

A Teacher's Perspective on a Child's Social Interactions Upon School Entry.

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Abstract:

The study investigates whether the choice of pre-school care affects a child's ability or willingness to socially interact. The research is from the perspective of a teacher and considers data from the point of entry to a reception class. Alongside this, the investigation explores how COVID-19 and the resulting social isolation influenced these outcomes.

The intended interviews to support the online study were not possible due to the limitations of COVID-19. Therefore, a modified, online questionnaire incorporating both qualitative and quantitative questions was sent to two hundred and ninety-six reception class teachers throughout England, with eleven responses.

The analysis reveals that nine from eleven teachers consider nursery schools to provide children with a preferable level of social interaction at the point of school entry. Teachers recognise communication as the predominant way by which children demonstrate both positive and negative examples of social interaction. There is particular significance regarding the timing of the research and the effects of COVID-19 upon both the research and the outcome, ten from eleven respondents agree that the pandemic affected children experiencing care within a nursery setting.

To conclude, whilst keeping in mind the relatively low response, an association has been demonstrated between the type of pre-school care received and a child's competency with social interaction. It is therefore recommended that the study be repeated in future years once COVID-19 is deemed to be having minimal or no effect upon daily life and a larger sample size may be possible.

Keywords: social interaction, teachers' perspectives, reception class, COVID-19, nursery setting, communication

Introduction:

This research aims to build on existing evidence examining how the choice of pre-school care influences a child's social interaction at the point of school entry. Extensive research already exists; however, the literature review revealed a gap in research specifically from the perspective of a reception teacher. The timing of the research has particular significance, being carried out in England during the COVID-19 world pandemic. As a result, the original research plan was adapted to meet Government restrictions and working practices in force at the time. The amended online questionnaire was issued to a broad geographical sample of reception teachers throughout England.

1: Literature Review:

Types of childcare:

The United Kingdom Government actively promotes early years child-care. Working parents benefit from thirty hours of free childcare per week for each child aged 3-4 (Gov.UK, no date).

Nurseries advertise the benefits of promoting a child's holistic development (Lamb and Ahnert, 2006) by providing enabling environments and activities (Almaqrn, 2019), conversely Loeb et al. (2007) and Huerta et al. (2011) reveal inconsistencies and conflicting findings, primarily that children attending preschool display poorer social development when compared to those attending other childcare options (Vandell et al., 2010). Findings included a correlation between the duration of preschool attendance and the development of aggression alongside decreased social-emotional progression (Early Child Care Research Network, 1996).

There is currently no research apparent from the perspective of a teacher suggesting how care from a nanny or childminder impacts on children's social interactions. However, Adamson and

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Brennan (2017) suggest parents are increasingly motivated to employ nannies due to up-to-date literature provided by Adamson (2017). A 2017 study conducted by Vlah and Ferić, positively applied to the research question due to results being acquired from a teacher's perspective.

Social Interaction:

A child's ability to socially interact relies on their possession of social cognition, being the way a child processes social knowledge (Garnett, 2018). Widyanoor and Pranoto (2019) suggest that in order for a child to develop their social interaction skills it is important that preferable techniques are developed during their early years. This includes the vital ability for a child to learn self-regulation (Reyes et al., 2019). Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) also supports this and discusses the theory of children forming role models and how they determine what they consider to be acceptable behaviour by observing close interactions (Nabavi, 2014).

Maleki et al (2019) found a 'significant association' between the level of a child's understanding of social skills and their parent's wealth and education level.

Ansari (2018) concluded that children previously attending a preschool setting generally established less desirable social skills, but higher academic skills, this continued to be demonstrated throughout secondary school. This study had a large sample size of 15,070 children.

Early Years Foundation Stage:

A statutory framework set out by the Department for Education (2021) known as the early years foundation stage (EYFS) is a mandatory standard that all early years practitioners must work to (Johnson, 2014). The framework ensures consistency of quality throughout settings (O'Connell, 2011), however, parents are not required to follow it.

Ratios:

Torr and Pham (2016) demonstrated a correlation between the Government guidelines of child to carer ratios and the successful development of speech, social learning and language skills. The recommended ratios may result in limited opportunities for one-to-one interaction with a practitioner for any significant length of time. Manning-Morton and Thorp (2015) also suggest that it is not beneficial for children to participate in large group sessions for prolonged periods of time as it can cause anxiety.

Continuing Professional Development:

Continuing professional development for teachers is key to ensuring knowledge is current and relevant, in addition to widening perspective and improving practice (Jarvis et al., 2016). Teachers can be key influencers upon a student's success, therefore confirming the vital role of teachers upon a child's life (Tichenor and Tichenor, 2005), this synthesises the importance of possessing up to date knowledge and perspectives in order to assist children in the most positive manner.

