children from ethnic minority backgrounds. ‘Mirror books’ (Bishop, 2007), which reflect the readers' identities and experiences, are essential for enjoyment in reading, as they enhance comprehension and boost confidence (Ciampa and Reisboard, 2021). Without sufficient access to these books, children from ethnic minority backgrounds may struggle with both engagement and achievement in reading.

Alphabet Books

Although book choices for toddlers vary depending on the child, as there is an extensive amount to choose from, books that are intended to teach the alphabet are popular choices for toddlers. Alphabet books have been suggested to aid the development of early literacy; and help toddlers understand ideas or concepts that are not tangible or concrete and the visual focus on letters increases letter comprehension and acquisition (Bergman Deitcher, Aram and Itzkovich, 2021; Davis and Evans, 2020; Bradley and Bradley, 2014). Nowak and Evans (2012) argue that alphabet books with complex images provide more enjoyment for toddlers, but may hinder literacy development, however, this gives practitioners and parents a choice between focusing on development or enjoyment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reading aloud to babies and toddlers offers numerous benefits that significantly contribute to their development and overall well-being. Firstly, it fosters language acquisition and literacy skills, laying a foundation for future academic success and social engagement. Additionally, it provides comfort and nurturing care, creating positive associations with reading, and fostering emotional bonds between caregivers and children. Furthermore, reading aloud cultivates a love of reading from an early age, promoting a lifelong appreciation for literature and enhancing cognitive development.

To effectively read to babies and toddlers, practitioners, parents, and carers can create a literacy-rich environment, utilise emotive voices and facial expressions, encourage interactivity and interaction, and incorporate props and story sacks. When selecting books, it is important to choose age-appropriate, engaging, and developmentally suitable titles that cater to the interests and preferences of young children. By understanding the benefits of reading aloud and employing effective strategies, practitioners, parents, and carers can optimise the reading experience for babies and toddlers, ensuring they receive the full advantages.

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Article 4

The Effect of Poverty on Children and Their Development

About the author:

Kate Banks

Author biography:

I am a mature student dedicated to becoming a teacher, I have plans to complete a PGCE and QTS postgraduate course, as well as becoming TEFL qualified. My time working within early years settings during university has been amazing, working with young children and watching them grow and develop is incredibly rewarding and I am so glad that it is what I will be doing for the rest of my career.

Level of study:

Five

Membership institution:

University of Bolton

Introduction

Goulden and D'Arcy (2014) defines poverty as "when a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)", this means that children living in poverty tend to not have access to the resources necessary to support them in their development. Today, poverty impacts over 13 million people in the UK, having a detrimental impact on every stage of life (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). Amongst the most vulnerable to the effects of poverty are children, whose development can be impeded depending on the socioeconomic circumstances they are raised in. Practitioners within the early years sector can act as agents of change by using information and support pulled from the different interventions to offer vital provision to children and families living in poverty to lessen the negative impact of the child's development (Nutbrown, 2018 and Smith et al., 2018). In 2023, the UK's lowest recorded temperature was -16 degrees; almost as cold as a commercial walk-in freezer (McCarthy et al., 2024). The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero estimates that over 3 million households in the UK live in fuel poverty and 4.3 million children struggling under the relative poverty line (Francis-Devine, 2024) will suffer serious, life-long consequences to their health, education, and development. Thousands of preventable deaths are attributed to cold homes every year (Taylor, 2024).

The developmental impact of poverty

In the UK, 4.3 million children are being raised in poverty (CPAG, 2024) and this has a harmful effect on children's physical and mental health. Children who are born into a family living in poverty are more likely to be born at a lower birthweight due to the mother not being able to afford adequate nutrition during pregnancy (CPAG, 2024). Families living in poverty are likely to be victims of fuel poverty which is defined as the inability to afford gas bills to heat the home to an acceptable level, fuel poverty and residing in a cold home has been linked to increased cases of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases (Sawyer et al., 2022). Professor Ian Sinha stated in the Marmot Review (Marmot et al., 2010) that cold housing will have life-long dangerous consequences, leading to life-long health inequalities. Children growing up in a fuel poverty-stricken household are more likely to struggle with their mental health, they may have trouble managing their emotions (Champagne et al., 2023) which can lead to disruptive behaviours in school settings. Sir Michael Marmot (2010) also suggested that children living in inadequately heated homes hinders their ability to do homework, leading to academic underperformance. This increases the risk of low-income, unstable jobs and financial insecurity later in life (Maisuria and Lally, 2024). Educational achievement strongly influences long-term health and longevity, contributing to health inequalities (Marmot et al., 2010).

