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# SERA

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### Early Years Network Special Issue

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## Editorial

The SERA Early Years Network is delighted to present a cross-section of early childhood research in Scotland – working in this particular field of research and practice carries with it some issues about status, as if paying attention to the youngest children, their experiences, learning, curiosities and rights might be in some way lower on the research and practice pecking order than the visible promise in young children and their futures deserves. Is there a sense in which the younger the child, the less important? We believe not: approaches may be different, but research interest in early childhood shares much with other phases of education. Reflecting on the research strands of recent SERA annual conferences: in early childhood too there is research interest in professional and vocational learning, in social justice, equity and inclusion, in digital learning, in curriculum, in policy, in leadership, in children's rights and voice and in the quality of education. Less talked about are the implications of early childhood experience for later school success as raised through a longitudinal study tracking children's experience from the age of three to school leaving. Almost invisible beyond early childhood, here love-led practice finds its place in this Bulletin.

The Early Years Network's purposes are to recognise the significance of the early years of a child's life, spanning into early schooling, by-

1. Promoting professional development alongside best practice for the ELC profession in Scotland.
2. Sustaining and forging new links with policymakers, practitioners and the public.
3. Expanding research-informed practice by building (national and) international partnerships.
4. Involving both current students and graduates working within the early education field.
5. Promoting and critiquing practitioner research.

These aims emphasise intersections between research, policy, and practices, and in the spaces between each, and therefore our call for contributions to this SERA digital publication.

The Researching Education Bulletin (SERA REB) invited contributions that would focus on the early years of children's lives from the ages of 0-8 at a time when there are major policy, research and practice developments, and major restrictions to our daily lives. In response we have received, and after a blind peer review process, have included, short research papers, 'bite size' short accounts with links to a longer item, posters, and synopses of current research.

We begin with Mary Wingrave et al's short research paper on the views of BA and MEd Childhood Practice students about the Standard for Childhood practice, which provides a framework for quality practice in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) in Scotland. Mary highlights the evolving leadership needs of these practitioner-students. Aline-Wendy Dunlop's synopsis of her current leadership research explores ELC and Early Primary educators' leadership experience, beliefs, practices and development. In a context of professional and vocational learning, Nicky Shaw's doctoral research explores the effects of a practice based programme on sustained empathic practices which support small children's emotional understanding and self-regulatory behaviours.

Such work reaches into social justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Barbara Adzajlic and Susie Heywood's health based work aimed to improve gender equality by reducing gender stereotyping in nursery. Their bite sized account reports a project with a Scotland wide significance. Similarly, Shaddai Tembo and Liz Latto's shared authorship raises issues of agency and subjectivity in tackling inequalities in nursery and issues of identity in early childhood through a posthuman lens. Inequalities in digital access have surfaced during the pandemic, two contributions consider digital worlds – Elizabeth Mitchell's short research paper explores the place of touch screen devices in childminding practice in home settings, where Jonathan Brown's synopsis of current research presents a proof of concept study on the feasibility and role of the Family Learning App in enriching home learning activities.

Four contributions focus on issues of voice and equity through collaborative curriculum approaches – Rhian Ferguson's paper on a Froebelian approach reflects what might be called the new Scottish Froebel Movement to explore the role of dialogue and participation in a philosophy of practice based on his concept of 'freedom with guidance': she looks at how this focus on children's agency sits with Scottish early years policies. This rights based approach is illustrated in Lauren Boath's short research paper on the child as co-researcher in what children value outdoors. Lauren's work uses developmentally appropriate research methods to support children in forming and sharing their views on a topic that matters to them. Gemma Paterson leads a group of Early Years Equity and Excellence Leads in Falkirk, who are also practitioner researchers: Gemma provides a short overview paper of three holistic child centred approaches which are each illustrated through poster submissions.

A group of authors from Strathclyde led by Lorna Arnott offer a short research paper with a brief overview of their Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 project, under the title 'Pushing Play in Primary 1'. This captures what we find in both the Froebelian paper and the paper on Raising the Ambition: Being Me. Early years research, policy and practice is coming together around

appropriate pedagogies in work with younger children. Too often the political landscape suggests that starting formalised learning early will lead to closing the attainment gap and higher attainment in the journey through school: for early years practitioners the reverse offers them a recognisable truth. Giving children time, ensuring their engagement in learning through play pedagogies and working effectively alongside their families brings greater long-term dividends.

We move on to a paper from Aline-Wendy Dunlop that embraces early childhood in the transition to school and revisits the same cohort in their transition to secondary to understand the longer term implications of children's wellbeing and attainment at times of transition, for their future school outcomes at school leaving, through an ecological approach.

We finish with two short research papers which look beyond our current Covid-19 influenced experiences to the need for respect and strong relational practices. Marion Burns, Elizabeth Paterson and Lynn Taylor, authors of the new national practice guidance for the early years, *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*, use an interpretive approach to explore the impact the national guidance had on practitioners' and teachers' approaches to the transitions incurred for both new stars and returners to ELC and school after the long spell of Covid closures. Finally, we close with Jane Malcom's doctoral work on developing love-led practices and their significance for post Covid-19 lockdown and a post Covid world.

A different journey through the contributions included in this REB would find a variety of research approaches from action research, to survey, to rights-based approaches, to ecological framing and to posthumanism. Through these pieces of work, we have sight of the variety and strength of early childhood research in Scotland that reaches beyond traditional research communities, focuses principally on applied research and influences the development of national guidance and practitioner understandings.

*The SERA Early Years Network Team*

### SERA REB Early Years Network Issue

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### The Standard for Childhood Practice - 10 years on

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Short research paper

*Key words: Leadership, childhood practice, programmes, transformation*

#### **Aims and background**

The aim of this study was to explore views and attitudes towards the Standard for Childhood Practice (SSSC, 2016b) with students on the Childhood Practice programmes (BA and M.Ed.) at the University of Glasgow. In 2007, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) introduced the first benchmark Standard for Childhood Practice (SCP), in order to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in the delivery of Childhood Practice qualifications. This guidance enabled HEIs to introduce and develop programmes suitable for the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector in Scotland, whilst setting out general expectations and capabilities that graduates of such programmes should be seen to demonstrate. In practice, it appears to work well, with the programmes being favourably considered in independent enquiries (Education Scotland, 2012; SSSC, 2014). In 2015, the SCP was revised, to more fully reflect the changing needs of the ELC sector. Now, over a decade on from its introduction, the SCP remains a key framework for HEIs and Childhood Practice students.

#### **Methodology and methods**

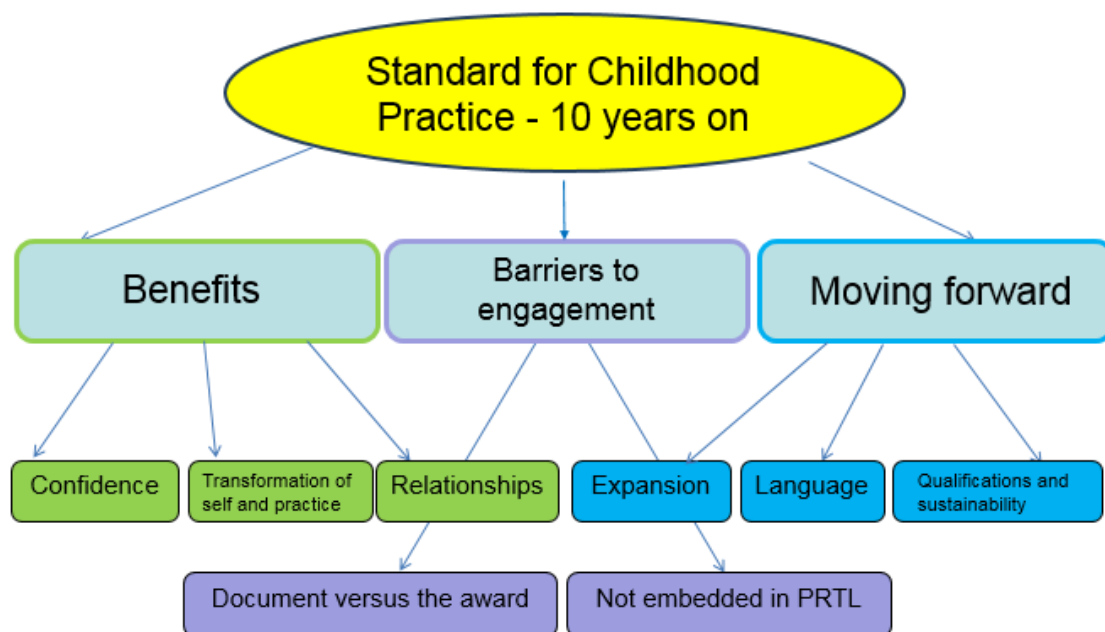
Following ethical approval, students from across both Childhood Practice programmes at the University of Glasgow were invited to take part in a discussion group. The nine participating students were experienced practitioners (minimum four years post qualification) from various types of settings (early years, out of school care, residential care, local authority, private, third sector). Students were completing their qualification by requirement or voluntarily.

This varied participating group allowed for insights from practitioners' perspectives to be obtained (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013), generating qualitative data. Following Oates (2006), the methodology was adopted at the levels of ontology, epistemology and axiology, allowing the project to be situated within an interpretivist paradigm, accepting in accordance with

Lincoln et al (2011) that experiences and feelings provide valuable data to examine people's lives. The project did not seek nor claim generalisability or representativeness (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013), however it provided some insight into the views of those who are required to meet the SCP (SSSC, 2016b).

Thematic analysis was adopted to examine the data, considering both literature and data in supporting any tentative claims made (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with theory reinforcing the analysis and clarifying what was said, allowing codes, categories and themes to be created. The following section presents the findings, using participants' own narratives to describe their experiences of the SCP (SSSC, 2016b).

### Findings and discussion



**Figure 1. Thematic map.**

Analysis of the transcripts identified three core themes relating to the participants' experiences of the SCP (SSSC, 2016b): benefits of the document, barriers to engagement and ideas for development moving forward. Under each core theme, a number of subthemes were identified (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participants identified a number of benefits as a result of engaging with the Standard (SSSC, 2016b), including increased confidence, building professional relationships and the positive

transformation of their professional identity and practice: 'I actually feel like a professional' (P1); 'It's how you project yourself now' (P2). From these and similar comments, it seemed that participants perceived themselves to be more professional and this, in turn, resulted in enhanced service provision (Fazey and Fazey, 2001). Participants reported experiencing higher levels of self-actualisation, enhancing the social capital they generate in their field (ibid).

In relation to the theme of moving forward, participants considered a number of ways in which the SCP (SSSC, 2016b) supported the development of the sector and how this, in turn, might necessitate further development of the document. Positively, the language of the benchmarks was seen to clarify key terminology: 'It actually puts it down there in black and white, you know, bullet points, what the expectations are' (P1). As well as being open-ended enough to include practitioners across the range of childhood practice settings: 'Anything you try and find for additional support, for homecare, for out of school care, for children with complex needs...' (P7). In tension with this, participants articulated strongly their perception that the language and framing of the benchmark statements contributed to a view amongst practitioners not holding designated leadership roles that the SCP is solely for use by managers. Participants described this perception as being detrimental to practitioners' professional development, discouraging frontline staff from engaging with the document: 'Cause I think they look at it and just see a lot of what they deem to be management, cause it's not management any more, everybody has to take those roles' (P6).

Further barriers to engagement were also highlighted by the discussion. For example, participants generally stated that undertaking Childhood Practice qualifications increased their awareness of the SCP document, with this, in turn, supporting self-reflection and professional development (SSSC, 2016a). However, a recurring theme was conflation of the Childhood Practice awards and the Standard for Childhood Practice document: 'I've learned so much doing the Standard for Childhood Practice' (P5). The implication was that students believed that once they had completed the programme of study, they had 'completed' the SCP, suggesting that use of the document after attainment of the award may be limited, undermining its potential to support and guide continuous professional learning. This echoes the conclusions of Forde et al. (2016) in relation to schoolteachers that standards have potential to support career-long professional development but only when effectively contextualised within practice.