2: Research Methodologies:

The rationale for selecting this research title was to investigate how the choice of preschool childcare impacted upon a child's social interaction capabilities at the point of primary school

entry. In-depth research revealed a wealth of information on the topic of social interaction but limited studies from the perspective of a reception class teacher. In addition, a research gap was highlighted on the effects on social interaction following the employment of a nanny as a preschool care option. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic added further complications including the potential major impact of significant reduction of opportunities for teachers to prepare children for school entry as well as children experiencing limited social interaction outside their own household.

Research Aim/Purpose:

The research aim is to explore the impact the choice of preschool setting has on a child's social interaction skills. Investigating this from a teacher's perspective will provide a superior depth of knowledge from professionals who (under normal circumstances) have a greater holistic understanding of children in their care. The aim is to address the shortfall in current research by ensuring more childcare options are included within the research, allowing parents to gain a greater understanding of childcare options and the effects of children's social interactions.

Research Context:

To ensure greater reliability, data was gathered from teachers located within all Local Education Authorities (LEA's) in mainland England, with two hundred and ninety-six schools contacted. A wide sample selection assisted in incorporating any variance occurring as a result of diversity in culture, economic situation or geographical location (Anderson et al., 2017). The schools were emailed directly (Appendix C) to become a gatekeeper for the reception class teacher. It has been noted that approximately one in ten schools have preschool settings onsite, therefore consideration should be given to the possibility of bias towards their own setting. The questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent and remained open to reply for two weeks, ensuring greater reliability from a larger sample size (The Journal of Neuroscience, 2020).

Sample:

The choice of purposive sampling improved the potential to view a phenomenon, aided further by teachers possessing suitable professional knowledge to competently answer the research question (Serra, Psarra, and O'Brien, 2018). However, questions of bias could be raised due to the sample being selected by the researcher (Etikan and Bala, 2017).

Data collection methods:

Due to COVID-19, the planned proposal to include one-to-one interviews was not considered feasible with lockdowns, online learning strategies and staff shortages applicable at the time (gov.uk, 2020). Whilst quantitative data is vital, the amended approach continued to provide essential qualitative data and assist in gaining a more in-depth and rich understanding of the single research title (Cohen, Morrison, and Manion, 2011, and Ogden and Cornwell, 2010). Due to the longer revised questionnaire, in conjunction with the current COVID-19 restrictions, a reduced response rate or less detailed information was possible, this in turn may diminish the validity of the findings (Denscombe, 2010), consideration was also given to ensure the formulation of a comprehensive but concise questionnaire. The pilot study indicated a completion time of around ten to fifteen minutes which Galesic and Bosniak (2009) suggest as ideal.

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The data for the proposed research is collected via an online questionnaire creator, SurveyHero. Online questionnaires have shown to be successful when focussing on specialist groups (Schwenk, Davis, and Wimsatt, 2010). An additional benefit of using SurveyHero was the assurance of anonymity for respondents (SurveyHero, 2021). Kılınç, and Firat (2017) state that anonymity was a key factor in improving accuracy of online questionnaires when compared to face-to-face techniques. In addition, SurveyHero does not hold gathered data and the researcher has full control (SurveyHero, 2021). Within the analysis teachers replies are differentiated by the use of (T1) and (T2) for example.

Data analysis:

In order to clearly identify emerging patterns and trends It is essential to ensure sufficient data is available for analysis (Springston et al., 2019). The thematic approach of performing both inductive and deductive analysis facilitated a more flexible approach during the analysis of both descriptive and numeric data (Xu and Zammit, 2020).

The primary data was collated from open ended, qualitative questions and analysed using an inductive approach, formulating an understanding of the teacher's thoughts, feelings and opinion. This inductive approach also facilitated the creation and development of data guided codes with further analysis to identify developing themes (Thomas, 2003). Deductive analysis of a Likert scale and drop-down options allowed further scrutiny of preconceived quantitative data where themes were already established (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011).

Validity, Reliability and Credibility:

The validity of the study was increased by applying a pilot study prior to circulation of the main questionnaire (Kistin and Silverstein, 2015). The pilot study was sent to ten participants, not being part of the main study but possessing an understanding of early years education (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001) this aided the researcher to assess whether the questions were deemed appropriate and effective and established how others perceived the questions.

Due to the study combining both qualitative and quantitative data, triangulation of the gathered information at the point of analysis achieved greater reliability and validity (Patton, 2002, cited in Golafshani, 2003).

Qualified teachers are a credible sample group due to being experts within their profession, additionally having spent time with the children they are in a position to formulate data rich responses to the research question, therefore, improving the reliability (Nilsson Jobs et al., 2019).