In Jo Beattie's article (2022) she discusses the impact of fuel poverty on children as they grow up, quoting the statistics found by the National Centre for Social Research (Barnes et al., 2008) that states that 10% of the adolescents in fuel poverty that were researched by the National Centre for Social Research felt unhappy in their family. Furthermore, living in fuel poverty can lead to significant social stigma and embarrassment, families may feel too ashamed of their cold, poorly heated home to invite visitors, increasing the risk of loneliness and social isolation, especially for children (Clair and Baker, 2022). A recent study found that this embarrassment can also prevent individuals from seeking assistance to improve their situation, either from friends, family, or support agencies (Sawyer et al., 2022).

The financial strain brought on by rising energy costs can lead to families making sacrifices in other areas in order to cover the cost of energy bills, often having to spend less on other essentials such as food, creating the dilemma termed "heat or eat" (Angelini et al., 2019), meaning that more of children's basic needs are not being met which can have a knock on effect to their health and wellbeing (Banks, 2024).

What is being done?

To alleviate some of the strain of fuel poverty and to assist families living in household struggling with fuel prices, the UK government introduced a few schemes to lessen the burden on families living in poverty. Ofgem introduced an energy price cap (EPC), this is the maximum amount that energy suppliers can charge people for their energy (Ofgem, 2024). When the EPC was initially introduced in 2019, it was capped at £1,137 for the year to make energy bills more manageable for families in the UK, however, as the years have passed, the capped rate has slowly risen, reaching £4,279 in January 2023. Ofgem announced that from April 2024, the new price cap will be £1,690 (Ofgem, 2024), yet National Energy Action (NEA) states that this alone will not be enough to help the six million people living in fuel poverty (NEA, 2024). Chris Scorer, Chief Executive of NEA says, "the cost gap between where they are right now and escaping fuel poverty is getting wider… years of punishingly high energy bills will continue to take a heavy toll" (NEA, 2024). This means that families with children who have struggled to pay their energy bills will continue to do so despite this energy cap, and will remain living in fuel poverty. Further measures have been put in place following COVID-19 to calm the disaster, such as the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG) announced by Chancellor Jeremy Hunt in October 2022, which would limit the amount households would pay for gas and electricity to £2500 if the energy price cap exceeded this (Keung and Bradshaw, 2023). However, the Chancellor then changed his mind ahead of the spring budget and increased the energy price guarantee to

£3000 in February 2023, removing the safety net for many households that relied on it (Helm and Inman, 2023).

Alongside government schemes, there are charities designed to help and aid families struggling in fuel poverty, one of these charities is called the Fuel Bank Foundation. This foundation helps by providing emergency financial support to households living in fuel poverty (Fuel Bank Foundation, 2020). On their charity website they boast of having helped over 550 thousand people and have 350 fuel banks nationwide. Nevertheless, charities such as the Fuel Bank Foundation rely heavily on donations from the public, which in the climate of a cost-of-living crisis, can be very difficult. The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) did a report in 2023 that found that the number of donors to charities is declining (CAF, 2023); this is predominately due to the lack of disposable income left in their wages to give to charities. The report also found that due to inflation within the UK and the rising prices of resources means that the spending power of the donations has been harshly eroded (CAF, 2023). The End Fuel Poverty Coalition (2024) discovered that 32% of households in fuel poverty did not receive government support in 2023/24.

How does poverty impact education?

Children growing up in poverty are also impeded in their education; research, such as the UK Millennium Cohort Study, confirms the causal link between child poverty and poorer educational outcomes (Dickerson and Popli, 2015). Children from low-income families achieve less academically compared to their peers, perpetuating a cycle of lower adult earnings and reduced life opportunities (Cooper and Stewart, 2017 and Hunt et al., 2022). Poverty impairs cognitive development through insufficient nutrition, unsuitable housing, lack of resources, and stress which in turn hinders academic performance (Kent et al., 2018). Breaking this cycle requires interventions supporting disadvantaged children, quality early education access, and policies reducing income inequality to promote family economic stability (Haglund, 2023). The Save the Children charity produced a report which found that poverty and financial restraints are a barrier to learning as it can lead to situations where parents cannot afford educational resources, sending their children on school trips or provide access to a laptop or computer (Save the Children, 2019). Children who are consistently ill because of growing up in cold houses take more time off school which has a detrimental effect on their educational attainment (Beat the Cold, 2024). The reduced academic outcomes harm their chances of earning sufficient incomes which perpetuates the never-ending cycle of inter-generational poverty (Hunt et al., 2022). Children who are frequently absent from school often struggle to form and maintain essential social relationships, missing out on field trips and other bonding opportunities

(CPAG, 2024) because either they cannot afford them or are too sick to participate due to their living conditions.