### **Implications and conclusions**

These findings suggest implications for developing effective practice in use of the SCP



document at various levels. Firstly, in the context of rapid developments within the ELC sector (Dunlop, 2015), participants identified changing some of the language within the SCP (SSSC, 2016b) as an important step: 'I think as well everything that's happening with the expansion... there could be more tweaks in it...because everybody's role's changing...' (P4). Specifically, replacing the phrase 'Managers/lead practitioners...' at the start of each benchmark with more inclusive language could help underline the relevance of the Standard to all practitioners in line with stated intentions for the document (SSSC, 2016b:4).

Building on this, in order to embed the SCP (SSSC, 2016b) into everyday practice, we recommend that the SSSC introduce a requirement for all practitioners to link entries in their Professional Registration and Training Log with associated benchmarks of the Standard (SSSC, 2016a). Within the wider policy context, incorporating references to specific benchmarks within policy documents could support practitioners in making further connections and enhance the profile of the sector.

From the data presented, it is possible to conclude that students from various settings within Childhood Practice studying at both under-and postgraduate level within this University context, find the SCP document (SSSC, 2016b) a valuable resource to support their personal and professional development as leaders. As the sector evolves, Childhood Practice award providers will need to review programmes regularly taking account of the changing demographic of the students in order that the programmes meet their evolving leadership development needs and continue to support them in meeting the Standard for Childhood Practice.

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### Perspectives on Early Childhood Leadership in Scotland

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Synopsis of current research in process

*Key words: Leadership, qualities, agency, vision, 0-8 year settings*

#### Synopsis

When I first reviewed leadership in early childhood 3-8 there was only a small literature (Dunlop, 2008). What was written was full of powerful thinking about emerging notions of leadership (e.g., Aubrey, 2007; Nivala and Hujala, 2002; Rodd, 2005; Whalley, 2005). Now, with the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland and strong imperatives for ensuring the Early Level of Curriculum for Excellence operates with some unity of purpose between nursery and primary, it seemed important to update this work. The study design included an online survey and focus groups using Nominal Group Technique (NGT) (Kennedy & Clinton, 2007). Ethical approval was granted to work with a target group of graduate practitioners currently providing leadership in early learning and childcare settings and in early primary education in Scotland.

*The survey questions were designed to answer three main research aims:*

- 1) To provide a picture of current ELC and Early Primary leadership experience and qualifications;
- 2) To explore leadership beliefs and day-to-day practices across diverse early years 0-8 settings; and
- 3) To develop further understanding on how to provide sustainable “on-the-job” leadership development.

The impact of lockdown two weeks after the launch of the survey, meant responses capped at 125 when 10 times that number were anticipated. The survey was paused but as 50 people had expressed interest in the NGT groups, these were moved online and three groups were held via Zoom. Nominal Group Technique minimises the interventions of the researcher and allows participants to work together on the independent generation of ideas in response to a single stimulus question, in this case: “How do you define effective leadership in early years ELC and Early Primary settings?” Ideas are shared initially with no discussion, then grouped, and described in a set of statements which are prioritised and rated. The session finishes with

a discussion of what support or barriers are experienced in relation to the priorities each group has identified.

The deeply reflective responses and initial coding revealed that early years leadership in Scotland demands a clear vision, is shared, dispositional, relational, agentic and complex. These early results suggest the value of re-launching the research as lockdown eases. This will combine with and contribute to an extensive review of existing early childhood leadership literature, to set research findings into the wider context of leadership scholarship (Nicholson et al, 2020; Stremel et al, 2019).

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### Supporting Sustained Empathic Connections in Early Years Pedagogical Practice

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Synopsis of a current research project

*Key words: empathy, empathic practice, connections, early years workforce*

This doctoral research aims to evaluate the extent to which a practice-support programme, focused on reflection and revision of emotional constructs, enables Early Years (EY) pedagogues to engage in sustained empathic practice. Empathic practice is characterised by the pedagogue accepting, labelling and validating a young child's emotions, modelling and teaching the child ways to express their emotional needs. With a focus on the communication and expression of emotion within a safe, secure and accepting relationship, empathic practice supports young children's emotional development (Siegel, 2012).

Previous Action Research details the process of developing empathic approaches in a Scottish nursery (Shaw, 2018). Results highlight an improvement in young children's emotional understanding and self-regulatory behaviours in response to the empathic interactions from staff. Recommendations from this study advocate that EY practitioners require training to develop an empathically-aware pedagogy that supports young children. Dingwall and Sebba (2018) identify that practitioners often highlight empathic practice as an area in which they require further focused training.

This PhD research is grounded in Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955), with links to Social Neuroscience (Lieberman, 2013) and Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 1999). This social constructivist perspective recognises that individuals construct ways to construe their world, shaped by interpretations of their own successive experiences. Therefore, for pedagogues to engage in empathic practice, there must be an emphasis on developing their personal constructs of emotion and empathy through practice.

This six-month evaluative case study of a relational and empathic practice-support programme utilises participant observation, reflective discussion and video-enhanced reflective practice (VERP). Following refresher training on the neuroscience of emotion, practitioners participate in experiential learning cycles within their practice setting. Through successive cycles of

experience and reflection, emotional constructs are re-evaluated and revised through the lens of empathy and emotional understanding.

Ethical considerations are informed by an awareness that the reality of this experience for participants is subjective and grounded in the participants' interpretations of their own emotional experience. Containment, reciprocity and empathy are key to all communications and interactions with participants, reflecting the researcher's own professional practice experience and training.

Realising the Ambition (2020), may guide practitioners towards adopting an 'empathic understanding' of children's emotions, however, engaging in consistent empathic practice is challenging. Following a programme of experiential learning which aims to develop an empathic understanding of emotions, pedagogues will feel enabled to offer sustained empathic connections which support children's emotional regulation.

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### The Gender Friendly Nursery

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Bitesize account

*Key words: Gender, equality, equity, stereotypes, training programme, early years, childcare, education*

The Gender Friendly Nursery (GFN) is a preventative approach to the harms caused by gender inequality, for ELC practitioners. It was developed by Health Improvement (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde), supported by a group of national agencies interested in reducing gender stereotypes and improving gender equality. The training programme, support pack and accreditation scheme were piloted in North East Glasgow from 2016-18 and are now offered to ELC establishments across Glasgow City<sup>1</sup>.

The early years are a critical time of rapid brain development (Conkbayir 2017). Research (Martin & Ruble, 2004; Freeman, 2007; Rippon 2019) shows that children absorb messages about gender from birth, therefore it is vital that all children experience a wide range of learning and play opportunities. On GFN training, practitioners learn how gender stereotypes and inequality are root causes of public health issues including gender based violence, mental health (of men in particular), challenges facing LGBT people, parenthood and parenting, and education and employment inequalities. They explore how, through small and large changes and an equitable approach, they can reduce the harmful impact of gender stereotypes. Evaluation<sup>2</sup> shows that practitioners value the training and award process, and follow up by making changes to practice and policy. Collaboration with national organisations has raised the profile of the programme and of gender equality in early years more generally, with strong recognition of the importance of this work and its potential to improve outcomes for all children. There are moves to make GFN available across Scotland, supporting the training needs of the expanded workforce.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.nhsggc.org.uk/gbvresources](http://www.nhsggc.org.uk/gbvresources)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stor.scot.nhs.uk/handle/11289/579834> Ethics: As service evaluation ethical approval was not required. However, all participants gave full informed consent to take part and ethical research principles were applied throughout by the researcher.

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### Posthumanism in Early Childhood: Implications for Practice

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Short research paper

*Key words: Posthumanism, sociomaterialism, identity, gender, early years*

#### Introduction

Posthuman frameworks have emerged in recent years to critique humanist philosophies which have foregrounded humans as dominant across all other species and materialities, privileging a narrow conception of what constitutes valuable knowledge (Braidotti, 2013, Ferrando, 2013). The following two research studies explore questions around social consciousness, agency and subjectivity within a posthuman context. Within this framework, ethics are understood as situated, ongoing and encompass both the material and the discursive. Both studies have been granted ethical approval from the authors' respective universities.

#### Posthuman implications for inequalities in early childhood

*What can posthumanism do for early childhood research?*

Shaddai Tembo's doctoral research works with posthumanism to reconsider 'what counts' as knowledge in qualitative inquiry. His focus on heteronormative practices through children's play is concerned with finding new ways to 'refuse' and to 're-fuse' heteronormative practices in the early childhood context (Tuana, 1983). That is, to refuse the hegemonic yardstick of heterosexuality as a taken for granted, 'natural', and unquestionable norm that contributes toward the maintenance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) inequalities (Rich, 1993; Warner, 1993); and, more affirmatively, to re-fuse the concept of heteronormativity to better account for social *and material* (sociomaterial) relations that compose normative play practices. Re-fusing proposes that to better challenge practices of heteronormativity, we, as researchers, first need to engage in a radical rethinking of the fundamental concepts that have validated our processes thus far.

### *Exploring the social and the material world*

Despite the gains made in providing sustained critique towards a culture of normative gender and sexuality, heteronormativity continues to perpetuate inequalities toward LGBT+ people (Lough Dennell, Anderson, & McDonnell, 2017). In recent years, an emergent body of scholarship has come to recognise the role of critique as necessary and, at the same time, limited to a particular framework of knowing and being (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). They argue that, for all the intellectual gains made in recent years, any conceptual framework that addresses heteronormativity as primarily socially constructed restrains the possibility for resistance against these forms of power to the domain of discursive agency, therefore bracketing out the social world from the *material* world that enables it. Instead, a sociomaterial framework challenges a legacy of viewing the social and the material as disjunctive, foregrounding the complicated relational ontogenetic entanglements happening between them. Applying this to the early childhood field prompts a manoeuvre away from understandings of childhood as a purely social construction, toward rethinking in more relational, more-than-human, terms. This offers a set of methodological tools to question *what else* we can know, and counts, about heteronormativity and its manifestations.

### *Implications for practice*

This project therefore seeks to explore how else we might understand heteronormativity in early childhood and aims to evaluate a different approach to exploring heteronormative practices through sociomaterialism, drawing upon ethnographic video data from a nursery setting in Scotland. More precisely, this research proposes to examine how non-human, human and more-than-human (posthuman) elements come together within the nursery site, figuring the assemblage to emphasise their relationality (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013). This could include, for example, the material resources (toys) within the nursery; spatial arrangements of particular areas; the movements of bodies throughout these spaces *as well* as the children's voice. Ultimately, the wager is that future teaching and learning practices may benefit from a metaphysical framework that does not privilege human agency over materiality. This has implications how we might more successfully understand how heteronormative practices serve to perpetuate discrimination against LGBT+ communities.

## **Posthumanism and identity in early childhood**

### *Posthumanism and identity*

Liz Latto's doctoral research focuses on practitioner identity and implications for practice. Set within the context of the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision in

Scotland and following the introduction of the degree and Masters degree pathway for early years practitioners, this study explores questions of identity through class, gender and race to understand how access to higher qualifications is changing practitioners' perceptions of their role and status within the sector.

### *Posthumanism/new materialist framework*

Adopting a posthuman, new materialist stance, this research challenges established humanist knowledges which privilege dualisms such as mind/body, and rational/irrational, thus offering a critique against the rationalist, "God's eye" view of the world (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016, p194). Accepting knowledge as being embodied, this move towards valuing both the discursive and material elements, the human and non-human, creates space to explore different ways of being and becoming (Braidotti, 2002; Harraway, 2016). This opens the possibility of new ways of thinking, highlighting how the mind/body dualism has informed the distinction between education/care aspects of ELC and the often unrecognized emotional toll experienced by a "highly feminized" workforce (Mikuska & Fairchild, 2020, p76). Adopting this flat, or monist, ontology allows for an acknowledgement of emotions as a way of capturing the affect of these agentic assemblages, paving the way for a more socially just interpretation of what constitutes knowledge within ELC.

