
Children's experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Ros Garrick, Caroline Bath, Karen Dunn, Heloise Maconochie, Ben Willis and Claire Wolstenholme

Sheffield Hallam University

Centre for Education and Inclusion Research

INTRODUCTION

This project aimed to gather examples of children's perspectives on their experiences in a range of early years settings, and to consider what these perspectives tell us about the effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008). Throughout the EYFS framework, emphasis is placed on understanding the individuality of each child, and the theme of 'A Unique Child' states that 'all children have an equal right to be listened to and valued in the setting' (DCSF, 2007). In this research, particular consideration was given to play-based learning, outdoor provision and children's participation, linked to the six Areas of Learning in the EYFS¹. The findings contribute to an independent review of the EYFS, led by Dame Clare Tickell from September 2010.

Key questions the research addressed were:

- To what extent and in what manner are children's experiences in early years settings based around play and how enjoyable are those experiences?
- How well do children's experiences in early years settings meet individual children's needs and interests?
- To what extent do children's experiences in early years settings include physical activity, including physical activity outdoors?
- To what extent do children's views inform planning and delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage by practitioners?

KEY FINDINGS

To what extent and in what manner are children's experiences in early years settings based around play and how enjoyable are those experiences?

¹ The EYFS specifies learning and development requirements that early years providers must deliver by law. The requirements include Early Learning Goals and educational programmes, organised in six Areas of Learning: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development.

- Children talked about a range of play, including 'pretend' play, construction, drawing and painting, computer games and football. Children's access to such experiences seemed to vary considerably from setting to setting.
- Play can be linked to all six Areas of Learning and Development, but children conveyed most enjoyment of play linked to Creative Development, Knowledge and Understanding of the World, Physical Development and aspects of Communication Language and Literacy.
- Children described and showed favourite play areas and resources. Where children had free access to varied and flexible resources and a relatively large open area, they identified a wider range of play interests and more complex play.
- Some children talked about enjoying 'real world' experiences, for example cooking, shopping, arranging flowers and caring for pets. Children in childminding settings described the widest range of such experiences.

How well do children's experiences in Early Years settings meet individual children's needs and interests?

- Children's comments suggested that their needs and interests were usually catered for.
- Children especially appreciated social play opportunities, social occasions and opportunities to care for others in their settings.
- Children's views reflected their need for parents, carers and siblings to be welcomed into settings.
- Children in our sample talked about variations in how far adults get to know them as individuals. Children's comments suggested that in smaller settings, they were more likely to feel that adults knew them as individuals.
- Children demonstrated great interest in the rules, boundaries and routines of their settings. Some children seemed to find this structure helpful; others seemed to want more freedom. Children were often keen to understand why particular rules and routines were needed.

To what extent do children's experiences in early years settings include physical activity, with regular opportunities to play and learn outdoors?

- Most, though not all, children talked about their enjoyment of physical activities, particularly outdoors. Children talked about cycling, climbing, chasing, jumping and balancing, hoops and balls. The extent of these opportunities varied from setting to setting.
- Some children commented positively on being free to choose when to play outside. In several settings, children described feeling unhappy about waiting for particular times of day for outdoor activity.
- In a few settings, children described enjoyment of indoor physical activities. This included hall games in a reception class, large-scale construction play in a Steiner setting and dancing in two childminding settings.

To what extent do children's views inform planning and delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage by practitioners?

- Children in our sample often saw themselves as capable of being involved in planning their own activities. Children seemed to find it easier to choose and lead their own activities when the space was less clearly organised into areas designated for specific play themes.

- Children enjoyed planning their activities, but often they were not as involved in the planning process as they could have been.
- Many children we spoke to did not recognise the setting record as their own and some children were unhappy that they could not understand the written information.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology was designed to identify how children perceive their experiences of a range of early years settings, and to inform an understanding of the effectiveness and limitations of the EYFS in implementing a play-based and participative approach to learning.

The qualitative research design was structured around the four EYFS principles and the related themes and commitments² (DCSF, 2008a, p9):

- A Unique Child (Child Development, Inclusive Practice, Keeping Safe, Health and Well Being).
- Positive Relationships (Respecting Each Other, Parents as Partners, Supporting Learning, Key Person).
- Enabling Environments (Observation, Assessment and Planning, Supporting Every Child, The Learning Environment, The Wider Context).
- Learning and Development (Play and Exploration, Active Learning, Creativity and Critical Thinking, Areas of Learning and Development (see p.6).

Based on an adaptation of the Mosaic approach (Clarke and Moss, 2001) and participatory rural appraisal techniques (O'Kane, 2000), a number of participative activities with children were designed to correlate with each of these four broad themes and to address the four commitments within each one.

The Sample

A sample of 15 case study settings was selected from across four Local Authorities (LAs) drawn from two government regions in the north of England. It comprised two children's centres, two reception classes, two maintained nursery classes, two private nurseries, one voluntary sector setting, one independent school, one out-of-school setting, four childminders and one Steiner³ kindergarten. The sample was selected to include children growing up in urban and rural settings, areas of social advantage and deprivation, and ethnically diverse communities. It included children in both full day-care and sessional care. The final sample of 146 children achieved the aim to represent a wide range of children except in relation to sampling disabled children.

