

Abstract

The following proposed research study looks to explore the effect of lockdown due to Covid-19 on children in early years in South Wales, considering their development and social skills from being at home with their families and how it has impacted on them compared to their peers previously who attended pre-school.

A literature review has been undertaken looking at all relevant research and acknowledging that we are only just post Covid-19 so future research will take place. The proposed study looks at different types of methodology and this has been evaluated to look at its effectiveness and relevancy for this study. A decision was then made on the most appropriate methods and reasons why the selected methods were chosen and justified.

Finally, ethical consideration was given ensuring that all by British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) and Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (2020) will be observed throughout the research project and acknowledging the different laws, legislation and acts so that the participants are treated fairly and with respect ensuring they are fully aware of the project, what it entails and their part in it. Careful consideration to the role of the researcher and how their actions reflect upon the university is also paramount.

This proposed research project carefully considers all aspects of the literature review, the methodology that will be used and the reasons why and finally, the ethical considerations that have been taken into consideration and adhered to. It aims to show clearly that there is a need for a study to highlight the impact that Covid had on children during their early years so that practices can be adapted and improved so that this does not disadvantage them.

Literature Review

The rationale for this research project is to explore the effect of Covid-19 on children in early years, considering their development and social skills from being at home with their families during this period and how it has impacted them compared to their peers previously who attended preschool.

Research conducted by Sarac, Gulay-Ogelman and Yildirim (2023) shows how 27 teachers took part in qualitative studies resulting in the conclusion that because of lockdown there were both negative and positive influences on children. Children found social and fine motor skills more challenging together with separation anxiety however, communication between the teachers and parents improved as well as the children's self-help skills and engagement. The benefits of this study enabled the teachers to change their practices to support the children and their families and increased outdoor play, free play and individual activities. This study was carried out on a limited number of teachers and their own stress factors may have influenced their answers.

Bottrill (2022) disagreed with the Baseline Assessments in 2021 carried out on children as they started school at age 4 years. These were the same assessments that children have each year when they start school but Bottrill (2022) stated how unfair it was on the children who had been isolating for the previous 18 months and that it was a tool to measure progress and impact as opposed to the teachers actually getting to know the children. Bottrill (2022) suggested that assessments could not be compared with previous or future years as only these children had been through this period of isolation from their peers.

Both Panchal *et al* (2021) and Viner *et al* (2020) through their studies of qualitative research involving interviews and questionnaires concluded the same that emotional, social and physical development of early years children has been impacted negatively and delays are evident by Covid-19. Pelaez and Noval (2020) and Vasileva, Bunga and Kiling (2021) found through their qualitative research of interviews and questionnaires that children were suffering anxiety at the prospect of returning to school. They also found that parents had the anxiety of deciding the right time to take their children back to school. Sarac, Gulay-Ogelman and Yildirim (2023) reported on their findings of the separation anxiety on children's return to school following the pandemic reiterating what Baker, Heller and Henker (2000) reported about how parent's stress affects the children making them feel distressed and insecure. According to Kernan, Cortellesi and Palazuelos (2022), intergenerational play was highly visible and apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Together Old and Young (TOY) for Inclusion approach was evident throughout Europe due to

the impact that Covid-19 had on families offering support through Play Hubs. This was carried out remotely and allowed opportunities for children to play and meet doing online activities including arts, crafts and games. From research conducted by Kartushina *et al* (2022) 1742 children aged 8-36 months from 13 different countries had their languages evaluated at the start and end of lockdown and it was found that the children who were read to and had less passive screen exposure, gained more vocabulary than children who spent more time with screen exposure. The research was limited and the period was conducted over a short time of March to September 2020 and the researchers concluded that it could have been that the parents were more aware of the child's developmental needs or that it was the increased direct vocabulary with the child that helped or both.

Alonso-Martinez *et al* (2021), Lopez-Bueno *et al* (2021) , Maugeri *et al* (2020), Ten Velde *et al.* (2021) and Yomoda and Kurita (2021) all conducted research and came out with similar results supporting each other stating that reduced physical activities during lockdown together with increased screen-time has had the impact of delayed fine motor skills. According to research by Wijaya, Bunga and Kiling (2021) parents found that children were bored at home despite parents engaging with the children so on return to preschool the children showed increased engagement but needed to develop social skills as these needs were not met at home during lockdown. Through their research collecting qualitative data through interviews, Toran *et al* (2021) found that child and parent relationships improved during lockdown; however it led to separation anxiety when the child returned to school. The parents who took part in the interview had a child between 3-6 years and spent all the time with their child during lockdown without any training to early childhood and care. This in turn increased parent/teacher communication which is vital according to Brooker (2008) and Margetts (2007) and Toran *et al* (2021).

