

MA Independent Project Proposal Form

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1. Working Title

An Exploration of Young Children's Expressions of Emotional Wellbeing Through Storytelling Experiences: A Mosaic Approach

2. Project Type and Format

This project will use a small-scale qualitative empirical design, adopting a participatory Mosaic Approach with Year 1 and 2 children. Three age-appropriate picture books including *Ruby's Worry* (Percival, 2018), *The Invisible String* (Karst, 2000), and *Owl Babies* (Waddell, 1992) will be read across three sessions, followed by drawing, child-led discussion and small-world play. Open-ended questions and prompts will support children's meaning-making. For example: during *Ruby's Worry*, the researcher may ask: what is a worry? What could be making Ruby feel worried? What did Ruby do about her worry? During the drawing activity, the researcher may instruct to draw what feeling safe means.

Data will include verbal responses, visual artefacts and observational field notes. Consistent with the Mosaic Approach, these multimodal forms will value children's perspectives beyond speech (Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017). Thematic analysis within an interpretivist framework will identify patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3. Rationale and Background

Emotional wellbeing and belonging are increasingly recognised as central to children's development, relationships and participation within early childhood (Allen et al., 2022). Attachment theory remains foundational, with secure and responsive relationships providing children with emotional security and base for exploration, which may support wellbeing, belonging and resilience (Ainsworth, 1979). Research highlights that children's experiences of emotional security, connection and inclusion can influence confidence, communication and social engagement (Allen et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2025). Furthermore, there has been growing recognition of young children as active meaning-makers expressing emotions and experiences in diverse multimodal ways (Sevon et al., 2025; Kumpulainen et al., 2014).

This study is informed by sociocultural perspectives, viewing children as active meaning-makers who develop understanding through social interaction and cultural tools such as language, play and storytelling (Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner (1990) similarly identifies narrative as an important way through which children make sense of their experiences and develop meaning, providing a foundation to explore storytelling as a shared context in which children communicate emotional experiences. However, children may interpret stories differently from adults/peers, highlighting the importance of exploring children's own meanings not

assuming a shared emotional response (Wang et al., 2023).

This study will use a participatory Mosaic approach, recognising young children communicate in multiple ways, including through talk, drawing and play (Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017). It is appropriate enabling children to communicate experiences through different forms of expression, not relying solely on verbal responses. However, participatory approaches do not remove adult–child power relationships or risk of researcher interpretation. Children's contributions will therefore be explored in context, grounded in their explanations wherever possible (Sevon et al., 2025).

Storytelling and shared reading are widely understood to support children's emotional literacy, empathy and social understanding, providing imaginative contexts to explore feelings/relationships/separation/reassurance and belonging. Engaging with characters/narratives, children may communicate experiences/emotions that are difficult to express directly (Nikolajeva, 2016; Schapira et al., 2025). However, much existing research focuses primarily on the developmental benefits rather than examining how children express emotional wellbeing through participatory and multimodal experiences.

This study seeks to explore young children's expressions/experiences of emotional wellbeing through storytelling activities using a participatory Mosaic approach. In this study, emotional wellbeing is understood in relation to children's experiences of emotional security, connection, and belonging within relationships. This includes how children communicate feelings of safety/reassurance, respond to worry or separation, and express experiences of being connected to, understood and supported.

In 3 separate sessions, the researcher will read 1 of 3 chosen stories that explore themes of security, connection and belonging. Children can contribute, discuss and share their thoughts/feelings during and throughout the activities that follow. While the stories and activities provide a broad structure for each session, children will have opportunities to influence how they participate and communicate their responses through discussion, drawing and play.

4. Aims and Objectives

Aim

To explore 6 and 7-year-olds expression of emotional wellbeing through participatory and multimodal storytelling activities, while considering security, connection and belonging.

Objectives

1. To explore children's emotional responses to storytelling in relation to security, connection and belonging.
2. To explore how children communicate emotional meaning through verbal, visual and play-based responses to storytelling.

Research Questions

1. What do young children express through storytelling in relation to security, connection and belonging?
2. How do young children communicate emotional meaning through verbal, visual and play-based responses to storytelling?

5. Literature Overview

Emotional wellbeing and belonging are widely recognised as central to children's development, participation, and learning. Belonging is understood as a relational experience characterised by feelings of being accepted/respected/valued, and connected to others, and associated with positive psychological/social, and educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2022; 2025; OECD, 2020).

Recent early childhood literature expanded this understanding by highlighting belonging as an active, ongoing process rather than a fixed state. For example, current studies emphasise children's participation in co-constructing belonging through everyday social/educational interactions. This aligns with broader child-centered perspectives positioning children as active meaning-makers in their social worlds (McGrath 2025; Hayes, 2025; Allen et al., 2025).

Storytelling/shared reading are recognised as key tools for supporting children's emotional wellbeing, including emotional understanding/empathy development. Narrative theory suggests stories help children organise experiences and interpret emotional states through identification with characters and events (Bruner, 1991). Recent research also shows that picture books can support emotional literacy providing opportunities to explore emotions/perspectives, and social situations within narrative contexts, however, this evidence does not suggest picture books produce uniform emotional responses, as children's interpretations may be influenced by their individual experiences/contexts (Dewi & Kurniawati, 2026; van der Wilt, 2022; Crawford et al., 2024).