Methods

Research activities, based on the EYFS themes, were designed to incorporate a variety of strategies for promoting talk between researchers and children to explore:

- A Unique Child - how well early years settings respond to the uniqueness and difference of children.
- Positive Relationships - how children view the significance of their relationships with peers and with practitioners.
- Enabling Environments - how children experience early years settings and the extent to which these provide them with positive opportunities.

² The four guiding themes of the EYFS are each broken down into four commitments that describe how practitioners can put the principles into practice in their day-to-day work.

³ The Steiner Waldorf approach emphasises the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive development.

- Learning and Development - children's experiences and views about learning and development in their settings.

To gather information about how well early years settings were responding to the **uniqueness and difference of children**, a one to one activity was used, to create a digital picture book called 'My Best Day', based on the child's ideal day in a setting. Alongside this we gathered information about children's **relationships** within settings by using an adaptation of a floor based visual mapping game. To gather information about how children experienced the **environment** of their setting, an adaptation of the Mosaic approach 'tour' (Clark and Moss 2001) was devised. Finally, to gather information about children's experiences of **learning and development**, we used records of children's learning, often called 'Learning Journeys', as prompts to conversation. Participant observations were also undertaken with individual or small groups of children.

Data Analysis

A first stage of data analysis drew on the categories that seemed to be important to children, identified from their talk and their choices, such as the kinds of play and play contexts they showed us. The second stage involved researchers mapping identified themes relating to children's perspectives onto the EYFS themes and commitments, drawing on concepts and language more abstract than that those used by children. At the third stage, we moved into findings with relevance to a review of the EYFS. At each stage of drafting and redrafting the research team cross checked data and returned to the original notes to ensure the findings closely reflected our interpretations of children's perspectives. Although a priority for the study was to amplify children's voices and ensure that reporting used as much direct quotation from children as possible, the main findings are couched in the more abstract language of the EYFS and professional practice.

CHILDREN'S PLAY EXPERIENCES

Children across settings talked about their enjoyment of play-based experiences. However, there were marked differences in the range of experiences that children commented on in different settings. At one end of a continuum, children commented primarily on enjoyment of physical activities outdoors, for example, football, cricket and races. At the other end, children showed us a range of areas and resources for play and described diverse play-based experiences enjoyed indoors and outdoors. These experiences seemed to us to match to many aspects of the EYFS Areas of Learning and Development.

Children's comments suggest that the extent of their play-based experiences varied in relation to the EYFS Areas of Learning and Development. In most settings, children talked in particular about their enjoyment of pretend play, which we see as linked to aspects of both CD and KUW. However, in most settings children talked less about play linked to aspects of PSRN, in particular numeracy, than about play linked to other Areas of Learning and Development. In relation to CLL, children in most settings told us that they liked to look at books alone or with friends. However, fewer children talked about opportunities to retell stories or write in playful ways. In a small number of settings the comments of some children suggest that they experience some literacy and/or numeracy activities as 'work', which they sometimes view as less enjoyable than other activities.

Children's talk about the play environments in our sample settings also suggests wide variation in the nature, range and organisation of resources, as well as the deployment of space across settings. Comments indicate that these factors may affect both the ways that children play and their enjoyment of play. While children in several settings talked about play with small-scale resources, for example farm animals, selected from accessible 'continuous provision', children more rarely talked about or demonstrated enjoyment of opportunities to construct with both small and larger scale open-ended resources such as large blocks that

could be moved around. Children in two settings talked with a sense of engagement about construction and/or pretend play with large-scale, moveable resources outdoors. However, only children in the Steiner kindergartens talked about their enjoyment of play of this kind indoors. In addition, the comments of kindergarten children most often linked construction play with relatively complex role play, for example building a bus to drive people from a Park and Ride into town. The Steiner play provision, therefore, provides an interesting model that raises questions about how best to promote creative play.

A further finding was that some children talked about their enjoyment of 'real world' experiences as much as play. Real world experiences were primarily domestic activities, often undertaken alongside an adult in the setting or on visits into the community. Such experiences matched to children's interests and supported their sense of competence. The EYFS (DCSF, 2008) emphasises the delivery of Areas of Learning and Development through play. It is useful to consider, alongside this, the potential of real world experiences to support learning and development.

MEETING CHILDREN'S NEEDS

There was a range of evidence relating to the ways in which early years settings met needs and interests for children as individuals and in groups. Children demonstrated that they particularly valued social activities such as meal times, and missed friends and older children who had moved to other settings. This would suggest that opportunities for a range of relationships with older and younger children should be given more importance in settings and that children's well-being could be supported by enabling more opportunities in settings for caring for others through social activities.

