

Pilot project

Aim: To explore whether early years’ practitioner views of children's competence and capability have an impact on their practice and pedagogy in Flying Start settings in Wales



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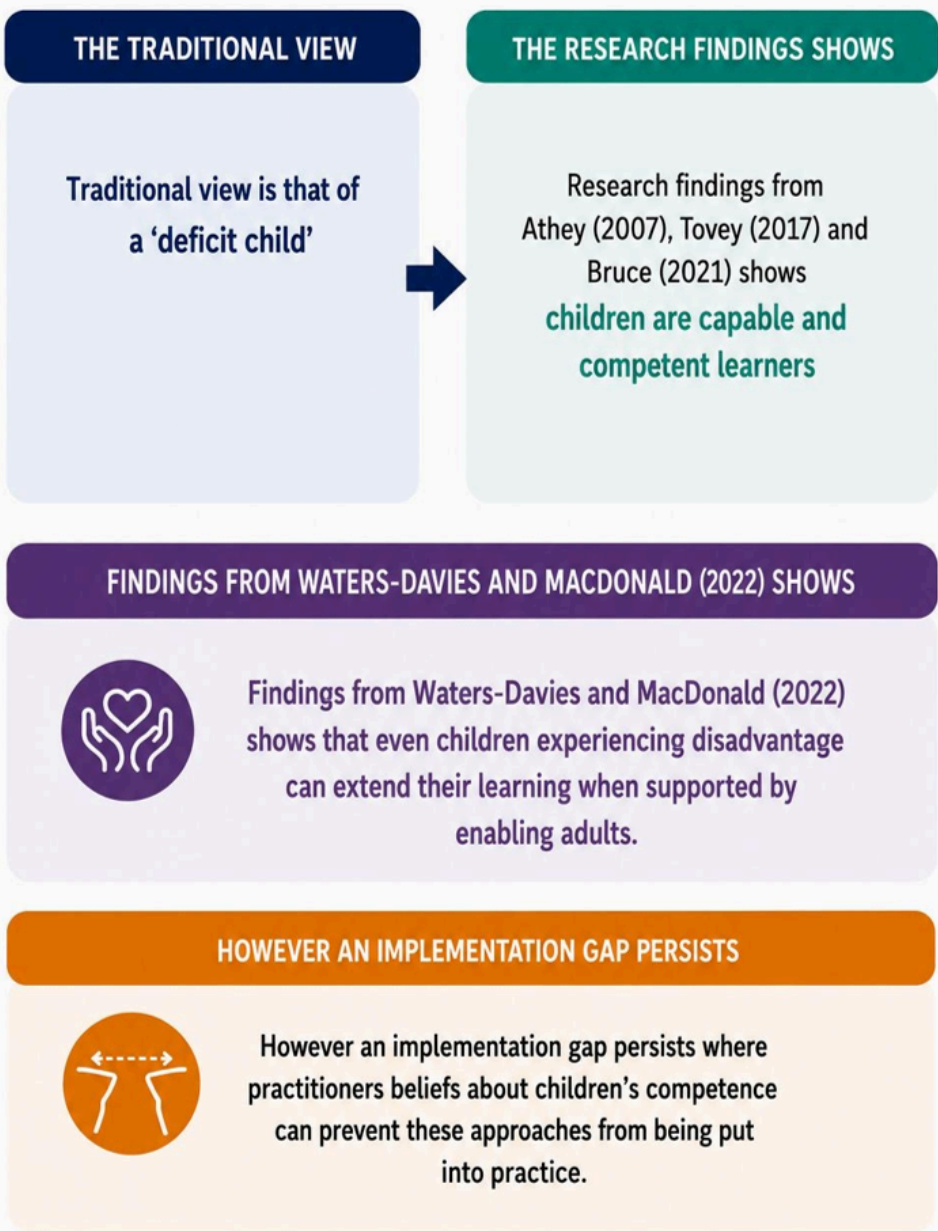
Keywords

Flying Start; pedagogy; competence; capability; professional learning; schema theory

Abstract

This pilot study found that practitioners’ views of children influence pedagogy, interactions, and learning environments. Findings highlight the value of professional learning in promoting strengths-based, child-centred practice within Flying Start.

Rationale



Introduction

This study explored how Flying Start practitioners’ views of children influence their pedagogy and practice. Findings will inform professional learning that supports strengths-based, rights-focused practice.

Methodology

- **Design:** Qualitative pilot study (Creswell & Poth, 2018)
- **Participants:** 3 Flying Start practitioners
- **Sampling:** Purposive (Campbell et al., 2020)
- **Method:** Semi-structured interviews (Mukherji & Albon, 2022)
- **Analysis:** Thematic analysis of interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2021)
- **Ethics:** Consent, confidentiality, anonymisation (BERA, 2024., Mawson et al., 2025)
- **Reflexivity:** Researcher dual role as Advisory Teacher and researcher (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018)

Welsh Government Policy

“My development is enhanced by adults who view me as confident, capable and curious” (Welsh Government, 2022).

‘We should recognise that babies and young children are both capable and competent.’(Welsh Government, 2024)

‘At its core is a child-centred, rights-based approach, ensuring every young child’s needs, interests, and voices shape their experiences.’ (Welsh Government, 2026)

Research Findings: 4 Key Themes

1 Children as Competent, Capable and Agentic Learners

- Capable, active participants
- Agency beyond spoken language
- Linked to wellbeing, confidence, security
- Aligns with Welsh Government policies

2 Negotiating Choice, Independence and Adult Intervention

- Value time and space for exploration
- Intervention guided by judgement
- Resist “fixing”; build resilience
- Resistance needs reflection and restraint

3 Relationships as the Foundation for all Learning and Development

- Strong, supportive relationships
- Trusted adults as a secure base
- Regular “coming in” builds security and independence
- Relationships underpin all learning and development

4 Developing Professional Understanding Through Reflection and Learning

- Learning shapes how practitioners observe and respond
- Schema theory deepens understanding and informs practice
- Learning can be theory-based or experience-based
- Learning shapes views and supports child-centred practice

Conclusion

Practitioners consistently promoted children's agency, independence, and participation. However, variations in pedagogical understanding suggest a need for targeted professional learning (Education Endowment Foundation, 2023). Strengthening theory-informed practice could support more consistent implementation of child-centered pedagogy across Flying Start settings (Bird, Paterson-O’Kane and Elliott, 2025).

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