

MA Independent Project Proposal Form

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1. Working Title

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

2. Project Type and Format

This project will adopt a small-scale qualitative empirical research design using a participatory mosaic approach with young children aged 4–7. A qualitative format is appropriate as the study explores children's emotional meaning-making and experiences of belonging through child-centred and multimodal forms of expression. Carefully selected picture books will be used as storytelling prompts, followed by drawing, child-led discussion, and small-world play using story baskets with sensory materials. These methods align with the Mosaic Approach, which values children's perspectives and recognises that meaning may be communicated through multiple modes beyond speech alone. Data will include verbal responses, visual artefacts, and observational field notes, enabling comparison across visual, verbal, and play-based forms of expression and supporting a richer understanding of children's experiences. The data will be analysed thematically within an interpretivist framework that prioritises children's voices and diverse forms of emotional expression (Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017; 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, educational, and community learning contexts (Allen et al., 2022). Research consistently highlights that children's sense of emotional security, connection, and inclusion can influence their confidence, communication, and social engagement (Allen et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2025). Alongside this, there has been growing emphasis on recognising young children as active meaning-makers who express emotions and experiences in diverse and multimodal ways (Sevon et al., 2025; Kumpulainen et al., 2014).

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

This study therefore seeks to explore how young children express experiences of emotional wellbeing and belonging through storytelling activities using a participatory mosaic approach and conducted within a setting familiar to them. This may provide a familiar and relational space in which children feel comfortable expressing emotions through play, storytelling, and creative interaction. The Mosaic Approach is particularly relevant as it values children's voices through multiple forms of communication, including drawing, discussion, and play-based interaction, rather than relying solely on verbal responses (Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017).

4. Aims and Objectives

Aim:

To explore how young children express emotional wellbeing and belonging through storytelling using multimodal, participatory methods.

Objectives:

1. To explore children's emotional responses to picture books focusing on wellbeing, relationships, and belonging.
2. To examine multimodal meaning-making within a participatory mosaic framework.
3. To investigate how storytelling supports expressions of safety, uncertainty, and emotional connection.

Research Questions:

- How do young children express emotional wellbeing through storytelling activities?
- How do young children express belonging and relationships through storytelling activities?
- How do young children communicate emotional meaning through visual, verbal, and play-based responses to picture books?
- How do mosaic methods support children's multimodal expression of emotional experiences?

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 has been associated with positive psychological, social, and educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2022; 2025; OECD, 2020). Attachment theory remains foundational in this field, with secure and responsive relationships providing children with a sense of emotional security and a secure base for exploration, which may later support feelings of belonging, wellbeing, security and resilience (Ainsworth, 1979).

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

2025; Allen et al., 2025).

Storytelling and shared reading are widely recognised as key tools for supporting children's emotional wellbeing, including emotional understanding and empathy development. Narrative theory suggests that 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 by providing opportunities for children to explore emotions, perspectives, and social situations within narrative contexts (Dewi & Kurniawati, 2026; van der Wilt, 2022; Crawford et al., 2024).

Furthermore, 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, participatory process through which children not only build meaning but also engage with and make sense of emotional experiences in socially mediated contexts.

Sociocultural theory is an important framework for this study. It suggests that children learn and make meaning through social interactions and cultural tools such as language, play, and storytelling (Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner (1990) also highlights narrative as a key way children think, learn, and develop their identities and the more recent early childhood research extends these ideas by recognising children as active meaning-makers who communicate through multiple modes, including visual, physical, and symbolic forms.

The mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) remains a highly influential participatory methodology in early childhood research and continues to be developed in recent studies focusing on child voice and multimodality with (Clark, 2017), recognising that children communicate meaning through multiple languages, including drawing, talk, movement, and play, which together create a richer understanding of their experiences. This approach aligns with current methodological debates around the limitations of verbal-only data and the importance of recognising diverse communicative forms in young children's research participation.

Despite this growing literature, there remains a gap since much of the recent research concentrates on the developmental benefits resulting from storytelling. However, this research will focus on exploring children's expressions of emotional wellbeing and belonging. This study therefore contributes to ongoing debates by exploring young children's 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 as the research seeks to explore children's lived experiences and meaning-making in relation to emotional wellbeing and belonging rather than measure predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study uses a participatory mosaic approach, which values children's voices across multiple modes of communication, including drawing, talk, and play (Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017).

Participants and Recruitment

The study will involve approximately 4–12 young children aged 4–7, divided into smaller groups across three storytelling sessions. A small sample size is intentional to support in-depth engagement and rich qualitative interpretation of children's perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants will be recruited from the researcher's place of work, a setting familiar to the children. Access will be facilitated through management, with the gatekeeper being the researcher's employer. Organisational permission and parental consent and child assent will be obtained prior to recruitment with an understanding that it is a voluntary commitment with permission to withdraw at any point (British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2018).

Researcher Position and Reflexivity

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

Data Production and Analysis

Data will be produced through storytelling sessions using carefully selected picture books exploring themes of wellbeing, belonging, relationships, and safety. The selected stories are *The Colour Monster* (Llenas, 2016), *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 using story baskets and sensory materials.

Open-ended prompts such as "Can you tell me about your drawing?" and "How does this part of the story feel?" will support child-led meaning-making while avoiding directive questioning. This approach recognises that emotional understanding may be communicated through verbal, visual, and play-based forms (Clark & Moss, 2011).

Data will be analysed using inductive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. Analysis will identify patterns of meaning across drawings, verbal responses, and observational field notes relating to emotional wellbeing, belonging, relationships, and emotional safety. The mosaic approach will support triangulation across

multimodal data sources, contributing to a richer understanding of young children's meaning-making.

7. Ethical Considerations

This study will follow the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines and the British Psychological Society (2021) Code of Ethics and Conduct and will also require ethical approval from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) beforehand. Written parental consent and age-appropriate child assent will be obtained, with participation remaining voluntary and the right to withdraw maintained throughout. Safeguarding, confidentiality, and anonymity will be prioritised, particularly given the researcher's role within the setting. Audio/video recording and photography may be used to support transcription and analysis, with all data securely stored on password-protected devices. Any adults supporting data collection will hold enhanced DBS clearance e.g. video/photo support. Activities will remain supportive and child-led to minimise emotional distress, and all data will be retained and destroyed in accordance with university data protection policies.

8. References (not included in word count)

Provide references in appropriate style.

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