Credibility and reliability could be debated as schools closed at very short notice for a prolonged period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period children of key workers or those considered vulnerable were allowed to remain in school, teachers therefore experienced greater contact with children arguably from households with raised stress levels due to vulnerability or parents working through the pandemic and arguably experiencing stressful environments. Upon general return, only 30% of reception class students attended (gov.uk, 2020). The opportunity to repeat the research under more normal circumstances and compare the outcome would be of particular interest.

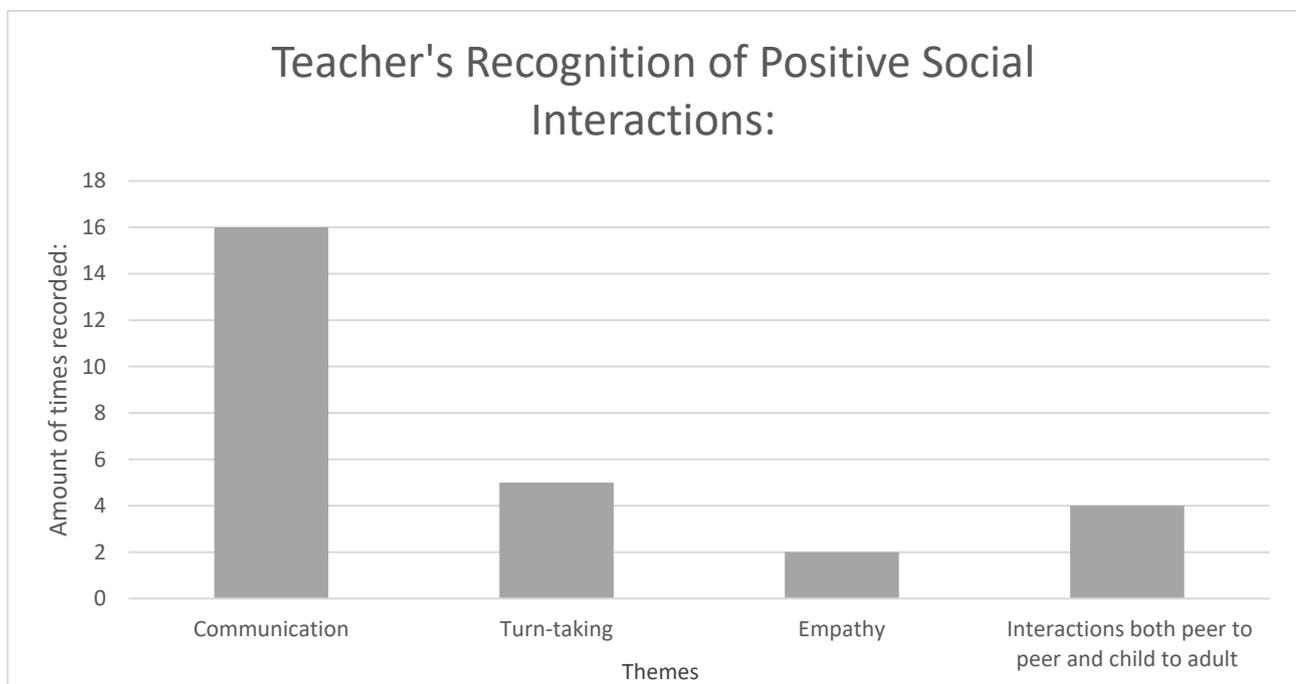
As COVID-19 is an uncontrollable phenomenon it was impossible to reduce associated limitations apart from ensuring a large sample received a well formulated questionnaire. However, whilst this could impact on the reliability of this study, the results provided a vital basis for comparison of the effects of the pandemic in further research.

Ethical issues:

A detailed information sheet and informed consent page was provided prior to commencement to ensure participants were fully aware of the research title and their requirements as participants, this included the reassurance of anonymity throughout the questionnaire. Additionally, a confirmation that the study may be published publicly with reassurance of the anonymity of any responses (Norland College Research Ethics Policy and Procedures Handbook, 2020). The right to withdraw was included and is considered essential in research, the Norland College Research Ethics Policy and Procedures Handbook (2020) state the right to withdraw is informing participants of their right to terminate participation at any time without justification or consequence.

3: Data Presentation and Analysis:

Figure 1:



In order to ascertain a baseline for the respondents understanding of the subject, teachers were asked to describe what they considered to be a positive social interaction. Communication was the most populated of the four themes, made up of sixteen examples of positive social interaction. Within the 'communication' theme both verbal and non-verbal results were included, as respondents considered both to be significant. One teacher (T1) remarked, 'when eye contact is made and lots of gesturing to other children to join in and play', (T2) stated 'interactions are harmonious, and play is progressive and collaborative'. Additional positive interaction examples included 'talking', 'smiling' and 'focussing on a speaker'.