### *More than just voice: an agentic assemblage*

Adopting Bennett's (2010) concept of agentic assemblage, this research challenges the primacy of the spoken word, for example through shared stories, viewing it as but one aspect of the complex of material and discursive entanglements which make up an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This challenges the humanist idea that voice is the true and stable reflection of the individual, looking instead to fluid entanglements of human and more-than-human elements, each acting with force and agency (MacLure, 2009). Embracing this approach affords opportunities to explore how social structures, hierarchies, geographies, and the built environment intra-acts with individual human histories, emotions, ambitions, skills and knowledges. This leads a to better understand how this complex of inter and intra- actions create practitioners' lived realities.

### *Methodology: moving toward new knowledges*

This study adopted an auto-ethnographic approach to data collection, based within one stand-alone early years setting conducted over a 16-month period. Data was collected through semi-

structured interviews, observations, informal chats and reflections on my own responses and practice. My engagement with the stories told by the (all) women in my study, how I was affected by them and in turn affected them, opened the door to co-creating new subjectivities, whereby understandings and knowledges were shared, reflected upon and (re)constituted in ever changing assemblages. The intra-actions of participants in relation to other practitioners, the material setting and their own histories created new knowledges which highlighted how power relations are negotiated and renegotiated, informing identities which are multiple, layered and deeply felt. What constitutes knowledge, and whose knowledge has value, are important consideration moving towards a more socially conscious and just praxis within ELC.

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## Digital learning - Perspectives from childminding

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Short research paper

*Key words: Touch screen devices, childminding, digital learning*

### Background and approach

George and Odgers (2015) explain how over the past ten years, children's use of digital technology has increased exponentially, resulting in extensive research studies around how digitally mediated activities may potentially affect children either positively or negatively. They suggest that we should now be asking ourselves how and why children use technology, and with what consequences, rather than whether or not they use it. Prensky (2001, cited in Cut, 2017), first suggested the term 'digital native' to describe anyone who feels comfortable in the digital age, having grown up immersed in technology. Within the UK, 41% of five to fifteen-year olds own a smartphone and 44% possess their own tablet (Ofcom, 2016).

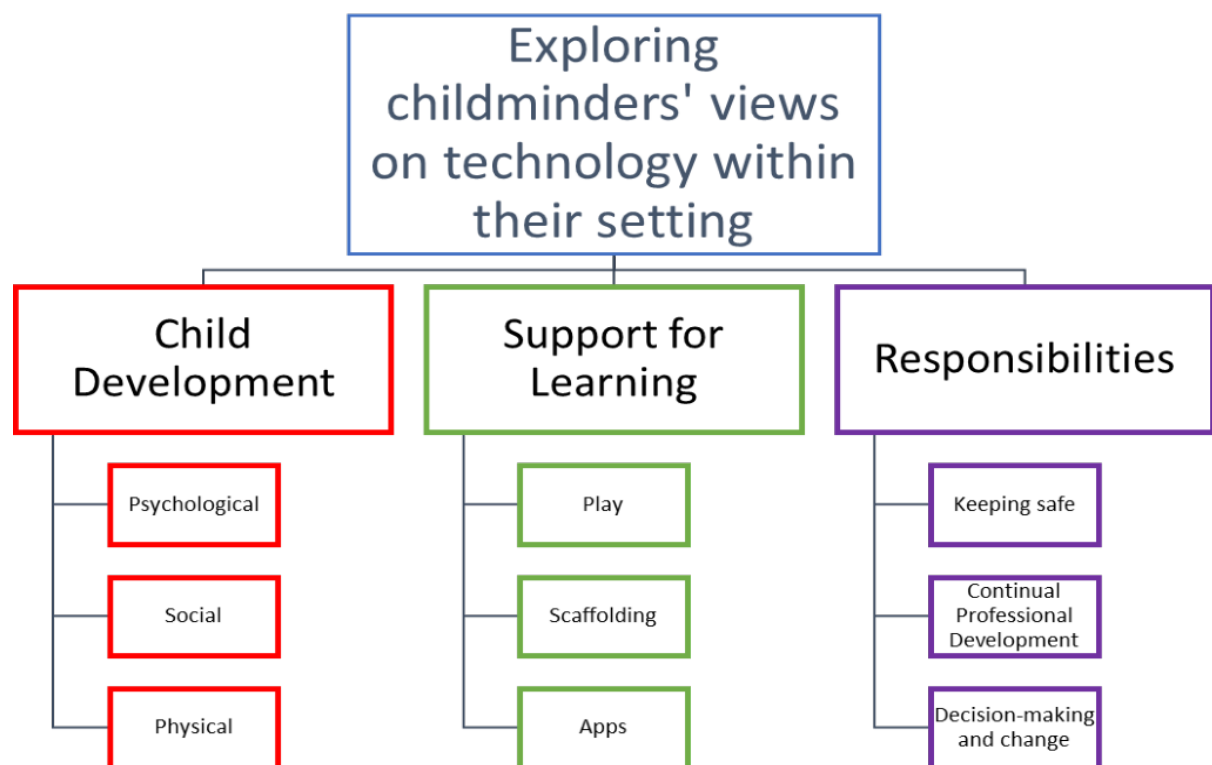
As a childminder, I am aware of the part technologies play in key Scottish Government educational policies, including the recent digital learning and teaching strategy (Education Scotland, 2014; 2018) and the impact that technology at home already has on the young children for whom I care. The literature highlights risks and possible harms that technology poses to children (Hatch 2011; Blackwell et al, 2014; Gottschalk, 2019), while other researchers suggest the 'potential' impact technology may have on children's learning and preparedness for the world in which they will grow and eventually work (Jack and Higgins, 2019; McKnight et al, 2016; Raja and Nagasubramani, 2018). As a 'digital immigrant' (Prensky, 2001, cited in Cut, 2017) born prior to the digital age and subsequently finding myself constantly trying to keep up with the digital natives while attempting to understand digital technology, I do not provide digital devices within my setting and I was now considering whether this was placing these children at a disadvantage.

This study set out to explore the views of registered childminders on the use of digital technology within a childminding setting. The nature of childminding does not easily allow childminders to meet collaboratively, so an electronic questionnaire became the data collection method of choice (Cohen et al, 2018). Ethics approval was granted and a link was

sent to all registered childminders in my local authority via the childminding development officer. Thirty-nine responses were received.

### Findings and discussion

Initial data analysis revealed that twenty-one of the childminders did not provide digital technology for children's use within their settings, nevertheless, they responded with their perspectives on the use of technology within a childminding setting. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) identified three key themes within the responses:



**Figure 1. Thematic analysis of findings**

Participants' responses showed a broad range of views and opinions, with concerns being raised about how technology may potentially affect children's physical and psychological development, causing eye problems and lack of sleep, or a lack of physical activity leading to obesity. Several participants had observed children displaying temper tantrums, frustration and agitation when devices were removed after the permitted length of time, while others used phrases such as '*becoming addicted to screens*' (P9) and '*turning into zombies*' (P32). Play,

or the disinclination to play, by some of the 'minded children, was mentioned by nine participants who explained the need at times to persuade children to put their devices down and go outdoors to play, with one participant commenting that this made her feel sad. This echoed concerns identified in the literature (Gottschalk, 2019).

A second theme concerned technology as a way of supporting children's learning (Jack and Higgins, 2019). Many of the childminders highlighted how children in their settings found laptops and iPads helpful for homework. Educational apps were considered by far the main advantage for those childminders who provided digital devices, allowing children to access educational games which supported and enhanced literacy, numeracy and musical activities: 'There are many apps that can teach the children maths, colour and new words' (P17); 'The apps I use are all educational and music, enhancing learning' (P20). However, Collins et al. (1997) suggest that the potential of technology is rarely achieved because the successful use of computer software depends on appropriate support or 'scaffolding' for learning; educators need to be confident and knowledgeable when implementing technology to support children's learning. Nutbrown (2012), concluded that within the early years sector, a wide disparity in practitioner training, qualifications, skills and confidence was noted. None of the childminders who took part in my study referred to having completed ICT training (also noted by Aubrey and Dahl (2012).

The third theme focussed on the responsibilities of childminders, including the need to teach children online safety regardless of whether or not they provide devices within their settings (UK Council for Internet Safety, 2019), as children may be using the internet at home, at friends' homes or public places: '*Children need to know the advantages and disadvantages of such devices*'(P1). UKCIS (2019) note that practitioners also have the opportunity to role model the positive use of technology, fostering this as part of daily practice, however although all respondents but one noted that children had opportunities to observe their childminder using technology (mainly taking photographs with a phone to share with parents), none of the childminders commented on whether they discussed this action any further with children. A second responsibility highlighted in the responses, was the importance of childminders keeping their continual professional development informed and to constantly develop their practice, in pursuit of attaining the best possible outcomes for children in their care (Scottish Childminding Association, 2020); the omission of further comment from participants on role-modelling to support children in learning about technology suggests scope for this as a focus of continuous professional development provision as well as further investigation in future research.



### Implications

The results of this study highlighted a disparity of views between participants. One summed up her thoughts by stating;

*‘The use of devices should be monitored closely with the time away from them being key to children’s all-round quality of life in the future. Devices cannot teach children the old-fashioned values we still look for in a person such as manners, kindness, patience and being able to communicate with others’ (P7).*

Conversely, another remarked that *‘The internet can teach things that I can’t (P5).*

With half of the respondents indicating that while they acknowledged the potentially negative impact of digital devices, they continued to offer to provide these for the children within their settings to use, as they also considered them to be effective in enhancing children’s learning. At the same time, responses seemed to suggest that the remaining childminders did not offer devices within their settings, considering that the negative impact of digital devices outweighed the positive. While believing that the children in their care were offered sufficient opportunities to use devices while at home, they chose to offer alternative methods of enhancing and encouraging learning.

However, indications were evident that they recognised that eventually they would feel obliged to introduce devices, so as not to disadvantage children in any way. The internet itself might potentially be an effective learning tool, used by adults to research activities and information while following a curriculum framework, which may then be imparted to children, rather than considering it to be *doing the teaching*. As the debate about the positive and negative impact of technology on young children continues (Goldschmidt, 2020; OECD, 2020), this research study has reinforced my resolve to not change my current practice to introduce digital devices into my setting. The literature remains inconclusive and the need for further research is evident.

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### App based intervention to support parents enact home learning activities: Proof-of-concept study

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Synopsis of current research in process

*Key words: Home Learning Environment, Nudge, App, Behavioural Science, Decision Making*

The positive relationship between the quality of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) and attainment is well documented (Sylva *et al.*, 2012). When reviewing recognised elements of a quality HLE it is clear that quality HLEs require adults to enact certain behaviours, however, behavior change is complex with many factors influencing an individual's knowledge of what to do and their capacity to do it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Thaler, 2015).

The Family Learning App (FLAPP) seeks to reduce the effort required to enact enriching home learning activities by sending participants daily 'digital nudges' in the form of developmentally appropriate 'play based' activities (Mani *et al.*, 2013).

This proof of concept study investigated the feasibility of FLAPP as a behaviour change intervention using a mixed-methods approach with a group of 42 families from a Scottish Early Years' Centre. Following a review of proposed methods, ethical approval was granted by the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee.

The primary measure used was parental response to three questions that required parents to report on the extent that FLAPP:

- changed the amount of time spend supporting their child's learning and development
- helped them learn new approaches to support their child's learning and development
- helped them feel more confident in their ability to support their child's learning and development

Results indicated that the majority of respondents experienced an increase across all three aspects. The daily activity provided by FLAPP appeared to simplify the decision making environment regarding 'what' to do resulting in more cognitive space for participants to be

creative regarding 'how' to do the activity with their child. In addition, the content of the daily activities combined with the experience of customising the activity appears to facilitate a change in understanding as to what constitutes learning at home similar to the acquisition of a 'threshold concept' (Meyer & Land, 2006). The majority of participants reported being better able to spot opportunities for learning and make small adjustments within daily life to include learning. One participant spoke of this shift in terms of learning '*indirect ways*' to support their child's learning that were more '*imaginative*', contrasted against her previously held view which saw learning as '*just sitting down with paper and pencil*'.