Teachers within the sector have noticed the correlation between poverty and lower attainment at school according to the National Education Union (2024), observing higher rates of fatigue, inability to concentrate and frequent cases of ill health in children from lower income families. The attainment gaps between low-income students and their peers during school years lead to large differences in their qualifications in adulthood, children from families who are not living in poverty do better through all stages of the education system and grow into more skilled adults (Tahir, 2022). This difference in educational attainment and qualifications means that children who grow up in poverty are likely to become adults who cannot get a job with a good income due to not having the necessary qualifications, creating a cycle of poverty (Visser et al., 2021).

What more can be done?

To combat these poverty inequalities in the education system, the government introduced free school meals for eligible students as required by the Education Act 1996 (GOV.UK, 2024), which necessitates that schools provide free school meals to disadvantaged students aged 5-16 years old (DfE, 2024). However, it can be argued that only having the free school meals available to 'eligible' children is not enough; the Child Poverty Action Group (2023) calls for the government to introduce universal free school meals to ease burdens on household finances and avoid hunger in the classroom. The government also encourages schools to hold breakfast clubs after research suggests that a healthy breakfast before school can help to improve school readiness and increased concentration, the government provides support to schools that do participate by providing a 75% subsidiary for the food and other costs of the breakfast club (DfE, 2022). In addition, the government has other benefit structures in place to further help and support families living in poverty, such as Universal Credit, child tax credits and housing benefits which aim to ease the financial burden on disadvantaged families by providing money to them monthly or help towards bills such as rent (GOV.UK, 2024). However, changes have been made to these benefits over recent years, the implementation of the two-child limit on universal tax and child tax credits, which restricts benefits to the first two children in a family, has resulted in a situation where nearly half of all children in the UK with more than two children are living in poverty. Of the 4.3 million children living in poverty, 71% have at least one parent who is employed (Haglund, 2023). However, the government cuts to Universal Credit have resulted in a social security system that is unable to shield children from the negative impact of in-work poverty (Hobson et al., 2024). Additionally, the capping of Local Housing Allowances, which are intended to link housing benefits to the local housing costs, has worsened the

situation. Housing costs have risen exponentially and rapidly, housing benefit payments have fallen behind the actual expenditure of renting, this in turn pushes more families and children into poverty due to the widening gap in housing payment assistance and the reality of rental expenses (Haglund, 2023). A large portion of children in the UK, even children with parents in employment are vulnerable to the detrimental effects of poverty due to the combination of the two-child benefit limit, cuts to universal credit and the stagnation of Local Housing Allowance, this undermines the child's well-being and prospects.

Conclusion

To conclude, childhood poverty has significant negative effects on a child's development. It has a substantial influence affecting physical and developing health specifically; it also impacts cognitive, emotional, and academic development but these aspects are woefully under researched (O'Sullivan et al., 2016). Children from impoverished backgrounds are more prone to malnourishment and to be exposed to conditions that link to reduced future growth and prospects (Champagne et al., 2023). While charitable organizations have sought to lower the impact of childhood poverty, the significant nature of the phenomenon necessitates a more vital interaction with evidence-informed policies and more sustainable measures from the government. The current schemes in place only do so much to help families struggling in poverty, with most policies informed by the idea that fuel poverty only impacts the elderly (Beattie, 2022). Furthermore, addressing childhood poverty necessitates broader cooperation in financial environmental policy and education and support that is community-based (CPAG, 2024). More commitment to improving the environmental situation of deprived children is necessary to ensure more healthy children's outcomes. It is imperative that the government, educators, and other childhood agencies prioritise the needs of children living in, and impacted by, poverty. Through collaboration and implementing evidence-based interventions, the negative effects of poverty can be alleviated and create a better environment to guarantee that every child can be successful, despite their socioeconomic background.

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