Figure 2:

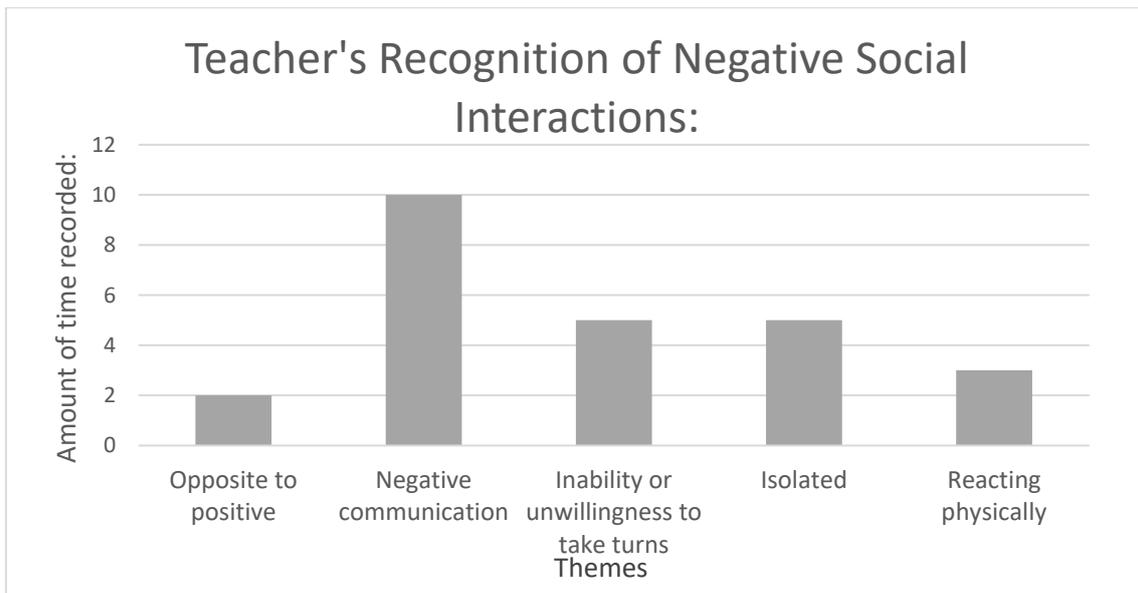


Figure 2 represents the establishment of a baseline assessing the understanding of negative social interactions. As Figure 1, codes were applied and themes developed, communication was also a significant characteristic of negative social interaction. Ten examples were provided including: 'no eye contact', 'children do not listen to other's ideas and opinions' and 'not responsive'.

Figure 3: Representing the care type resulting in the most positive social interaction.