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### A Froebelian approach to supporting diversity and equity in early childhood

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Student work

*Key words: Freedom with Guidance, adult role, diversity, relationships, intersectionality*

*Author's note: this contribution has been extracted from an MSc Froebel and Early Childhood research proposal.*

The project is grounded in the philosophy of Friedrich Froebel (1782 – 1852), one of the most significant early years pioneers of the eighteenth century, who established the *Kindergarten* in Blankenburg, Germany in 1840 (Liebschner, 1992). The research project considers the tensions between advocating democratic political practices in early childhood from a Froebelian perspective of freedom with guidance (ibid), a concept where dialogue, participation and equal child-relations exist (Urban, 2008); and the discourses of others whose agenda is centred on different assumptions. Moss (2019) argues that many early years programmes which are directed by government and local authorities include taken-for-granted approaches which can be controlling and exclusive of other discourses. This inhibits practitioners from looking at other ways of implementing their principles and ideas. Furthermore, Liebschner (1992, p.64) notes that 'even what to teach and how to teach it is now laid down by law – this is fundamentally opposed to the philosophy of the founders of child-centred education'. This research aims to examine how practitioners, who base their practice on Froebelian principles, navigate current Scottish early years policies, guidelines and agendas which may be in opposition to their principles.

This project takes social justice, which foregrounds a respect for childhood and children's agency, as its conceptual framework (Christensen and James, 2008). It adopts a participatory, qualitative multi-methods design which supports interactions with all participants, children and adults (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The project emphasises the importance of the adult role to question and uphold a socially just pedagogical stance within the early years.

### Background

Froebel did not name his approach as socially just; rather, he encouraged well-meaning progressive educators to consider an equitable, rights and participatory approach to pedagogical practice (McNair and Powell, 2020). Wright, (2013) suggests that Froebel's work was considered 'liberatory' (2013:34) forming part of a tradition where individuals thought for themselves, rather than following the directives of others and his legacy can be found in both the Hadow (1933) and Plowden (1967) reports. The former aimed to reduce the prescriptive teaching across the curriculum, the latter reinforced Froebelian concepts of self-activity, stating that 'finding out is better than being told' (Plowden, 1967:460). Advocating socially just practices from a Froebelian perspective which views children's development as holistic (Froebel, 1886), contrasts starkly to dominant theories of child development as well as developmentally appropriate tick-box assessments, produced by local authorities and a government which favours free-market capitalism in education; governments, who view it primarily as a 'political practice' (Moss, 2019:49). Such discourses validate Rose's (1999) claim that childhood continues to be the most intensely governed sector of early childhood, perpetuated by relations of domination which uphold unequal adult-child relationships and maintain power imbalances (Gallagher, 2009). As practitioners, such policies present us with a dilemma, as they oppose Froebelian principles of freedom with guidance and inadequately support a socially just pedagogical stance.

It is therefore fair to say that the failure to effectively articulate the concept of social justice leaves many practitioners feeling dispirited as well as struggling with a lack of clarity and transparency. A reductionist perspective, adopted by government policies to close the attainment gap in early childhood education, emphasises a performative skills and competence approach, thereby creating a knowledge hierarchy by privileging some subjects (mathematics and literacy) and subordinating others. In contrast, *Realising the Ambition* (Education Scotland, 2020), draws from different principles to curriculum approaches within early education and adopts a more holistic view of developmental evaluations to children's learning, which is considered as emerging in unforeseen directions, a concept in line with Ingold's (2011) view of wayfaring, with the child mapping their own learning journey with no predetermined goals. McNair and Powell (2020) note the importance for practitioners in being able to align themselves with a philosophy, suggesting that a Froebelian approach to education can provide practitioners with a strength to uphold principles against a backdrop of burgeoning literature with its many contradictions.

The project therefore aims to explore the steps which practitioners take in upholding their Froebelian principles. Do they respond with feelings of disorientation and amnesia, unable or unwilling to navigate their way through a web of ambiguities? Or, do they acknowledge such tensions exist and choose, implicitly or explicitly, to deploy their activism to uphold their principles and engage critically with current guidelines and question policies which underpin their practices? Froebel foregrounded the importance of reflexivity, (Liebschner, 1992) an approach which disrupts our thoughts and challenges our assumptions, thereby preventing a rigid pedagogical approach (Bruce, 2016). Ladson-Billings (2005) draws on Freire's notion of conscientisation to take an active stance and engage critically in educational discourses to work towards equality and justice. This research will examine whether practitioners can draw on this notion and themselves take an active stance to employ a critical pedagogy to counter dominant discourses.

### **Implications for Practice**

It is within this background that this research is situated. For many practitioners, policy guidelines in which they have to operate, oppose their Froebelian principles. The adult role is central to Froebelian philosophy (Liebschner, 1992). Froebel advocated for trained, skilled staff as part of his workforce (ibid). Likewise, Bruce emphasises the importance of training, learning and reflection, the need for practitioners to be educated to think for themselves and 'not to rely on the thinking of others in authority to tell them what they should think' (2012, p.64). Adopting a pedagogically just stance can support practitioners to challenge the auspices of Local Authority perspectives in today's educational environment. The project will explore how practitioners navigate their way in the conflicting sea of policies and guidelines and argues for practitioners to be pioneers who support democracy and possibility and who contest the dominant paradigms as the early years revisionists once did. Rigid and inflexible policies for measuring children's performances are not what Froebel's liberatory vision included (Bruce, 1987).

The aim of the research is that findings from the proposal may contribute to a better understanding of the pivotal role of the adult in supporting Froebelian principles by seeking alternative pedagogically just practices in early childhood education. It may influence policy makers to seek alternative approaches and knowledges within early years.



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### The child as co-researcher in the early years: what do children like in the outdoors?

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Short research paper

*Key words: early childhood; outdoor learning; children's voice; children's rights; autonomy support; wellbeing*

The research described in this paper grew from a collaboration with a Scottish nursery. Staff within the new, purpose-built school sought advice on developing the outdoor space for the nursery which has a roll of 130 children aged 2 – 5 years, from the diverse local community. Nursery practitioners felt that the outdoor space offered great opportunity for the curriculum and learning to be 'seamlessly' in- and outdoors. Not all children attend full-time. Some, including children in the Strong Start Scheme who join aged 2, attend full days throughout the week.

The aim of the study was to use a children's rights-based approach to nurturing children's voice as a methodology for shaping the outdoor space, and exploring the impact of involvement in shaping and using the outdoor space on children's wellbeing. This paper describes one aspect of the project, which was limited by the school closures during the coronavirus pandemic: what children said they want from their outdoor space, using thematic analysis.

Despite Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children (UNCRC) applying to all matters which affect children, adults often decide that matters do not involve children's views, putting children's access to their rights in adults' control (Lundy, 2007). Interpretations of the UNCRC often diminish the application of Article 12; 'the right to be consulted', 'the right to participate', 'the right to be heard' and 'pupil voice' lack depth and lead to involvement only where an adult deems it appropriate (Lundy, 2007). The methodology used here, drawing on the work of Lundy (2007), Lundy & McEvoy (2011) and Boath (2019), positions the researchers as 'potential "enablers" capable of playing a positive role in guiding and assisting children in the formation and expression of their views' (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011,

p14). Within this paper, we describe this as an ‘ethically-robust methodology’; one which enacts Article 12 of the UNCRC and gives scope for children to be included in a greater range of issues which might commonly be considered as being outside of young children’s competence, including those on which children may not already have formed opinions (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011).

### Methodology

Parents/carers of 102 children provided consent for their involvement (Table 1. refers).

Data collection day	Potential participants (children attending nursery on data collection days for whom parental/carer consent given)	Number of children choosing to take part	% participation rate
1	73	34	47%
2	11	9	82%
Combined	84	43	51%

**Table 1. Children’s participation information**

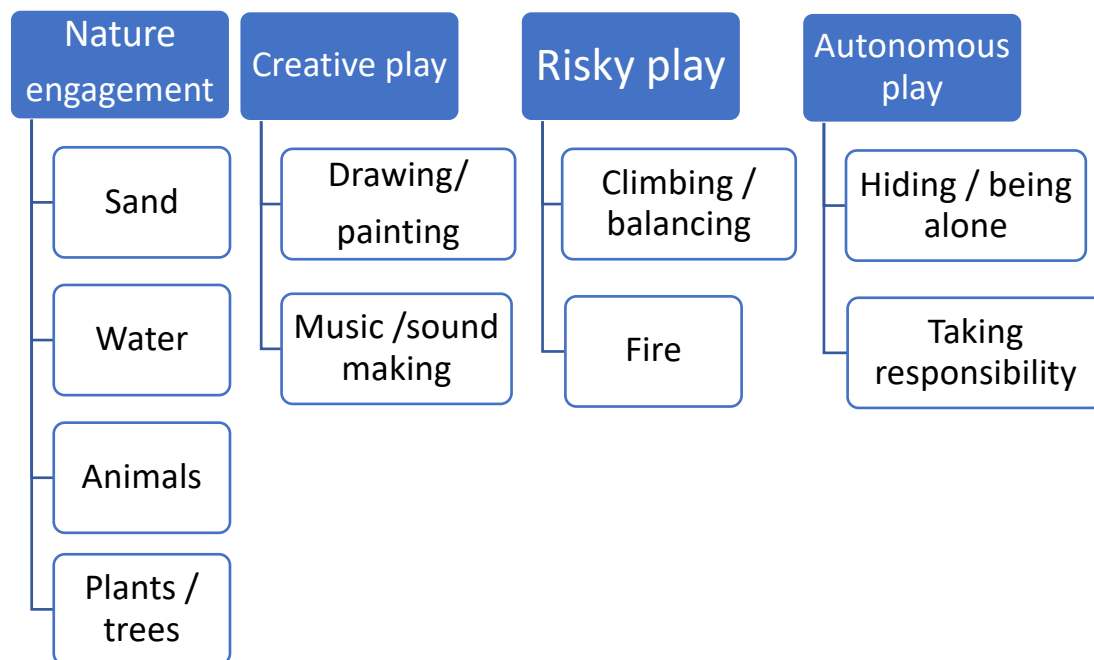
Children chose to participate for as long or short a time, or as many times, as they wished. The boy: girl ratio was representative of the overall nursery ratio of 53:47.

Children who approached the researchers were invited to watch a short animated video, scripted and voiced by a child of the same age group, for whom parental and child consent had been obtained. The video communicated to the children the idea of consent, that they did not have to take part if they did not want to, and that they could take part in any, all or none of the activities with the researchers. Children opted to approach the researchers if they wished to do so; this was considered their consent in participation. On approach and during activities they were reminded of being able to choose: what they did and did not want to do; to stop taking part at any time. Once there, children were invited to look at pictures of ‘outdoors’, some of which had been taken by other children from the nursery on visits. Fieldnotes made included the expression of interest the children showed, noting how many children chose different images, questions asked and comments made about those images.

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify recurring themes in the children's choices. The lead researcher undertook initial analysis; the co-author enhanced the delineation of the themes through secondary analysis.

## Findings

The following themes (Fig. 1) identified in the children's choice of images and comments, have been put into the context of play / engagement because that is how most children expressed their potential interaction with the spaces depicted.



**Figure 1: Coding themes**

**Nature engagement:** Children were drawn to 'nature' within the images, and comments revealed a wish to engage closely with natural resources, including looking after plants and animals. Examples included wanting to water the flowers and play with a bunny rabbit.

**Creative play:** Children see the outdoor space as an opportunity for activities which might equally be undertaken indoors, such as drawing, painting and making music. However, the outdoor space may afford opportunities for more creativity, especially in the use of open-ended resources. For example:

"My favourite is the pots and pans, I'd use it to make music".