Methodological considerations

Various methods of collecting data and information will be gathered during this research including interviews, questionnaires and observations. The triangulation approach will be used which involves using different types of qualitative and quantitative data giving a more accurate result to the research. It allows the research to be more valid and the outcomes more convincing. These have been selected as

different information needs to be gathered from adults and children in regards to finding out the impact Covid-19 has had on the children between the ages 2 and 4 years. According to Mukherji and Albon (2018) when preparing and carrying out a research study the actual group of people who will take part needs to be considered. A combination of open-ended questions, structured questions, semi-structured questions and unstructured questions will be included to cover all areas of the research according to Jarvis *et al* (2012). The process of choosing people is called sampling and it will be done according to the number needed for the research and the correct types of people such as the correct age group for children. Mukherji and Albon (2018) mention that when choosing a qualitative method of research the number tends to be lower as it normally is a selection from a group whereas the quantitative data is normally to analyse a much larger number and can cover a population. A sample of the relevant people will be interviewed, observed or questioned depending on the technique chosen. According to Care Inspectorate Wales research is going to be done by Miller Research in 2023 for Welsh Government but depending on when this is completed, the findings shared and the relevancy of information would decide if the information would be included in this research project. Choosing a sample is important in order to control the effects of random variables according to Johnson and Christensen (2017) and Kumar (2014). In this research study, non-probability sampling will be used as it will be done on a small amount of people compared to probability sampling where the type of sample is representative of the whole population including random sampling, systematic sampling and stratified sampling. According to Emerson (2015) opportunity sampling is a type of non-probability sampling and is used when people are chosen who fit into a certain criteria suitable for the research. In this research, this type of sampling will be used.

According to Aurini, Heath and Howells (2022) interviews are one of the main qualitative data techniques. Interviews allow the researcher to explore more into what the participants' thoughts and experiences are. Providing the adult interviewed is happy, the interviews will be recorded as it can be replayed and the data taken from it. However, if the adult is not happy then note taking will occur. The face-to-face, telephone or online via teams interviews will be conducted over a period of time

of a month and will involve interviewing 15 early years practitioners over 3 settings. Jarvis *et al* (2012) maintains that interview methods that have been tried and tested should be used to give reliable results and full attention given to the observation so that the correct data is recorded. Questions will include finding out from the practitioners how many years they have been working in that role in that setting so a level of expertise can be understood. Then questions comparing children to how they were before the pandemic to where they are now. These questions will include comparing data with children from previous years attending and whether children were attaining in their individual child development records with their age pre-pandemic compared to now post-pandemic. Questions on social skills, speech and communication and attachment will each be discussed to see if the children are still on track to how they were pre-pandemic. Descriptive and theoretical questions will both be used as suggested by Saldana (2013).

Questionnaires will also be carried out. Questionnaires are a cheap to do but they are not child-friendly for early years children. Therefore, they tend to be used more for the parents and practitioners. If they are used for children then the questions would need to be read to them and their answers recorded according to Roberts-Holmes (2018). Questionnaires help with research but they are not suitable to use solely so when put with in conjunction with other research methods such as observations and interviews they are useful as stated by Roberts-Holmes (2018) and Denscombe (2014). The questions in the questionnaire are designed to ask 75 parents over three settings about their time during lockdown, including questions about the time per day spent doing activities with their child. A translator will need to be used as not all families speak English as a first language. The child's age is of utmost importance so is a must as one of the questions. Also how long the parents had to work each day and what the child did whilst they were working such as screen time. Whether the child attended an early years setting during the pandemic and how long for which could mean that the child was a keyworker's child or vulnerable. It would be necessary to include a question as to time spent with an adult whilst the parent was working or to find out if the parent was working during lockdown in the household or elsewhere. Another question is to find out what activities the child did and with who and if the child had any siblings or younger relatives at home. The

questionnaire will be given as both paper copies and sent electronically. They can be completed over the telephone, online or in person and giving these options of contacting parents allows them to pick a time which is more suitable to them according to Kirsch and Brandt (2002). Another question will be whether they read to their child and how often. How many other children in the household and what ages are they together with a question as to whether the child lives in a one household or two. The questionnaire will have mainly closed questions but there will be a question at the end offering parents to add any information they may think is useful. The parents will be asked to put their contact details so that any questions can be followed up if needed (providing prior consent for this) and there will be a box to tick if they are happy. (Roberts-Holmes, 2018)