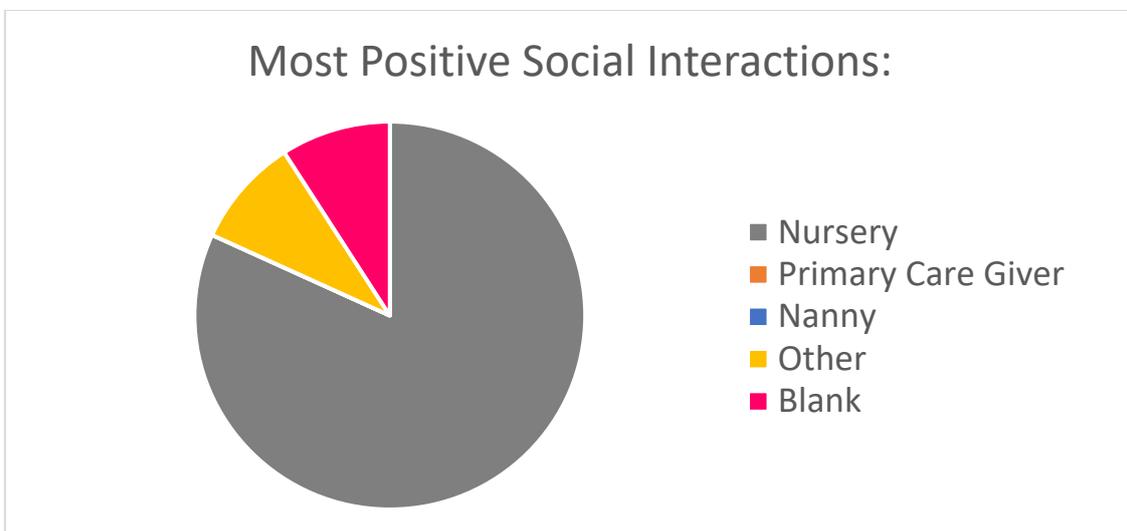


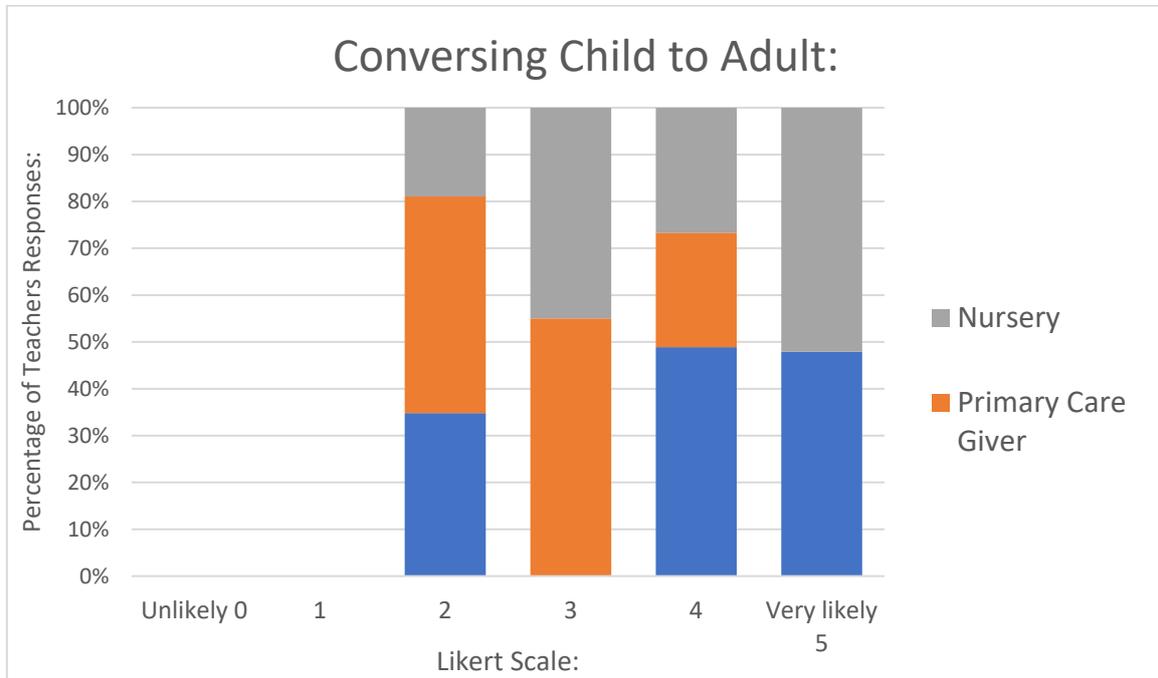
Figure 3 clearly illustrates a significant majority, being nine from eleven teachers declaring that attending nursery provided children with more advanced social interaction skills at the point of entering a reception class. The subsequent qualitative question to develop reasoning revealed ways by which children expressed more socially acceptable skills. Responses include (T2), children had 'more social skills in general and more able to feel comfortable to access resources in provision set up, therefore, more children willing to be drawn into that play or peer's play.' The remaining two responses were equally split between 'other' and failing to choose between the options given, the latter being classified as 'blank'.

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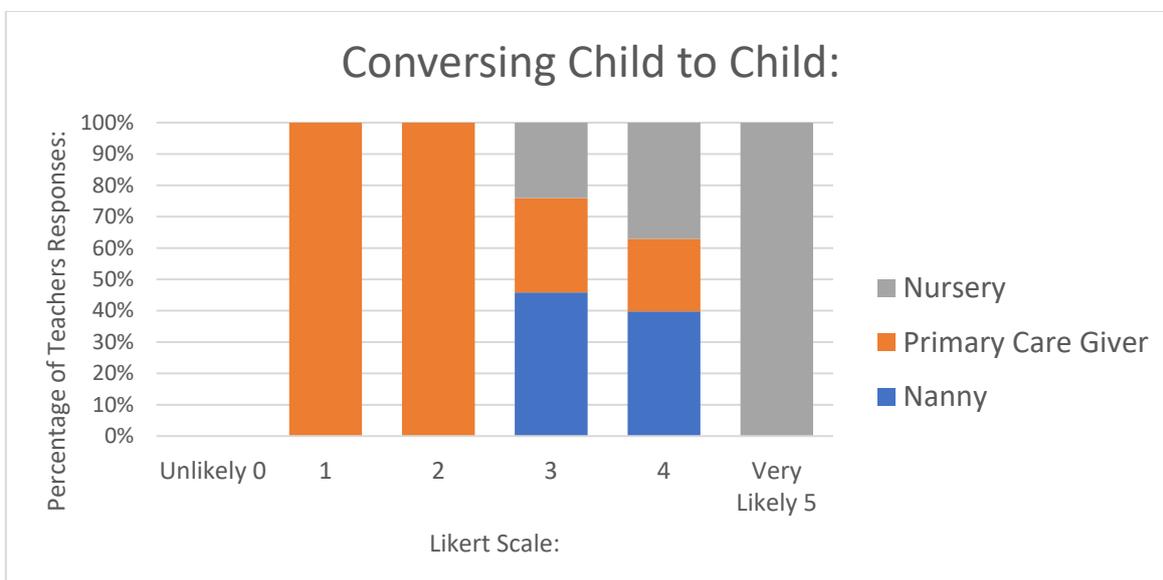
Neither Primary care givers or nannies featured within groups demonstrating the most positive social interactions.