In an indoor environment, pots and pans may be stored in the 'home area' as cooking equipment, and children may sense, or indeed be aware of explicit rules, that 'bashing' the pots and pans for making music is not their intended purpose. In the outdoor area they can be seen as more open-ended resources.

**Risky play:** Many of the children chose images with planks, blocks, pallets, logs and tunnels, which they would like to climb, balance on, or jump from:

"I would jump off this, I love jumping"

Fire featured strongly in children's choices, although there was also a clear understanding of the risks that it presented, and the precautions they should take. Moreover, children recognised the fire as a source of warmth and food:

"I want to make marshmallows and cook them" and "I like the fire because you can be warm".

**Autonomous play:** Images of shelters, whether pre-built from willow or canvas tents, or made using pallets and canopies, led children to identify these as a place for time alone or quiet:

"I would like to play in here by myself" and "I'd like to sleep in the tent".

### **Discussion**

The choices children made fell along thematic lines supported by previous literature. Engaging with nature, rather than just being 'outside', and looking after animals and plants, can be a focus for outdoor learning in the early years (Barrable, 2019a), while creative play, especially with the use of loose parts has become very popular, based on the opportunities for physical activity, communication and the provision of more varied activity (Maxwell, Mitchell & Evans, 2008). Previous research has recognised risky play, including fire and heights, as physically and emotionally stimulating for children (Sandseter, 2007). Finally, autonomous or self-directed play, important in a variety of settings (Schwarzmueller & Rinaldo, 2013), can be particularly nurtured in outdoor ones (Barrable & Arvanitis, 2019).

### **Implications for practice**

We recommend that practitioners engage children in thinking about the design and use of outdoor space to create opportunities for autonomy and creativity, play and engagement with nature, which may otherwise inadvertently be 'designed out' of the outdoors.

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### Equity and Excellence Interventions in Falkirk- A Holistic Approach.

Gemma Paterson, Lead Early Years Pedagogue, Falkirk Council Early Years Team.

[gemma.paterson@falkirk.gov.uk](mailto:gemma.paterson@falkirk.gov.uk)

Three poster presentation and overview

*Key words: Health and Wellbeing, Literacy, Outdoors, 1,140.*

Falkirk's response to the addition of equity and excellence leads in 2018 resulted in the creation of Falkirk Early Years Pedagogues (EYP), a role supported by Scottish Government (2020) Funding. Our direct work with children and families is paramount, as is our commitment to playing a key role in leading and supporting pedagogy within an early years setting. Our approach in Falkirk is driven by a holistic and child centred pedagogy which results in a variety of projects being implemented across the academic year. We have found there is greater impact by implementing practical, supportive and meaningful approaches that children, families and practitioners can continue to use throughout their ELC journey and beyond. We ensure our impact on children's learning and development is not tokenistic and adapt our practice within these projects accordingly. The following three posters have been developed as a result of these practice based projects. Ethical considerations have been taken account of, permission sought where needed and consideration has been given to our data gathering methods.

**Marvellous Mealtimes: Gemma Paterson.** A holistic approach to snack and mealtimes in light of the 1,140 expansion, this project has been developing since 2018. We have seen a lunch time routine go from being static, rushed and unrealistic to snack and mealtimes being regarded as a rich learning experience across the local authority. The impact on children's and families' wellbeing continues to impact the poverty related attainment gap as relationships with food/nutrition improve and mealtimes become a social experience. Denton and Parker (2019) explore the richness of cooking with young.

**Traditional Tales: Elaine Haughton.** This project explores the importance and impact of retelling stories on children's early literacy development. This project highlighted the importance for children to have the opportunity to explore the same stories and characters over a longer period of time. The importance of retelling stories is highlighted in Bruce, Whinnett and McNair (2020).



**Back to Nature: Claudette Wright.** This project explores the impact outdoor spaces have on positive interactions between children and parents/carers. This project had a variety of balancing outcomes, for example while positive child and adult interactions increased there was also an increase in parent/carer confidence outdoors. Learning Through Landscapes (2020) provided support in developing this project initially.

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Bruce, T, Whinnett, J and McNair, L. (2010). *Putting Storytelling at The Heart of Early Childhood Practice*. Oxon: Routledge.

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## Marvellous Mealtimes in Falkirk

Gemma Paterson; Lead Early Years Pedagogue, Falkirk Council



### Introduction

In August 2018 two settings within Falkirk Council established a holistic approach to snack and mealtimes, in light of the 1,140 hour expansion. From this Marvellous Mealtimes in Falkirk was developed and has grown from strength to strength in the last two years. In the 19-20 academic session, 20 ELC settings adopted the approach.

### Rationale

The 1140 expansion provides an opportunity for us to consider how best to deliver a high-quality provision to young children. We know that eating times provide rich opportunities to foster children's social wellbeing. In the best ELC settings, snack times are regarded as a rich learning opportunity and skilled staff plan carefully for these experiences. We also know that the importance of fostering positive attitudes to healthy eating begin from a young age. Obesity and poor oral health, particularly among communities affected by poverty, remains a national health issue. Consequently, there remains a relentless focus by Scottish Government on improving this. ELC settings play a key role in intervening early with young children and families in fostering a more healthy relationship with food.

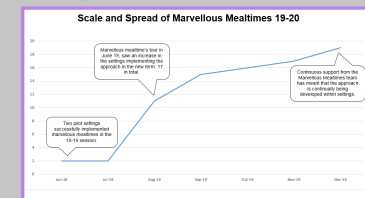
Our hope is that we can take the approach ELC settings have towards snack and adopt this while implementing mealtimes such as lunch across the ELC day.

*"Cookery provides an exciting learning opportunity for all children. It allows children and adults to work together with the adult guiding the child but giving the child freedom to make decisions and undertake important tasks such as chopping vegetables. Through finding out where food comes from and how it grows, the child is connected to nature and has a greater understanding of the world around them. Cooking plays an important role in supporting teaching and learning (McCormick 2012) and supports all areas of the curriculum. (Denton and Parker, 2019, pg. 2)*



IMAGE 1: AUHTORS OWN

### Impact and Evaluation



We know the amount of settings adopting the marvellous mealtimes approach has risen considerably in the 19-20 academic year, with the commitment from the local authority to provide support where needed. However what impact does marvellous mealtimes have on children's learning and development?

In 2018 we tracked children's eating habits while in the school dining hall and then after the move to ELC. We found that on the days where only 16% of children ate in the dining hall, this increased to 85% after marvellous mealtimes was implemented in the ELC setting.

We also tracked children's wellbeing and found that on average 28% of children were unsettled or upset while eating in the dining hall. After a move to ELC this reduced to 1%.

Marvellous mealtimes has also enabled other approaches such as Big Cook, Little Cook to be developed. This involves cooking with children and families.

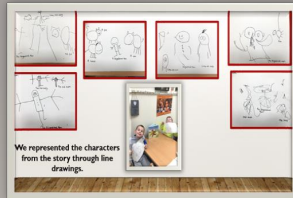
### Implementation

- The initial pilot of the approach was implemented across two settings in the 18-19 academic session.
- Each setting developed the approach while considering spaces, interactions and experiences.
- Children moved from experiencing lunch in the school dining hall to lunch in the ELC setting.
- The process developed in key stages:
  - Children eating at set times in keyworker groups.
  - Children eating with keyworker groups but self-serving.
  - Children experiencing a free-flow lunch, similar to the routine of snack.
  - Children making and preparing snack and lunch foods from their larder.
- Over the course of the last year we have supported settings in creating homelike and nurturing environments for their children to explore.
- We recognise that some settings may not be able to provide lunch in ELC so have moved towards supporting these settings in creating a marvellous mealtimes experience wherever they are.
- We have developed two Marvellous Mealtimes guidance documents in the form of floor books which evidence the approach and highlight excellent practice examples from across the authority.

**Reference:** Denton, A and Parker, L (2019) A Froebelian Approach: Cooking with young children. Froebel Trust: London.

## Traditional Tales

Retelling stories through repetition and play  
Elaine Houghton; Early Years Pedagogue, Falkirk Council



Role playing using props.

***'In order for children to be able to benefit fully from what a story can give them, they need to hear it continually and be able to immerse themselves within it' (Bruce, Whinnett and McNair, 2010, pg. 18)***

### Introduction

Regular revisiting of the same stories provides the practice children need to master new skills, develop vocabulary and understand new concepts. We significantly reduced the amount of books on offer to children, offering ten core traditional tales over the year.

My aim was that by January 2020 80% of target group children would have shown an increase in confidence and story awareness by at least one level. By March 2020 60% of all nursery children would have an increased confidence in retelling and understanding a story.



### Rationale

Young children naturally go through a developmental phase where they request to have favourite stories, rhymes, songs or games repeated. Research tells us repetition helps to increase confidence, and strengthens the connections in the brain that help children learn. Regular revisiting of the same stories provides the practice that children need to learn new skills. ***'Researchers found that toddlers who had heard just one story three times were much better at recalling and remembering new words than those who had listened to three different stories' (Sunita Shah, 1997-2020).***

### Implementation

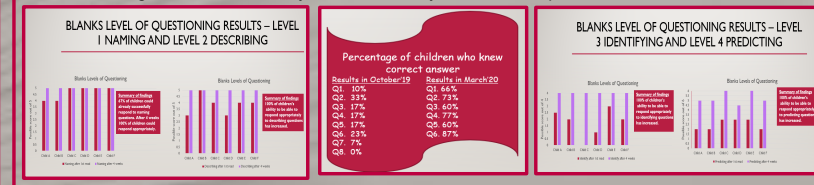
- Only ten story books were available for children to access daily. A collective decision was made for books to be traditional tales.
  - An initial audit was carried out using the blanks levels of questioning toolkit. Assessing children after the 1<sup>st</sup> reading and then again after 4 weeks.
  - Children experienced the same story being read to them over a four week period.
  - One book featured each month as our "Book of the Moment".
  - Children heard the story three times a week for the first two weeks, then twice a week for the last two weeks.
  - An early years practitioner supported the early years pedagogue by providing children from the focus group with a wide range of active experiences and opportunities to participate in.
  - Leuven scale was used as a tool to measure children's engagement.
  - Qualitative data was recorded from children's voice, drawings and their engagement in dramatic play.
- Feedback was obtained from staff and families.



### Impact

All children on the nursery roll by October 2019 participated in a traditional tales' quiz. This was repeated in March to ascertain if any impact had been made on children's knowledge of stories. Questions seven and eight were not asked as, up until this point, the last two books had not been a feature of book of the moment.

After four weeks of working with initial focus group of children using our book of the moment, 100% of children had an increased confidence in retelling and understanding the story. Children were assessed using Blanks level of questioning at the start of initial project, and then again after four weeks. There was an improvement in children's oral language development during play and 'reading', with all focus group children showing an increase in ability to name, identify, describe and predict.



### Evaluation

- Practitioners are now aware of the importance of retelling and repeating the same stories to children. They have observed and recognised the impact this has made to children's ability to recite and recall, and how it has helped to support and extend children's vocabulary.
- Practitioners are becoming more aware of the Blanks levels of questioning toolkit and further training and discussions will take place to enable all staff to use this as a point of reference when assessing children's understanding of a story.
- Parents are beginning to recognise the importance of retelling children their favourite stories repeatedly.
- There was an improvement with all children's ability to recite and recall the sequence of a story. Children became more comfortable with the story after each read and learned more about the story through the variety of follow up experiences.

***'The more a child reads, the larger their vocabulary becomes. When a child reads or hears the same book multiple times, they become familiar and comfortable with a greater number of words' (Scottish Government, 2010).***

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**QR code**  
(please scan for qualitative data)



## 'Back to Nature'

**Increasing positive adult and child interactions through outdoor play pedagogy**

Claudette Wright; Early Years Pedagogue, Falkirk Council



***"Let them get in touch with nature, and a habit is formed which will be a source of delight through life."***  
(Mason, 2013, pg. 83)

### Introduction

A vast amount of research has been conducted which has an evidence-based conclusion, that the outdoors is paramount for children's learning and development. There are endless opportunities for children such as; outdoor play contributing to cognitive and social/emotional development, giving a first-hand experience of life and growth, providing endless opportunities for imagination and creativity, creating a nurturing calming environment whilst connecting to nature. It increases attention span, improves sensory skills and promotes positive adult and child interactions. Enabling children and families the opportunity to facilitate high quality outdoor experiences is paramount. "Habits of healthy outdoor exercise as adults are linked to patterns of use established in childhood" (Thomson Et Al, 2008, pg. 20)

**My aim:** By December 2019, 80% of identified families will attend a minimum of 3 outdoor play experiences, with 50% showing an increase in positive adult and child interactions.