Observations tell practitioners lots of information about a child according to Palaiologou (2016) and before carrying out the observations permission will be requested from the parents and the children. Observations of the children will take place with 60 children over 3 settings in different areas in South Wales so that comparisons can be made between the areas as well as the children. Depending on what area the families live in can also determine the level of support received during the pandemic. One setting will be where the researcher is currently working and the other two settings will be new to the researcher. With this in mind the researcher will visit the other two settings and will obtain permission from the parents and practitioners before spending time with the children. This is so that when the actual observation is taking place the children will not be with someone they do not know and also so that the children will be seen relaxed and playing in a typical day. The Hawthorne effect according to Thomas (2023) may happen with the children changing their behaviour when the observation begins and they can see interest is being taken specifically in them. The halo effect will not be used as it uses a snap judgement. The children all need to be 2-4 years old so that the same age group are being observed in each setting. According to Jarvis et al (2012) observations allow data both qualitative and quantitative to be collected and this can be useful when observing children as they can be spontaneous with their answers. Open and closed questions will be asked to the children whilst they are playing. Whilst observing quantitative data can be collected and a graph formed to display these answers so the

research can be analysed. The skills used to observe and record the information need to be done effectively so that the observer is not influencing or leading the child. According to Fawcett and Wilson (2016), Freud, a psychoanalyst, Piaget, a psychologist and Isaacs, an educationalist all did observations on children to further their knowledge and this research project doing the observations directly on the children should give an unbiased approach and answers. Also according to Roberts-Holmes (2018) the researcher in order to get the best results from the child, will join in with the child for a short period of time and then will stand back and watch and ask questions. As the observation takes place, the child may be interested in the researcher joining in and the researcher will be unable to take notes. The observation record sheet can be filled in with the times, what the child is doing and saying, who the child is playing with and what is the child looking at. The child will also be asked questions during the observation. The child will be observed coming into the setting to see if there are any attachment and insecurity issues. If the child is not unhappy during the observation then it will stop immediately and the child's needs attended too. According to Cohern *et al* (2018) observation alone cannot tell us what is going on in the mind of a child and this needs to be taken into account when observing a child. However Cohern *et al* (2018) also suggests that the more observations that are taken, then the more reliability of the findings is gained. Welsh Government (2022) suggests what children should be aiming towards and this will be used as a tool when collating the information from the research completed via the questionnaires, interviews and observations. Focus groups will not be used as a method of gaining information in this study. This was decided as to be a fair test, the focus group should have been selected prior to Covid-19 for data tracking. As Covid-19 was an unprecedented event, this was not possible or planned and therefore, is not a fair method.

Ethical considerations

BERA (2018) states that 'educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in the research they are undertaking. Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and within an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any

other significant difference' and this should be adhered to at all times. According to BERA (2018), researchers must be aware that participants can withdraw at any time and they must be informed of this right. They do not need to give a reason, they can just withdraw. Payment as an incentive to participate is not encouraged and incentives are not to be used in this research project. The ethical considerations by BERA (2018) will be observed throughout this research project. 'The ERIC (2020) approach reflects a commitment to children's rights, the role of relationships, and the need for researcher reflexivity in advancing ethical research. (Powell, Graham and Truscott, 2016) Through these 'Three Rs', ERIC supports children to be safely involved in research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) is a framework of rights for children relating to their care, protection, adequate provision and rights with regard to participation. Article 12 states that 'Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.' This recognises that children are full participating members of the society the same as adults and that adults should respect them. Article 3 states 'the best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children' and this must be adhered to at all times and thought about throughout the research project (UNCRC,1989). There is still challenge as to a child's involvement in and with a research project. According to National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (2023) research on children must be balanced with ensuring the children are safe and their well-being is not affected together with the importance of children taking part in research that will actually have an impact on them. Cook-Sather (2016) supports the creation of brave spaces to encourage children to have a voice and to ask questions about the proposed research project and have them answered in a way that is clear and age appropriate to them. Gaining consent is not just about asking them to sign their name it is about being sure that the child understands exactly what is happening prior to the research, during it and after it is completed. (Harcourt and Conroy, 2005). This will be adhered to in the research project to ensure all participants are happy. The only issue is the younger children aged 2 years may not be aware due to their age but their parents will be spoken to fully and any questions answered before consent is asked for. According to Roberts-Holmes (2018) before any research methods can begin informed consent must be

received. Informed consent refers to all participants in the research voluntarily agreeing to take part in a research project after they have been given all the information regarding what will be involved in the research as to how it will take place and where and when and what will happen with the data collected from it. Full disclosure of this information needs to be given first as mentioned by Coates (2010). For research in a setting it must first be obtained from the person in charge in writing. In this research project all persons in charge will be contacted to obtain their consent before the practitioners who will be carrying out the research will be contacted. This will be done in the research project to ensure all participants are happy. The only issue is the younger children aged 2 may not be aware due to their age but their parents will be spoken to fully and any questions answered before consent is asked for. The research is different to observing children by doing regular observations, assessments and for planning as it is being used for a research project. Children's informed consent is legally known as assent and can only be asked for after their parents have already agreed to their participation. All consent and assent is voluntary and any participants can withdraw at any time and this will be explained to all participants in the project. According to Robert-Holmes (2018) the children involved need to have the research project explained to them in ways that is age appropriate to their understanding so they know what is expected of them and what will happen with the information and time for the children to ask questions also. The consent which will be obtained for children is verbal. Palaiologou (2014) disagrees with children marking a form to say they have understood the research that is planned as it is not known how much children understand. However a child can show at any time that they no longer want to participate as in Palmadottir and Einarsdottir (2016) when a child said 'No, no, no!' when a camera was used by the researcher. In this project the observation will be explained to the child throughout and at any time a child wants the observation to stop it will. According to Kanyal (2014) children's rights and their understanding of their inclusion in the research is paramount and they need to understand the limit of anonymity and confidentiality regarding what they may say to the researcher in regards to child protection issues. If what they say to the researcher means they are at risk of harm then the researcher has a duty to take the necessary steps to protect the child. The researcher also has a duty to the child to let the child know that they will be doing this. All participants should be told at

the start of the project that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if a difficult situation arises. Alderson (2008) suggests that researchers should be reminded of the disrespectful ethical methods for research with children and ensure these are not used. According to Albon and Rosen (2014) children's rights to give or withdraw consent is a key research principle that must be remembered at all times. Mukherji & Albon (2018) state that questionnaires need to be well-presented so that they are showing respect to the person responding as well as being simple and straightforward avoiding jargon. They should not take long to complete or cost money to return. Otherwise, this could also put people off completing it. Questions in interviews and in questionnaires in research need to be planned and considered and all staff and parents that will be involved need to be respected and considered when the results of the research is shared. They should be completed by literate older children and adults. Although some results may highlight excellent practice it is important not to highlight the weaknesses of anyone or make them lose confidence according to Jarvis *et al* (2012). This also applies to making parents feel that the research is questioning their parenting skills. All records should be confidential and GDPR (2018) adhered to throughout the project. This includes the Data Protection Act (2018) for example, if a memory stick got lost nobody else should be able to access the information. Also, if the researcher is working on the project in a shared space then the computer and other information should not be left unattended and the computer logged out of after use according to Jarvis *et al* (2012). Jarvis *et al* (2012) also suggests emailing to a password secure email rather than using a memory stick.

The ethical review form needs completing before the proposed research can begin. It contains the researcher's name and supervisor's name, the purpose of the research (giving key references) and the participants (target sample, including sample size, age, gender, methods of recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria). Included on the form needs to be the design of the research (proposed methodology to include where the research will take place and confidentiality) and consent (how it will ensured consent has been received by all participants and how, including vulnerable individuals such as children). The remaining information needed is finance (by identifying any costs involved in the research and how this will be met), data storage

and key references (Thomas, 2023). Finally, as the research is being done by a student at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD, 2022), the Research Integrity Code of Practice needs to be adhered too. It ensures that the research is done correctly and that all places of research such as other early years settings as well as the setting the researcher work in are respected and their policies and procedures observed. The information should be stored correctly during the research but destroyed appropriately after the research is completed. The research, as a student at UWTSD is carrying it out, will be a representation and reflection of the University so the researcher must behave in a professional manner at all times, treating the participants and data with respect. (UWTSD, 2022)

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