

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The findings from the questionnaires highlighted staff's thoughts on what they felt would be beneficial within the setting. All staff suggested that extra time spent with the children rather than focusing on paperwork would be of benefit, this is something that the feedback from the children also indicated. All the children talked of play and care as something that the adults in the setting do. Children replied with comments such as "they play with me" when asked 'what is a key person?'. Whilst some children seemed unsure of how to answer my questions, instead, asking me to join in with their play "would you like some dinner", (whilst offering me some lettuce and bread roll). This implied that what is important to the children is adults to engage in their play. One staff member had stated that low levels of children in the setting due to the Covid -19 pandemic had enabled them to spend more "quality time" with the children, this finding is supported by my literature review of what practitioners would like to achieve with their day and what is possible due to time constraints and resources (Elfer & Page, 2015). Based on the findings from my literature review it appears technology has the benefit of freeing up practitioner time (Pinnington, 2020). Additionally, digital journals can support in the overall assessment process, and help streamline data analysis (Callanan, et al., 2017). Literature also suggests that it improves the quality of the observation, enabling practitioners to put immediate thoughts down, linking these with an observation (Callanan, et al., 2017). This would therefore be a truer account of the child's capabilities rather than an account written up after the fact, for example at the end of a busy day.

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

The online journal that was trailed for this research was a live system, meaning that if a key person uploaded information to a child's learning journey it was immediately available for the parents to see. Verbal feedback from 1 of the 2 families that took part six weeks into the trial showed a desire for more updates than what was currently being uploaded, in some respects validating the concerns raised by staff that it could add additional pressure to keep paperwork up to date. However, this was not the findings from the literature review, which points towards it freeing up key person time by reducing the amount of paperwork correlation (Callanan, et al., 2017). From the parental feedback suggestion was made that some parents would like to use an online journal to enable them to 'do observations at home' and, 'upload photos of (their) child'. Implying that the observation system can be a two-way process, potentially alleviating some pressure from staff to produce all evidence. One parent however, opposed the idea of a real-time system, as they looked forward to their child informing them of what they had done during the day, and did not

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want to know via an app. It is worth noting that parents do have a choice as to when they look at information posted by the key person, they receive an email notification and can choose when to log on to look. Although the parent's concerns over it affecting communication with their child is a valid perspective, one parent who had some previous experience of a digital log suggested it 'was nice to read comments and see photos of my child – would check every few weeks'. Indicating that this was not an insurmountable problem.

Online journals and the incorporated assessment tools can also be used to identify development opportunities within settings daily provision (Callanan, et al., 2017), this should be considered something that all settings should do to continually improve the children's learning and development experience (Department for Education, 2017). With the literature pointing towards using technology to support in the home learning environment (Department for Education, 2020), it was interesting that a large proportion of parents who responded to my questionnaire considered that communication could be improved by using technology in some way. Only 19% of respondents had no suggestions of steps the setting could take to improve the way they created two-way communication.

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

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

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