Studies of children's reading practices emphasise that young children actively construct meaning when engaging with picture books, drawing on images, text, and prior knowledge to interpret narratives in multiple ways (Kachorsky et al., 2017). This positions storytelling as an active, process through which children build meaning but also engage with and make sense of emotional experiences in socially mediated contexts. However, children do not necessarily engage with picture books in the same way, individual differences in oral

expression and vocabulary may shape responses/interpretations (Wang et al., 2023).

Despite growing literature on storytelling and children's emotional development, less attention has been given to how children express/construct meaning around emotional wellbeing/belonging. Recent research has begun to address this **by** recognising picture books as complex multimodal texts that provide opportunities to explore being, belonging and acceptance, while highlighting the tendency for research to focus more heavily on linguistic aspects than visual meaning-making (Cheng, Powell, & Davis, 2025). Similarly, Petrova and Vasikova (2026) explored preschool children's agency when discussing favourite books, incorporating children's verbal/non-verbal responses, including pointing, page-turning and gestures. Their findings highlight the importance of considering children's own meaning-making around books rather than focusing solely on developmental outcomes.

Research has increasingly foregrounded children's own perspectives on belonging. Allen et al. (2025) found that children aged 3–8 communicated their understandings of belonging through drawing and verbal responses, describing belonging in relation to happiness/safety/friendship/inclusion and caring relationships, with differences identified across the age range. Similarly, Ulu and Kapusizoglu (2026) explored how 25 young children constructed meaning through wordless picture books using classroom interactions and drawings. Children connected emotional and narrative interpretations to experiences of family life/school and peer relationships, demonstrating narrative agency. Akyol (2024) further highlights the potential of picture books to support young children's participation/expression of perspectives within classroom contexts.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate growing recognition of children as active meaning-makers in relation to picture books, belonging and emotional experiences. However, there remains scope to explore how young children themselves communicate/construct meaning around emotional wellbeing through storytelling and multimodal, participatory experiences.

This study addresses this gap by exploring children's emotional meaning-making through storytelling using a participatory Mosaic approach.

6. Methodology / Project Approach

Methodological Approach

This study adopts a small-scale qualitative research design situated within an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative approach is appropriate seeking to explore children's lived experiences and meaning-making of emotional wellbeing in relation to security/ connection and belonging, rather than predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A participatory mosaic approach, values children's voices across multiple modes of communication, including drawing/talk/play (Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017). However, Coyne & Carter (2018) suggest a participatory approach should be carried out cautiously due to the power imbalance between researcher/children, therefore despite the advantages, the balance of power remains a challenge to negotiate.

Participants and Recruitment

This study will recruit approximately 6-8 children across primary years 1 and 2. A small sample size supports in-depth engagement and rich qualitative interpretation of children's perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Furthermore, this age range is appropriate because the Foundation years are developing children's ability to communicate emotions verbally while continuing to express meaning through drawing/play/storytelling and other multimodal forms (Sevon et al., 2025). This aligns with the participatory Mosaic approach, recognising children's varied ways of communicating their experiences. Additionally, a smaller sample is feasible within the six-month dissertation timeframe (Sevon et al., 2025).

Participants will be recruited from the researcher's place of work. Access will be facilitated through management. Organisational permission, parental consent and child assent will be obtained prior with an understanding it is a voluntary commitment with permission to withdraw. Child assent will be considered throughout (British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2018).

Researcher Position and Reflexivity

Being employee and researcher, an insider role is occupied. While familiarity may support trust and participation, it may influence responses and introduce bias or coercion due to power imbalance. A reflexive approach will therefore be maintained, with ongoing consideration of how relationships, assumptions, and position may shape data production and interpretation. A reflexive journal will be kept, and open, non-leading prompts during data collection minimising researcher influence (British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018); Finlay, 2002).

Data Production and Analysis

Data will be produced through storytelling sessions using picture books selected to explore emotional meaning-making surrounding security, connection and belonging: *Ruby's Worry* (Percival, 2018), *The Invisible String* (Karst, 2000), and *Owl Babies* (Waddell, 1992). Following each story, children will participate in Mosaic-based activities, including drawing, child-led discussion and small-world play.

Discussion will use planned and spontaneous open-ended questions informed by the texts, such as "What is a worry?" or "Can you tell me about your drawing?" This supports child-led

meaning-making and recognises verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Clark & Moss, 2011).

Inductive thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, will identify patterns across children's verbal responses, drawings, play and observational field notes. Consistent with the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), this data will be considered together rather than separately. Drawings and play will not be given assumed meanings and interpretation will be grounded in children's explanations, observable interactions and the context in which data is produced (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

7. Ethical Considerations

This study will follow BERA (2018), the British Psychological Society (2021) Code of Ethics and Conduct, and UWTSD policies, including the Research Data Management Policy (no date), UWTSD Group Data Protection Policy (no date), and Research Integrity and Ethics Code of Practice (2025). Ethical approval will be obtained before data collection. Participants will be recruited through email and management gatekeeper, with information provided and parental consent and child assent obtained by the researcher. Participation will remain voluntary, with confidentiality maintained through pseudonyms. Data will be securely stored. Safeguarding procedures will follow Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2026) and ACUK Safeguarding Policy (2026). Supporting adults will hold enhanced DBS clearance.

8. References (not included in word count)

Provide references in appropriate style.

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