Figure 4: A Likert scale representing the correlation between the care type and likelihood of conversing with an adult.



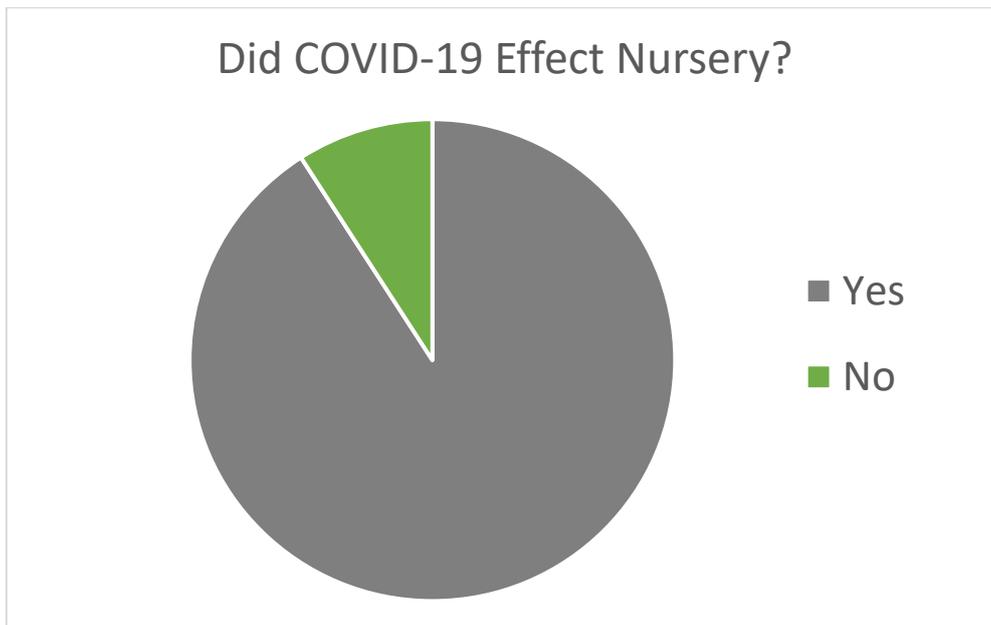
The gathered data revealed an array of results in relation to children's confidence levels when conversing with an adult. Children experiencing care from two preschool care types were selected as being 'very likely' to hold a conversation with an adult; being (a) those previously attending a nursery setting and (b) those cared for by a nanny. All responses were in the middle or top band of results within the Likert Scale demonstrating clearly that no pre-school care choice was considered to result in children being less confident when holding a conversation with an adult.

Figure 5: A Likert scale representing the correlation between the care type and likelihood of conversing peer to peer.



The results exposed a significant trend integral to this research and clearly depicted in Figure 5. Columns from the left highlight that children previously experiencing solely a primary caregiver pre-school care, are considered least likely to confidently converse peer to peer. The results broadened as the likelihood factor increased, with column three on the Likert scale introducing both nannies and nursery, this results in the primary care giver trend reducing from eleven to four responses. This diminishing pattern continues in column four with the primary care group then being eliminated entirely from the group considered 'very likely' to demonstrate confidence whilst conversing with another child. This clearly reflects the opinion that children attending nursery are 'very likely' to hold conversations with another child.

Figure 6:



Analysis has revealed that ten out of eleven teachers believe COVID-19 influenced the social interaction skills of children attending nursery in 2020. As this research took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important to explore its effect on children's social interaction skills and its relationship to the pre-school care received, either positive or negative. From the eleven responses, nine teachers recognised the negative impact, an example being (T3), 'Yes – many of them didn't attend nursery in the last few months they came in much lower and less communicative than previously', whilst two teachers (T4 and T7) focussed on more positive effects, including children being 'more confident with adults'.