**My aspiration aim:** By June 2020, 60% of families within Beancross nursery will feel confident providing quality outdoor play experiences within the community, evidencing an increase with positive adult and child interactions

### Implementation

- Firstly, a contextual analysis was completed to identify families who were not accessing outdoor play, and who required support with positive adult and child interactions (questionnaires, 'Blob tree' analysis, Leuven scale).
- Early Years Pedagogue led project, supported by two EYO's.
- A group of 12 children and families spent 2 afternoons a week down in the local woodland area for 8 weeks.
- Each week, high quality 'focused' experiences were offered to our children and families.
- Each session started the same to keep the routine consistent, to encourage our parents to lead with their child.
- These experiences were low cost, engaging and family centred. The aim was that our families could continue to carry out these experiences after the initial group.
- EYO's would facilitate high quality experiences, whilst role modelling and encouraging positive adult and child interactions.
- After each session, we would evaluate this using the Leuven wellbeing scale and Kym Scott quality conversations toolkit.
- This had outstanding results with a range of qualitative and quantitative data.

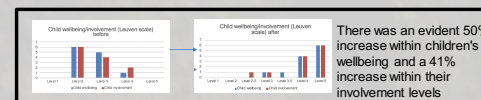
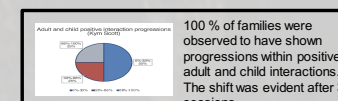
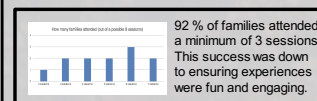
### Rationale

67% of our families have limited access to greenspace and 50% of our families reside in SIMD decile 1 and 2. Through observations and consultations with our families, it was evident that some of our children were not accessing outdoor play experiences within their local community on a frequent basis. This identified the need for us as professionals to raise awareness of high-quality experiences which could be facilitated within the local greenspace, for children and families. Staff had become positive role models and upskilled/empowered our families to facilitate high quality experiences with their children in the community, whilst promoting positive adult and child interactions and contributing to a positive community ethos. "Adults should be aware of the importance of play and take action to promote and protect the conditions that support it" (Lester, S. and Russell, W. 2010, pg.46).

### Impact

The overall focus was to improve positive adult and child interactions. However, we also had a focus on wellbeing to investigate if there was a relationship or pattern with the two outcomes.

**Our results had shown;**



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- Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008). *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice – a Review of Contemporary Perspectives*. London: National Children's Bureau (pg.46)
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### Evaluation

- An effective practitioners training session has been concluded, with 100% of practitioners feeling confident to provide back to nature sessions.
- 60% of families feel that Back to Nature has empowered them to facilitate high quality outdoor play within the community.
- A universal strategy has now formed from this targeted equity based approach
- We now have a community lending scheme, enabling our families to use their newly acquired skills, within a real life residential experience.
- 3 of our families are now leading our next sessions, empowering other parents within the community.
- High quality outdoor play pedagogy does encourage positive adult and child interactions.

### Pushing Play in Primary: Findings from Three Case Study Classes.

Lorna Arnott, University of Strathclyde. Christie Lamb (M.Ed. graduate, Strathclyde) Kayleigh Milligan (M.Ed. graduate, Strathclyde) Nicola Connor (M.Ed. graduate, Strathclyde) Deirdre Grogan, University of Strathclyde.

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Short research paper.

*Key words: play, early primary, changing pedagogy.*

Authors' note: *This paper presents a very brief overview of a larger data set.*

#### **Introduction**

This work is informed by Scotland's growing initiative to extend play across early primary, fuelled, in part, by The Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 Project, and nationwide continuing professional development delivered by Grogan. In terms of conflict of interest, it is important to note that some of the student researchers had attended Grogan's training before embarking on this project.

This paper explores the practicalities of implementing play-based pedagogy in early primary. Using a practitioner enquiry paradigm, data were collected during M.Ed. research projects in three primary schools and presented via case study methodology. A multi-method approach was adopted, including interviews with practitioners, observations and pedagogically-designed consultation with children. The paper presents four findings: 1. Play in primary was heterogenous and context specific; 2. Teachers had considerable sway over the place of play in the classroom; 3. Children appeared engaged when they were leading their learning and playing, making the need for more play-based opportunities fundamental. 4. Lack of confidence, training, resourcing and the need to 'cover' the curriculum were apparent barriers to play pedagogy in Primary.

#### **Aim**

This paper explores play in early Primary classes in Scotland. The work seeks to bridge the perpetual gap between the nursery and primary traditions, offering more fluid transitions throughout the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Early Level, which spans nursery into Primary 1 (Burns, 2019).

### **Relationship to previous research: the place of play in Primary**

Play is fundamental and beneficial, not least, for:

- children's social and academic skills (Sandberg, A. and Heden, R. 2011);
- children's self-regulation, through exploratory dramatic and make-believe play or child-led play experiences (Bodrova et al. 2013; Arnott 2013);
- creative thinking (Goodliff et al 2017);
- problem solving (Grogan and Duncan 2018);
- imagination (Vygotsky 1930/2004); and
- consolidating learning and application of skills to real-world situations (Piaget, J. 1951; Bruce, T. 1991.).

Linking play, learning and teaching requires an awareness of the many forms of play and the role of the adults in a play scenario (Fisher, 2013). It also requires an understanding that, as a medium for learning, play requires appropriate scaffolding and opportunities for uninterrupted play to facilitate new challenges. This cannot happen devoid of context and learning environments - physical, social and cultural environments are key. Hence, we need Primary classrooms that offer 'potentiating' spaces for play (Claxton, 2007).

In Primary, however, play is less established. To inform this debate at Primary school level, this paper offers practical and critically reflective examples of key considerations that must be explored in order to support children with play pedagogies.

### **Theoretical frame**

As this paper amalgamates findings from different studies the theoretical frames are idiosyncratic to the study. Nevertheless, for this paper, the data is presented as a critically reflective narrative (Dean, 2017) to consider the successes and challenges of play within each context.

### **Methodology and Methods**

The projects employed a practitioner enquiry approach (Hall and Wall, 2019) where researchers assumed a dual role as class teacher and researcher. Data are presented as case studies (Yin, 2013), to amalgamate the three data sets. All studies adopted multi-method approach (see Table 1).

## Researching Education Bulletin

Title of the project	Primary Level	Sample Size	Consent process	Methods	Data collected
Context 1 (Milligan)  Teachers' Perspectives of the Value of Play in Primary Schools	P1 - P3	3 teachers from 3 different primary stages  Primary 1 – 1 teacher and 25 children.  Primary 2 – 1 teacher and 19 children.  Primary 3 – 1 teacher and 28 children.	1. Written consent from teachers. 2. Consent to observe children in class - information session with the children within the participants classes to explain that I would be observing their teacher and I asked them to give their consent to me being there by moving their name onto a happy or a sad face.	Semi-structured teacher interviews.  3 observations of each teacher across different curricular areas.	3 interviews.  3 observations per teacher participant each lasting approximately 50 minutes.
Context 2 (Lamb)  An Investigation into Children and Teachers' Perceptions of Playful Pedagogy in Primary School	P1	8 (4 girls and 4 boys) children from a class of 25.  260 teacher survey responses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All pupils were informed as to the nature of the project prior to consenting. Children did not need to take part and consent was optional.</li> <li>If the selected children wished to take part then they would move their name onto a green thumb up. If they did not wish to take part their name would go onto a red thumb down. Their name could move at anytime during any day or lesson.</li> <li>If children consented to taking part in the interview phase of research, they placed a lanyard on to show they are consenting to being recorded.</li> <li>Although parents had no direct role in the data collection, they were required to consent to their child taking part. The parents were invited to an open afternoon to become familiar with the research.</li> <li>Consent was given electronically by those who wished to take part in the teacher survey by ticking a box to say they consent.</li> </ul>	Data Collection 1. Children's views using colour coded panel (a technique used as part of classroom pedagogy). 2. Semi structured children's interviews in groups. 3. Children's observations (using a time sampling checklist) 4. Electronic teacher survey	Panel vote by children - after each lesson (total 15)  Interviews – 4 groups of 2 interviewed.  Observation - minimum 5 per child (minimum 40 in total)  Teacher survey – 17 questions asked, 260 responses gained
Context 3 (Connor) "To what extent is it possible to teach science through play based pedagogy in Primary 1?"	P1	20 children (out of a class of 25)  15 (out of 20) teachers across the school ranging from P1-P7	An informal info session for parents and children, children then could choose to join with some or all with a consent smiley face badge. They were able to leave whenever they wanted, and leaving the activity indicated dissent. Non-return of surveys indicated dissent.	1. Narrative Observations 2. Teacher Survey 3. Mosaic Approach method for data collection including floor book, photos, and multi methods such as drawings, science work, mark making and results from science experiments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20 teacher surveys distributed- 15 returned.</li> <li>2 observations per child. 10 used in final analysis.</li> <li>Photos- 45</li> <li>Floorbook documenting work including photos, drawing, findings- all children's work.</li> </ul>

**Table 1 Multimethod approach**

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was sought from institutional ethics committees and the studies followed the Scottish Educational Research Association Ethical Guidance (SERA, 2005). Consent was sought from educational institutions, staff and parents. Children's assent was conditional, based on their willingness to participate and researchers provided opportunities for children to voluntarily withdraw at any time (see table 1 for details).

### **Main Findings and Discussion**

Across the studies, four findings became clear:

1. Play in Primary was heterogenous and context specific;
2. Teachers had considerable sway over play in the classroom;
3. Children appeared engaged when they were leading their learning and playing, making play-based opportunities fundamental;
4. Lack of confidence, training, resourcing and the need to 'cover' the curriculum were apparent barriers to play pedagogy in Primary.

Play was different across the case study contexts. This is not problematic; indeed it could mean that teachers are responsive to individual children within their class. Data, however, showed that play was less driven by children's needs and more driven by teachers' definitions of play as multifaceted, guided by their beliefs and experiences about education. Individual teachers could define play in many ways, from something that is 'pleasurable' or 'unique' or something that supported 'growth' in some way, either cognitively, socially or emotionally.

A definition of play which varied from moment to moment still fosters diverse experiences for children. This encourages child-led experience as Case Study 3 suggested that a child's natural play and learning cycle link to skills for life-long learning and work. This helps challenge or support children's curiosity and own investigations. The uniqueness of each child's play experience, therefore, has the potential to benefit children, not just in the moment but throughout their learning journey.

Child-led experiences were valued by the child participants as data showed that children perceive themselves to be playing when they are leading their own learning but learning when they are working with their teacher. Furthermore, the data showed children engaged most enthusiastically in activities that were child-led, open ended and provided a level of challenge, where the purpose was flexible but clear. Thus, in free choice time children engaged most with activities they perceived as play.



Similar findings were clear in case study 3 where the use of open-ended resources were shown to support child-led experiences. For example, the main conclusions from this case stated that:

*“that science can be taught through a play based approach in Primary one, as long as certain factors are implemented; starting from the child and child led learning, the learning environment/science area is set up with the children and open to change” (Connor, 2019)*

Overall, children need time for ‘free play’ – play that is freely chosen and self-motivated (Government, 2013; Scottish Government, 2013). It is through such free play – as opposed to narratives around structured or guided play (see Moyles, 2015 for consideration of these debates) – that the child’s perspective is obtained and understood. The data from these studies supports this where possible.

Yet, many Primary teachers, however, remain unsure of how to organise a play-based curriculum (Moyles, Georgeson and Payler, 2011). Staff need training about how to develop play to ensure a level of challenge and reflection for all children (Bruce, 2018). This was evident in the data, as Case Study 1 suggested that resourcing, budgeting and staffing were found to be barriers of play-based learning. In particular, lack of confidence meant that some teachers reverted back to adult-guided teaching approaches in order to ‘teach’ the curriculum.

### **Implications for research, policy and practice**

- Teachers require more opportunities to develop knowledge and confidence with play-based pedagogies, particularly in relation to supporting free play; a focus on provocations may be helpful here (Education Scotland, 2020).
- Freedom within the curriculum, classroom management, support networks, growth development and friendship building were found to be facilitators of play-based learning. Therefore, re-examining the structure imposed in some school context would help progress opportunities for play.
- Open ended resources, or ‘intelligent resourcing’ (Arnott and Grogan, in press) can support child-led learning, even with more specific topics like Science, as shown in Case Study 3.

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## Navigating Education 3-18 in Scotland

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Short Research Paper

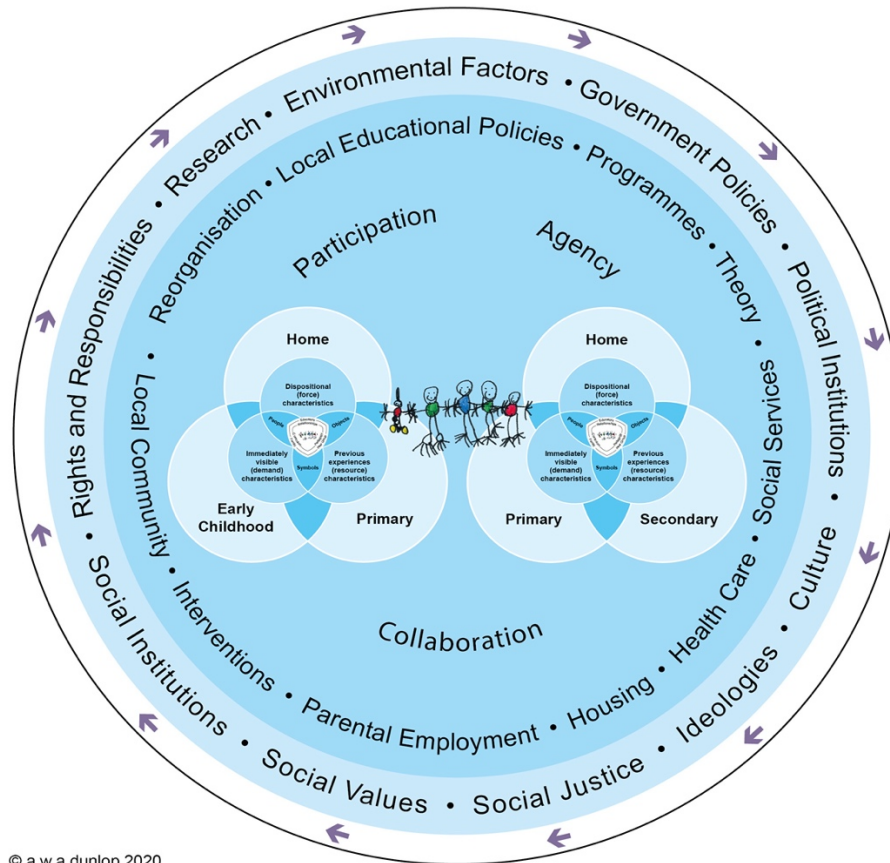
*Key words: Transitions, Wellbeing, Attainment, School Success*

### Introduction

This paper draws from a longitudinal study of one cohort's journey through education from 3-18 years old in Scotland to consider the contribution of transitions, wellbeing and attainment to eventual outcomes on school leaving. This exploratory-interpretive study tracked the experience of 150 children, framed by a hybridisation of the third phase of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), shown in Figure 1 and using wellbeing data at seven timepoints and attainment data at ten beginning in nursery education.

Data were collected through a mixed method approach using observation, interview, questionnaire, standardised measures, video tours and documentation. The variability in school outcomes among the focal children demands reflection on relationships, personal attributes and environments as potential explanatory factors. The paper argues that a good transition to primary and secondary school is definable and possible, enhances engagement in education, but is not available to all children.

How long is longitudinal study? Furstenberg (2002) tells us his study of young teenage parenthood took him 30 years as he followed through to new generations: he found it to be "ineluctably reflexive" (p.37). The point is well made for the researcher studying the major transitions in education must take account of changing social, curricular and policy imperatives, reflect on the work achieved so far and integrate new findings into the emerging narrative.



**Figure 1 Longitudinal ecological model informing data collection and analysis (Dunlop©2020)**

By so doing the study outcomes accumulate and increase in relevance along the journey. It is therefore essential to revisit ethical issues throughout the lifetime of such study: in this case ethics were reviewed and approved at four different timepoints. All transitions research is going to be longitudinal in nature as it needs to be undertaken over time to begin to understand the transitions processes at work, however for the individual researcher it is unlikely they would embark on such work at all if they appreciated at the outset the stamina, persistence and sheer length of time involved in such a journey. The lives of researcher and researched inevitably become intertwined.

## Defining Transition

We all experience so much change in our lives: 'transitions' is now a frequently used term used mainly to describe the move on from one educational setting to another and is mostly used to refer to age related moves. As Scotland continues to have one of the youngest school entry ages globally concerns have grown about how best to meet these changes for and with

children and families. It is helpful to recognise that a number of changes may be occurring simultaneously for young children and that is where the use of the term 'transition' is helpful as it emphasises both the opportunities and demands of such changes. Kagan (1991), an international scholar of transitions research identified the complexity of transitions as both 'vertical' and horizontal' as she brought a focus to the importance of continuity. The decades roll on and still the major transitions embedded in our systems guarantee challenges for all involved.

### **Impetus for longitudinal study**

When I started my longitudinal study it was driven by a concern about the very big changes children and families experienced as they "transferred" to school – terminology that was current at the time (Galton, Gray & Rudduck, 2003). The language of transition was different then, but the gaps and mismatches were equally apparent as they are today. There were differences in what we now call pedagogy, curriculum was in the process of definition, there was a focus on pastoral issues around starting school, but much less focus on continuity of learning: the relevance of each preceding stage to the next was not made particularly visible. Bridging relationships, partnership with parents and communication between staff working in different sectors was a vital part of shifting understandings about the experiences, competence and strengths of young children and their families.

### **Focus of study**

My own longitudinal study (Dunlop, 2020) began by looking at continuity and progression in learning in the transition to school for a cohort of 150 children entering six P1 classes in four different primary schools, with an eye to relationships, environments, play and curriculum. Main findings were that children's best chance of a positive transition was through what I described as "good continuity": an important point being that continuity doesn't of itself indicate high quality in any of the aspects studied. Looking closely at 22 focal children, where they transitioned between high quality settings the children recognised and coped with new demands, felt sufficiently familiar to show what they were capable of and were able to flourish.

Four kinds of transitions were identified: High quality to high quality, low quality to low quality; low quality to high quality P1 settings and high quality nursery to low quality P1 – all on the dimensions of continuity and progression already identified. Key elements were child agency (Dunlop, 2003a) parental participation (2003b) educator collaborations (Dunlop,2003c)

particularly around curriculum and pedagogy including play, and sympathetic competent well-led systems (Dunlop, 2004).

### **A developing narrative**

Following the first phase of the study (nursery-primary transition) the host local authority kept in touch and offered me standardised testing data over the primary school years from P.3 onwards, through to S1. I met the children again P3, P.6/7 and as with the initial phase, from P7 on into the transitions to secondary up until S3. Finally the cohort completed a school leaving questionnaire. I was curious about how the benefits of a good first transition, if it could be defined on my emerging hybridised socio-bio-ecological model of transitions, could be sustained and indeed whether this set children up for later school success? I could link the children's assessment results to a nursery profiles, teachers report, my own comprehensive story-based assessments with the children at home in the summer before school, I knew which children (from 18 nursery-P1 combinations) had flourished in transition, I understood that there were many other explanatory factors beyond relationships, environments and pedagogy including-

- How families are positioned in relation to education
- Children's attributes
- The proximal processes in which adults and children jointly create meaning
- The importance of home learning environments alongside those in school
- The balance in classroom discourse between adult and child
- The collaborative, reflective and agentic nature of play
- The role of assessment
- Children's wellbeing and coping strategies

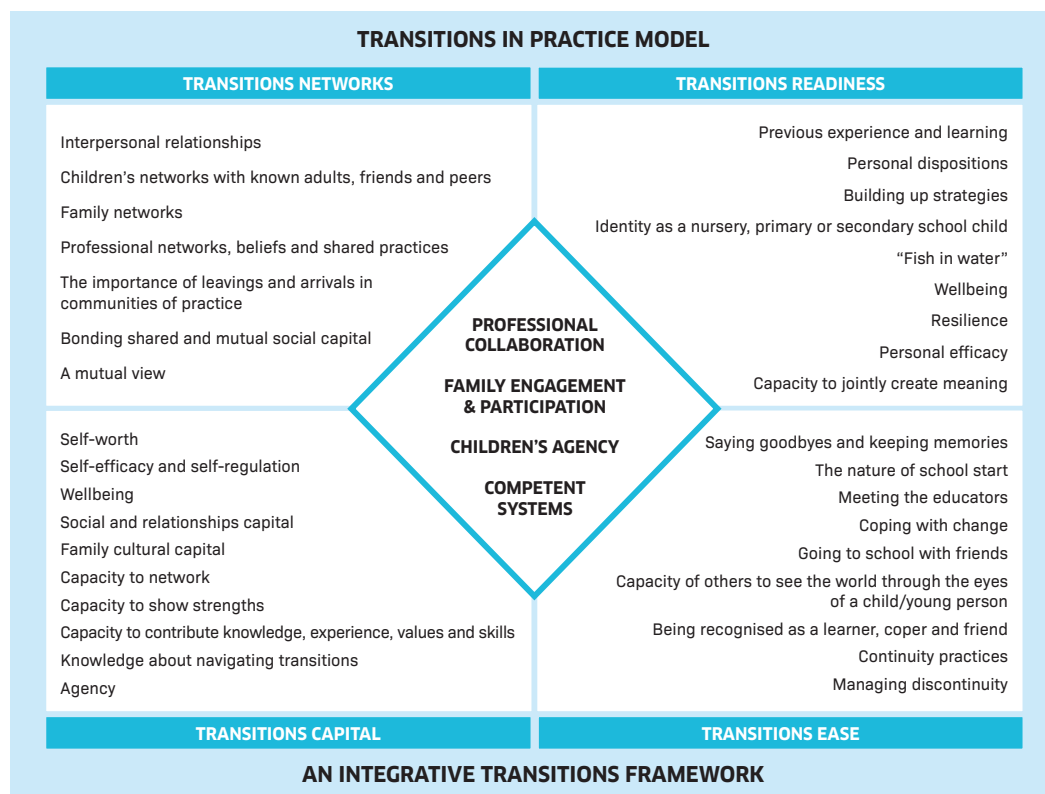
### **Generating Wellbeing and Attainment Trajectories**

Consequently Phase 1 and Phase 2 data was analysed to produce individual standardised scores to generate wellbeing trajectories over the length of nursery to the first year of secondary and attainment trajectories from nursery to school leaving. Alignments at the major transitions were identified – for some children wellbeing and attainment aligned at both main transitions, for others wellbeing and attainment diverged. 70% of children's wellbeing dipped at school start, while 30% was steady or rose, and 50% dipped again at the start of secondary

education. In terms of attainment 45% dipped at both P1 and S1, 14% remained steady and 41% experienced an increase in attainment.