Children showed overwhelming interest in their own families, and mothers were often missed. Opportunities for sibling relationships, except in the out-of-school club and childminding settings, were limited and parents' continued presence in settings, apart from in a voluntary pre-school, were also limited. We therefore suggest that it is important to give varied opportunities for parents, carers and siblings to spend time in settings.

Children tended to see adults as teachers or figures of authority, with the exception of childminder settings, in which adults were more likely to be viewed as play partners and supporters. Generally, there was little evidence that a key person relationship was of significance to children and they mostly had good relationships with a range of adults. However, where there were fewer adults, the quality of this relationship seemed firmer and more closely linked to being known as individuals and supporting learning. This echoes the guidance (National Strategies, 2008, p.50) which suggests that knowing children really well enables practitioners to start with what children are really interested in rather than what they think 'should be taught'. We therefore suggest that research needs to be carried out into how the key person approach is being operationalised across different types of early years settings, taking into account adult-child ratios and size of settings.

Whereas children were very interested in and 'knew' routines and rules, they less frequently understood the rationale behind them. This affected the scope of their independence. The EYFS does state that rules and boundaries should be explained to children (DCSF, 2008c, 1.3), and we suggest that more time needs to be taken to help children understand reasons for rules.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The comments of our sample children suggest that many enjoyed wide opportunities for physical activity outdoors but more limited opportunities indoors. Although a high proportion of children enjoyed active outdoor play, some settings appeared to offer a relatively narrow

diet of physical activities outdoors, with children's talk dominated by reference to play on wheeled toys or competitive ball games. Children's accounts raise questions about some favourite activities as potentially repetitive and perhaps unchallenging. This is likely to be an issue where choices are limited. In some settings, children's views suggest that rules and fixed routines may further limit opportunities for physically active play outdoors.

The use of moveable materials and resources, including larger resources such as blocks, planks and tyres, offers potential for play that is both physically and mentally challenging. However, children in just a few settings talked about provision of this kind indoors and few referred to regular provision outdoors. A wider range of opportunities for active play, indoors and outdoors, might draw in children who appear less intrinsically motivated to engage in physical activity.

Children's talk suggests that adult involvement in physical activity is another dimension of difference across settings. National Strategies Early Years (2009, p15) states that "Children like playing with adults... and actively seek adults as co-players," a point that is supported by examples from settings where children talked positively about adults as play partners or supporters. However, across the settings, relatively few children talked about adult involvement in physical activities. While adult involvement has many purposes, children's comments suggest that it may be particularly important, in terms of developing inclusive physical activities and strengthening children's disposition, to engage in physical play. Findings challenge any assumption that all children enjoy the range of physical activities provided by settings and they suggest a need for practitioners to talk with children to identify and plan activities that all children will enjoy. Children also appreciated free and continuous access to outdoor space.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Despite some barriers, children in several settings exerted influence over everyday decisions about the content and direction of their play. This was often where the setting was less organised for specific play contexts and some spaces were left open to interpretation by the children, such as in the Steiner kindergartens.

Although children's interests were often cited by practitioners as informing their planning, it has been difficult to find clear examples of children being aware of this. However, some examples suggest that practitioners who vary the roles they take with children, and engage with play that children initiate, are better able to support and involve them with decisions about ongoing planning. The data suggests that children could often be given a greater role in gathering and choosing documentation of their learning. Margaret Carr (2001, p138) states that different audiences for documentation require different formats and makes reference to the exclusion of children from records by the use of print.

Although the EYFS can be seen to support the above points, it could give more emphasis to children's participation in planning activities. As highlighted by MacNaughton et al (2007) and United Nations *General Comment 7 (United Nations Committee, 2005)*, children have the right to express their views about 'the development of policies and services' and staff should recognise the expert contribution children can make.

CONCLUSION

The National Strategies Early Years (2009, p.4) guidance for early years practitioners states that: 'effective early years practitioners will organise the time, space and activities in the daily routine to reflect the overall combination which best supports children's well-being and learning'. This report aims to present evidence of that combination in various early years

settings from children's perspectives. Thereby, the aim is also to gain insight into children's views of their own well-being and learning in those contexts.

Although many of the findings reported here are consistent with themes, commitments and guidance in the EYFS, it was also clear that there are omissions in the EYFS, in part due to the emphasis on children as receivers of a curriculum generated by adults. The theme of children taking responsibility is one such omission which we have pointed to as evident in children's clear desire to engage with the world around them, to demonstrate their knowledge of the world around them and to maintain a range of types of relationships.

Additional Information

Further information about this research can be obtained from:

Dr Ros Garrick or Dr Caroline Bath
Sheffield Hallam University
Arundel Building
122 Charles Street
Sheffield
S1 2NE

Tel: 0114 225 4919

Email: r.l.garrick@shu.ac.uk or c.m.bath@shu.ac.uk

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://publications.education.gov.uk>

Further information about this research can be obtained from
Dr Ros Garrick or Dr Caroline Bath, Sheffield Hallam University, Arundel Building,
122 Charles Street, Sheffield, S1 2NE
r.l.garrick@shu.ac.uk or c.m.bath@shu.ac.uk

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.