Discussion:

Two fundamental conclusions are apparent as a result of the research analysis. Firstly, nine from eleven reception teachers consider that children previously attending nursery exhibit more developed social interaction skills. Secondly, that children solely cared for by their primary care giver prior to attending reception class are considered to display a reduced proficiency. Both conclusions offer noteworthy revelations to help fulfil the research aim, results are comparable and connective and reveal links between the care a child receives prior to school entry and resulting levels of social interaction. However, as the results support children attending nursery, there is a partial contradiction to the findings of the literature review, therefore external literature is essential to support new findings due to unforeseen themes emerging. This discussion will examine and scrutinise the significant findings.

The research shows teachers recognise communication as the fundamental way by which children demonstrate both positive (Figure 1) and negative (Figure 2) types of social interaction. A substantial majority, being nine from eleven teachers agreeing that children previously attending a nursery setting demonstrated the most positive examples of social interaction, clearly observed in Figure 3. Therefore, the research highlights the importance of children attending a nursery setting to boost the development of positive social interaction. The outcome of Figure 3 is partially supported by Loeb et al. (2007) agreeing that a nursery setting offers greater social and holistic development for children, however Loeb's research only compared results from children of low-income families to those with higher incomes.

The research further develops the communication theme by comparing results to care type received, thus establishing the likelihood of conversation both peer-to-peer and child to adult. By utilising the Likert Scale, Figure 4 builds on these findings and highlights that no children are considered 'unlikely' to converse with an adult regardless of the pre-school care received. However, as Figure 5 considers the likelihood of child-to-child conversation the outcome is firmly with a nursery setting. A stark contrast is witnessed to the option of primary care givers, who are unrepresented within the column considered 'most likely' to hold a conversation with another child. These findings are consistent with Holdaway (1979, cited by Beauchat et al., 2009) as it supports the concept of communication improving positive social interactions.

When referring to Figure 1, more primitive forms of communication become apparent such as smiling, waving, body language and eye contact and should be recognised accordingly. The ability to communicate effectively offers children lifelong skills in either conveying their needs successfully or offering their support to other individuals, consistent with The American Academy of Paediatrics (2020).

Conclusions can be drawn from the data regarding the considered benefits of a nanny. Reflections from teachers include (T6) 'they missed the high-quality interactions' and (T1) 'children were not as school ready as they may have been otherwise' these specific observations relate to a negative impact when children experience the loss of a nanny (being the case for some children during the pandemic). Current findings build on existing evidence by Lippold et al. (2016) highlighting the importance of consistency of care for a child, similarly consistent with Leach et al. (2008) stating nannies provide high quality care and develop positive relationships in contrast to children cared for by grandparents. The current study reveals no findings to suggest any negative impact upon a child's social interaction when cared for by a nanny.

The rationale of this study is to assess findings acquired specifically from a qualified reception class teacher. The current study is consistent with Maleki et al. (2019), Petrisko (2019) as well as Wuller and Werang (2020) as it too focuses on teachers' informed perspectives during research. Teachers offer an opportunity to independently assess children in an environment that is normally consistent and controlled, resulting in a more accurate outcome (Cohen, et al., 2011).

Ten of the eleven teachers consider that COVID-19 has impacted on children's social interaction for those normally attending nursery. Eight teachers consider COVID-19 to have influenced the children of primary care givers and five consider effects to be shown for children with a nanny providing pre-school care. Teachers report that children's social interactions are less developed, due to the restricted opportunities for interaction. This research is significant as it reveals new insights into the effects a global pandemic can have upon children. It should be considered throughout the significance of the research being carried out during a global pandemic and at a time of great uncertainty with schools remaining closed to children other than those of key workers and vulnerable children. The opportunities for the further research to assess the impact will be discussed more fully in the recommendations section.

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Extraordinary affects are already being witnessed by teachers, including a teacher expressing concern regarding the long-term effects on children who due to COVID-19 are repeatedly being told to wash hands and sanitise. Findings show that children are now less confident exploring resources and their school environment. Concerns are that children now show signs of anxiety from having dirty hands which may be of particular significance when learning and exploring.

Conclusion:

Results have indicated that reception teachers generally consider nursery care to provide children with a greater competency when developing social interaction skills. This was agreed by nine of the eleven teachers questioned. Children having had the opportunity to mix with other children were also found to communicate more cordially with both children and adults.

Teachers considered children experiencing sole care from a primary care giver to be less prepared for successful social interaction at the point of school entry, leading to the supposition that one-to-one adult care may have a more adverse outcome on children's social interaction competency at this juncture. By focussing the research from teachers' perspective, the depth of understanding shown, and the rich data provided has enabled a successful outcome.

From data gathered, it is clear that COVID-19 significantly impacted on all preschool care types, typified by an example highlighting how the necessity of handwashing altered how children viewed their environment.

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Appendices:

Appendix One:

Link to Questionnaire: <https://surveyhero.com/c/db32b8fb>

How confident are you in recognising positive child social interactions?

Not Confident

Very confident



Please describe a positive social interaction

How confident are you in recognising negative child social interactions?