## Emerging groups and consequences for our systems

Relating these data to outcomes at school leaving for all focal children, four groups emerged: the marginalised, the persevering, those who got by and those who did well: each sometimes because of or against the odds. Now not only are those journeys plotted but they can be understood in terms of what makes a good educational transition: this can never be guaranteed but we are getting closer if we pay attention to creating transitions networks, transitions readiness, transitions ease and from these generating transitions capital so that with every subsequent transition each individual has this to draw upon. These core findings are translated into a hybrid and integrative Transitions Framework (2019) to inform planning for transitions in practice, shown in Figure 2.



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**Figure 2 Transitions in Practice Model using an Integrative Framework.**



A main finding is that good transitions are definable and possible, but are not available to all children: this matters given transitions make a difference to school success. This is not about changing children, it is about viewing transitions as tools for changing systems and doing so together across sectors.

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Realising the Ambition: Being Me, influencing pedagogy and changing practice? Implications and possibilities for high quality provision for Scotland's bairns starting school in a post Covid-19 lockdown landscape.

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Short Research Paper

*Key words: COVID-19, transition, national practice guidance, quality of provision*

### Introduction

In February 2020, Realising the Ambition: Being Me-national practice guidance for early years in Scotland (RTA) was published one month before the closure of Scotland's settings and schools. Since May 2020, Scottish Government issued a series of [COVID-19 guidance documents](#), some of which applied specifically to the reopening of early learning and childcare (ELC) and schools. The guidance states the importance of pedagogical practice as presented within Realising the Ambition: Being Me.

During May and June 2020 a series of live RTA themed interactive #BeingMeBlethers' were facilitated on Twitter by Education Scotland's Children and Families Team ([@CaFTeam](#)). This followed requests for national engagement and connection opportunities from ELC practitioners and early years teachers. Three key themes emerged from the analysis of qualitative data gathered from two of these public facing sessions held on 6<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020. The findings demonstrate how the national guidance is already influencing practitioners' and teachers' pedagogy as they plan for children's transitions. Potential areas for future research are suggested.

### Justification for study

'We have to remember that children stand to gain the most from a high quality setting' (RTA, 2020, p. 81).

Scotland is leading the way with an ambitious expansion of the ELC sector (Scottish Government, 2017a). Improving the quality of ELC provision sits at the heart of this expansion (Scottish Government, 2017b).

On 20<sup>th</sup> March, children and young people across Scotland left their familiar educational settings to face a period of significant change and uncertainty that may have [a lasting effect on their future lives](#). RTA offers possibilities for improvements in child-centred pedagogy and the quality of play across the early level of Curriculum for Excellence. Burns argues that ‘there are currently opportunities for collaboration between practitioners and teachers working at the ‘early level’ and that there is a need for a deeper understanding of pedagogies of play, if the aspiration of a seamless early level curriculum experience for the child starting school in Scotland is to be realised’ (2018, p.17).

### Methodology

We adopted an approach that brought to the surface the richness and openness of the views of those who have been engaging with RTA and who chose to share on a public facing forum their ontological position. An interpretive approach allowed us to view the data from the perspective and experiences of the participants ([Bryman, 2012](#)). In any small study, findings cannot be generalised, but offer up open-ended possibilities (Burns, 2018). The sample was not predetermined, rather we relied on participants choosing to join the #BeingMeBlethers.

The quantitative data sets are formed as a collation of the posts from two sessions. These were analysed using an approach known as ‘thematic analysis’ ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). Advantages of using thematic analysis include ease of identifying patterns and themes. Using thematic analysis allows the researcher to be responsive to the voices of the study participants and to use their thoughts, opinions, and behaviours to guide the coding of the data.

### Ethical considerations

‘Twitter is an open and accessible social media platform, though not all users realise their posts are public or that they are available for analysis and research purposes’ ([Ahmed, Bath & Demartini, 2017, p.3](#)). We have not attributed any posts directly quoted in this paper.

### Findings

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of data. Each theme has a strong connection to the following research question.

*What impact has the national guidance had on how practitioners and teachers are planning for children's transitions from home to settings and schools that are expected to reopen in August 2020?*

Theme 1: increased opportunities for professional learning which are being used by practitioners and teachers to improve the quality of pedagogy within ELC settings and across the early level in P1 classrooms

Posts noted that the national guidance helped to develop a 'collective moral purpose for developmentally appropriate pedagogy' and that the blether sessions were an effective vehicle for connecting practitioners and teachers as a workforce across Scotland. There was a strong emphasis on sharing and reviewing transitions practice. Many posts welcomed the imagery in RTA, which made it accessible as a tool for professional learning. Others appreciated the empowering messages which gave them permission to adopt play as pedagogy in their early stages classrooms.

Theme 2: increased awareness of the need for a nurturing approach in planning responsively for children's transition in the recovery phase: meeting children's and their families' social, emotional health and wellbeing (HWB) needs.

Many posts reinforced the need for careful planning to ensure the transition to a setting or school did not cause more trauma to children and their families. The importance of creating nurturing spaces was reinforced in many posts. An essential element of being responsive to children's emotional HWB needs was the existence of caring relationships. 'We need to think through the wide range of ways in which we can help children feel nurtured, included, respected and safe...as they come back'. Section 3 of RTA; How I grow and develop, was praised for its references to *executive functioning* in relation to young children's emotional development.

Theme 3: improved communication and collaboration between and across teams to gain a deeper understanding of the value of high quality play and continuity in children's learning at points of transition.

Throughout RTA, there is a golden thread that promotes high quality and connects theory with practice. Posts recognise these threads as a way of effectively foregrounding the needs of the child; that play is the way for our children now and in the future. To realise this ambition, 'one of the most important things is keeping clear, consistent and transparent

communication with parents' throughout the child's learning journey. Quality interactions need to be at the heart of mind-minded provision.

### Implications and possibilities

Since March, children have experienced a period of interruption to their learning ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). We need to consider how to support this next phase of transition for all children ([Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2020](#)). This study found that RTA offers a strengths-based approach to improving pedagogy, play and transitions in ELC and beyond.

Further study would provide a more in-depth analysis of the influence of the national practice guidance, post COVID-19 on improving the quality of children's experiences in ELC and early primary school stages, and endorsed in the sentiment contained in the following post:

*'I think time spent considering how we view children is essential and underpins everything we do. It is great to see this emphasised in RTA'.*

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### Developing Love-led Practice - Post Covid- 19 Lockdown

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Short Research Paper

*Key words: Love, Policy, Professionalism*

#### **Introduction**

The year 2020 will forever be associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. More than ever, loving attachments are vital for developing resilience in children. During the Covid-19 pandemic, love has become a strong force for building support and resilience in society; with our First Minister (2020) referring to love, kindness and solidarity as being guiding principles to steer Scotland through the pandemic.

The findings of my thesis exploration of love and professionalism show a number of challenges in reconciling seemingly separate concepts/constructs.

The aim of the study was to examine what the role of 'love' is in delivering high quality, ELC to children and families, from the perspective of ELC Lead Professionals. Four research questions were developed to define love in terms of practice, investigate the impact of personal experiences of love on practice, and what love means for professionalism and policy.

#### **Methodology and Methods**

A postmodernism interpretive approach shaped and influenced this study as it offered a 'common sense' way of looking at how love interacts with policy and practice by taking account of the variety of perceptions (Atkinson, 2002). Taking this approach acknowledged that participant opinions about love could be complex, contradictory and often difficult to pin down to specific key points. The research design and methods of data collection were chosen in order to garner the different meanings and understanding through the emotions and feelings of the participants (Ormiston et al, 2014). More specifically, the use of a reflexive approach

took account of complex perspectives identified by participants. The research methods chosen consisted of a demographic questionnaire, two participant interviews, a reflective diary and a pre-interview questionnaire (prior to the second interview). An additional questionnaire was added as the research progressed, this was for parents and was developed out of necessity through information provided in participant interviews. The sample developed included 16 participants, chosen through snowballing and purposive sampling methods. The sample represented the demographics of the ELC workforce at the time of the study.

There were a number of ethical considerations in carrying out this study. I had to be alert to the potential for safeguarding issues to arise through discussion around personal experiences. Also, many of the participants reported a change in their practice through the process of taking part in the study, it was therefore essential that I consider how my interactions may have influenced them. Finally, there was also the potential impact of power imbalances within the research process and my own awareness of my positionality, subjectivity and bias.

### **Discussion and Findings**

Several authors influenced the way I sought to define love, for example Page (2010) offers the concept of professional love and Sternberg (1986) explores perceptions of what it means to be intimate and passionate. The impact of prior relationships was identified as having a significant influence on loving relationships as an adult, early and contemporary attachment theories supported my comprehension of these relationships on love. Exploring the impact love had on professionalism and leadership led me to consider a combination of distributed (Spillane et al, 2001) and love-based leadership (Uusautti and Maatta, 2013) as a leadership model suitable for ELC.

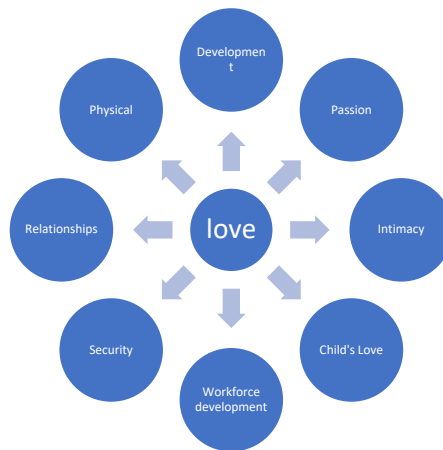
Results showed that love is exceptionally complex to define in terms of working with children. Participant responses ranged from a commitment to offering love to children to being afraid to offer love for fear of it being misunderstood by parents and carers (Osgood, 2006). Personal experiences emerged as a strong influence on understanding the role of love in ELC. Findings demonstrated a link between how someone experiences love in their early years and how they interact with love as an adult. There are a number of conflicting perspectives as to what those experiences look like, but all agree that social interaction supports development of attachments (Bowlby, 1965; Rogoff, 2003; Szalavitz and Perry, 2010). Participants maintained



the inclusion of 'love' in policy would give them permission to offer love to children with integrity and professionalism.

Finally, a significant influence on Lead Professionals' practice was the policy discourse. A number of key ELC guidance documents used code words for love such as 'nurturing'; 'care'; 'warmth' stopping short of the word 'love' instead repackaging it in more comfortable wording. While the guidance didn't explicitly forbid love, participants stated its absence suggested it was.

Findings led to the development of the framework for love-led practice, which draws attention away from inappropriate implications of love by offering an alternative way of reflecting upon love in ELC practice. The framework presents 8 aspects of practice, identified by participants as being important for love-led practice:



Developmental	Nurturing, Planning, Assessing, Challenge, Support
Physical	Hugs, cuddles, kisses, being there, care
Intimacy	Personal Care, closeness, bonding
Child's love	For each other, for you, for their parents and family
Security	Protection, safety, risk management
Relationships	Staff, parents, carers, children
Passion	For the job, for the team, for colleagues, for the children
Workforce Development	Policy, standards, legislation, mentoring, commitment, reflection

**Figure and table 1: Framework for Love-Led Practice (author developed)**

In offering such a framework, concerns that it could become yet another checklist for practice are mitigated by the finding that Lead Professionals understand the importance of love for building resilience and confidence in children in their own sense of wellbeing and in turn this leads to healthy development. The framework offers guidance to Lead Professionals on how loving practice can be embedded in daily practice in a professional way. However, there is potential that without such guidance the focus will remain on a discourse of child protection and the fear of 'risk' might deny children the right to experience a loving relationship with their key worker (Page, 2017). It is therefore crucial during this pandemic that staff are fully supported to offer loving care to the children they work with to build resilience in dealing with these times of Covid-19. Now is the time, especially during the pandemic, when uncertainty and vulnerability mean children need to feel loved and safe in their families and in ELC. Love-led practice will provide them with security and confidence to thrive.

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### Guest editors for this Special REB Early Years Issue:

**Elizabeth Black, Marion Burns, Aline-Wendy Dunlop, Liz Latto, Shaddai Tembo and Kirsten Thomson.**

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