Not confident

Very confident



Please describe a negative social interaction

Upon school entry, which group of children displayed the most positive social interactions?

Those cared for by

A Nanny

A Nursery

A Primary Care Giver

Other

Please describe in what way

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Upon school entry, which group of children showed more negative social interactions?

Those cared for by

A Nanny

A Nursery

A Primary Care Giver

Other

Please describe in what way

Considering children who attended NURSERY, do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has effected their social interaction skills?

Yes

No

If so, please explain in what way?

Upon entry, how likely was a child who had a NANNY to confidently hold a conversation with an ADULT?

Unlikely

Very likely

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Upon entry, how likely was a child who attended NURSERY to confidently hold a conversation with an ADULT?

Unlikely

Very likely

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Upon entry, how likely was a child who had a PRIMARY CARE GIVER to confidently hold a conversation with an ADULT?

Unlikely

Very likely

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

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Upon entry, how likely was a child with a PRIMARY CARE GIVER to confidently hold a conversation with a CHILD?

Unlikely

Very likely

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Upon entry, how likely was a child who had a NANNY to confidently hold a conversation with a CHILD?

Unlikely

Very likely

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Upon entry, how likely was a child who attended NURSERY to confidently hold a conversation with a CHILD?

Unlikely

Very likely

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Which group if any, do you feel has shown the greatest change in their ability to socially interact since the start of the school year.

Nanny

Nursery

Parent

Other

None

Please explain what changes you have seen

Appendix Two:

Examples of completed questionnaires.

Please describe a positive social interaction

Body language - when eye contact is made and lots of gesturing to other children to join in and play. When children share a smile or laughter with each other when playing. Turn taking when using resources. bodies turned inward facing other children rather than faced away and not looking or interacting. Holding hands. Playing chase with each other. Gentle hands, not pushing or hitting

Verbal interactions - saying please and thank you, saying your turn, or my turn. listening to other children and taking turns to speak, keeping on topic, building on comments .

Please describe a negative social interaction

Inability to share/wait turns/respond to others needs
Unkind
Not responsive
Withdrawn
Worried/anxious
Taking resources from another
Violence
Irritability

Upon school entry, which group of children showed more negative social interactions?

Those cared for by

- A Nanny
- A Nursery
- A Primary Care Giver
- Other

Please describe in what way

No ready for routine and changes. Wanted to stay playing in their activity rather than join in with whole class activities. Poor communication, answering in grunts or gestures, not using full sentences.

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Yes

No

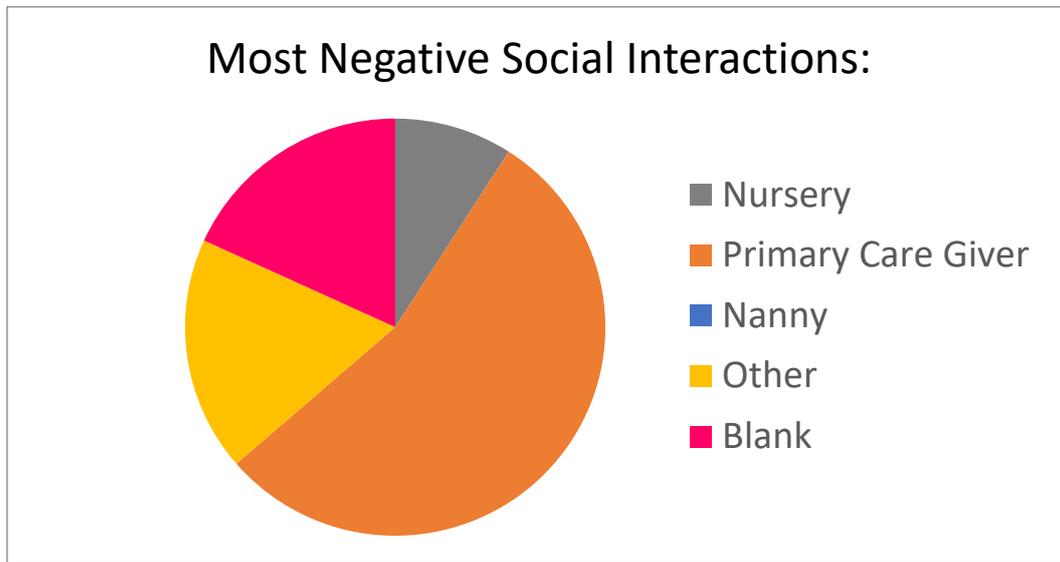
+ Add comment

If so, please explain in what way?

I think hand washing and sanitising hands will discourage children from getting their hands dirty and exploring in school

Appendix Three:

Figure Four:



Appendix Four:

Figure 8:

