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Abstract

This planned research project will explore the impact Covid-19 lockdown measures has had on early childhood and young children's early education. The implications of how much children missed out on in early education experiences and opportunities to socialise and develop self-regulation skills because of the pandemic. It will also look at how these effects also impacted time spent outdoors that consequently affected children's physical development negatively. Lockdown rules and preventative policies were ordered resulting in schools, childcare settings and playgrounds to close, limiting activities, reducing interaction, stimulation and learning. All these factors are now starting to raise questions and show some concern resulting in longitudinal studies of children's neurodevelopment, examining these effects had on cognitive development. Focusing on children living in the South Wales area by conducting a research method of questionnaires with professionals from their own observations and of parental concerns. Whilst implementing research for qualitative data plus triangulation to ensure an increased validity of findings during this research. Ethical considerations will be adhered to by following the British Educational research Association (BERA, 2019) and how gaining informed consent is paramount using guidance from Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC, 2020)

Literature review

In approaching this issue, the rationale for exploring this topic is to explore the short- and long-term effects Covid-19 restrictions had on early childhood and education.

The impacts the pandemic has had on children's development is not over and is having a lasting effect. Through research it is possible to highlight what actions are now needed to help reduce and mitigate those effects with the proper support and systems in place.

As reported by the First 1001 days movement, 2022 highlighting that the majority of children's development has been negatively impacted due to the pandemic. Notably,

this research carried out with professionals show key findings that there is an overwhelming amount of delay with children's communication, social skills and speech and language development (Nursery World, 2022). The strict measures that were put in place to control the spread of the virus impacted a key period in the lives of young children during a time where rapid growth and development happens. Where there would usually be plenty of transitional experiences relied upon with family members, friends and professional services. As a result of the pandemic and national lockdown, children missed out on access to playgroups, childcare settings which provide opportunities for positive playful experiences and other enriching informal activities. All of which are beneficial to a child's development and learning (Hogg, S. & Mayes, G, 2022). Similarly, the Delphi study, 2021 which is a Welsh government research study examined the effects with the same findings of how all areas of development for children under five have been negatively impacted. (Welsh Government, 2021).

According to research provided by Birth to three matters framework (Dfes, 2002) it shows how important early experiences are to shaping a young child's emotional health and social well-being. It is during birth to three that children develop a sense of self and build own personal characteristics, thus depending on the response and interactions given from the child's primary caregivers and how these needs and wants are met. Children will develop a sense of belonging with their family but also with other familiar groups such as education or play settings (Abbott, L. and Langston, A. 2007). Bruner (1960) suggested that environmental and experiential factors influence a child's development (Nutbrown, C 2006). Likewise, Vygotsky agreed that children learn best when exposed to a social environment where interactions with others construct meaning, whether this be with peers or adults (Teach Thought, 2014). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's Biological model identified various influences on a child's early experiences. Bronfenbrenner implied that development is influenced by micro contexts such as family, friends and the community around them, and how environment changes can have implications on the child and their development (Hayes, N., Halpenny, A.M. and O'Toole, L. 2017). According to McNair et al, due to the first lockdown children suddenly found themselves unable to go to school or socialise with their peers, see wider family or even go outside. Once these restrictions were lifted children were then able to go to school but remaining in a small 'bubble' only able to see certain friends from a

distance (McNair, L et al 2022). Children were reported to struggle to adapt to these ever-changing circumstances which caused much disruption to their lives. (Coram family and childcare, 2022). Daily routines such as sleep patterns, increased use of electronic devices and less physical and outdoor activities were interrupted having a further negative effect on children's growth and development which prevented them reaching their full potential (Araújo, L. A. et al 2020).

The World Health Organization states that children's learning and development requires constant attention and investment. Health workers can provide support to help families provide responsive care such as communication and play ideas to make families more aware of their child's needs and how to respond (World Health Organization, 2020). However, this was another element reduced significantly to children and families during lockdown which left parents feeling unsupported despite the necessity at the time. Surveys showed how children's needs were less likely to be identified early. (Hogg, S. & Mayes. G, 2022). Furthermore, parents and carers have reported how with no access to any childcare or early education support this brought challenges and strain with parenting. (Coram family and childcare, 2022). For some parents who were already under extreme pandemic related stress or possibly experiencing poor mental health, this made it harder for them to support their children's learning. (Hogg, S. & Mayes. G, 2022). Researchers at the time were mostly focusing on the epidemiological patterns the pandemic were having, rather than examining how families were coping with a sudden altered structure and family routine and how this would certainly impact children's developmental ecosystems (Singletary, B. et al 2022).

Since identifying these impacts Welsh government have acknowledged it and responded with a focus on enabling young learners to have plenty of time for socialising and plenty of space to do this, that will enable support whilst adjusting to changes around them. Avoiding 'catch up' interventions but rather plenty of play-based learning opportunities where opportunities to strengthen relationships with practitioners by increasing child-adult ratios. (Welsh Government, 2021)

Methodological considerations

The aim of methodology is 'describing and analysing' methods used for a piece of research. Allowing judgement and assessment, and for methods used to be tested. (Kaplan, 1973). According to Wellington, (2020) methodology is vitally important for any part of a research project. For any new researcher, the terms methodology and method can sometimes cause confusion. With this in mind, there must be distinguishes between them both for them to be clearly understood. Method can be described as the knowledge construction process and what tools to investigate will be used. Methodology is what are the principles behind the knowledge construction process (McAteer, M. 2013).

The chosen method for this research project will be questionnaires that will be distributed online using a secure survey platform or completed over the telephone with a deadline to ensure a response rate time by a certain date. Sharp (2012) suggests the importance of the response rate and how the researcher should give careful thought to this beforehand. Face to face surveys can have a much higher response compared to a self-completion survey. For the researcher to ensure a high enough response rate, Sharp (2012) advises disseminating a higher number of questionnaires than needed, ensuring enough data is collected. According to Wellington (2020) a key issue when using questionnaires involve sampling and this can usually be decided by targeting participants from the field of work that can represent a certain population. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) agree by claiming how crucial sampling is in research, and these decisions should be made early in the planning process. For the purpose of this research project the target sample group will be Health professionals and Early years practitioners who work with pre-school children and their families that can offer an in-depth view on the impact the pandemic has had on children's development between the ages 0-2years. This sample type will be a non-probability sampling technique used for qualitative data responses and includes purposive sampling that means it involves a specific purpose (Wellington, 2020). Teddlie and Yu (2007) believe that purposive sampling will provide more depth into the study than what probability sampling can provide. Meaning that this chosen sample will provide a specific purpose accessing the right

knowledgeable people by their profession (Cohen et al, 2011). By the researcher choosing this type of sample group of participants, one is expecting valuable information that will provide rich and useful research results. The size of the sample chosen will require a large number of participants to complete the survey carried out of a 6-month period. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest that sample sizes are determined usually by the method of research, for example survey style research generally requires a large sample. Research on this topic is becoming more widely studied on the effects the pandemic has had on children and their development, such as Government research projects to plan for support needed. But to gain a more significant understanding of these effects and how children can be supported, this research project will focus on children aged 0-2years old living in the South Wales area for the researcher to be able to manage this survey alone. Individual researchers generally cope with up to 500 sample size of participants. However, for any researcher determining the best sample size could be to use sample size calculators that allows ways to dissect over the population that will support with drawing a sample size together. Nonetheless, this use of sample size calculators does not always know what sort of method to predict for. (Newby, 2014).

Whilst planning a useful method to carry out this research, other forms to collect data were considered such as face to face interviews. These were not chosen due to the demands, time and energy interviews need. Arthur, et al (2012) points out how participants may drop out or may not want to answer truthfully or not feel fully comfortable with the question being asked. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) states whilst ethical considerations must always be considered it would perhaps be the biggest issue in this type of method such as what is private and public knowledge? Could the questions harm or help the interviewee? Singleton and Straits, (2009) say that it is only when one method is not adequate to address the research aims planned for, mixed methods may be more useful. An example of this could be to follow up questionnaires with telephone calls or if there were any visual or auditory deficits (Ponto, 2015) There are advantages to mixed methods as looking at two pieces of research can help with correspondence of each other increasing the researcher's confidence with the findings (Cohen et al, 2011). Whilst Triangulation can increase a researcher's credibility and validity of findings referring to the truthiness of findings. Thurmond, (2001) agrees there are benefits to this method as

it can reveal unique findings that can provide clear and concise understandings.

(Guion et al 2011)

However, Guion, Diehl, McDonald, (2011) believe these findings rely heavily on the quantity and diversity of the data used for analysis. As this kind of research requires a high number of participants, single-method approach of questionnaires was seen as the most useful in gaining the required findings. Mainly as the use of many formats would be beneficial for the researcher to access a high number of participants. Delivered via mail or electronically, offering participants choice. Ponto et al, (2010) According to Mcnamara, (1997) surveys are often used to help in the implementation of an intervention programme or new procedures from evaluating the results. Which is the main reason for conducting this research this way. However, this approach assumes the researcher has access to the participants telephone numbers and addresses before deciding to use this approach. Advancing technology for the online questionnaire is now quite common and in the development of the questionnaire itself and for collecting the data, offering huge advantages to then allowing the researcher to email a link to all participants to access and respond, again ensuring that access to collect email addresses of respondents has already been accessed (Kumar, 2019). The researcher chose questionnaires because they can be used as part of intervention studies which is what the researcher is looking to examine and explore from the responses Arthur, et al (2012). According to Tymms (2012) questionnaires can be divided into both open-ended and closed questions. Tymms (2012) continues stating that when respondents are given free rein that are open-ended with a prompt in the question, they will more likely write what they feel without the constraints of too many tick-box questions. However, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) argue that open-endedness can carry some problems when handling data as it can be difficult to make comparisons and it can take much longer for participants to complete than if presented with a tick option. The use of Likert –type options within this questionnaire alongside open-ended questions was useful for the researcher to gauge added feelings of the respondents thinking about how the pandemic has impacted young children's development and to what extent this could be. To illustrate this point, it could be - 'Strong negative effect - Negative effect – No effect – Some effect - Positive effect – Strong positive effect. General advice to the researcher is to use an even number of choices to achieve a solid decision from the response. (Arthur et al, 2012). This would appeal to the researcher

with aim of this research project as capturing a direct lived experience through open-ended qualitative data would be captured. (Punch, 2014) There are usually some limitations any researcher needs to bear in mind when carrying out surveys. However, despite this forethought it cannot be denied that for more thorough responses, open-ended questions allow freedom to decipher on an issue. (Cohen et al, 2011). Other factors to consider is the influence a researcher may have of a person based on perception on how they look or their job role position. This is referred to as the Halo effect and is a cognitive bias. Suggesting this could mean the researcher thinking to only send questionnaires to Managers in the Early Years sector as they work in a higher position, therefore they are assumed to be more skilled in the knowledge of children's development. (Gabrielli et al, 2021).

Ethical considerations

According to Newby (2014) when undertaking any research consent should always be obtained with those involved. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) believe research within education should be carried out with respect for persons, knowledge, democratic views and for the educational research quality. (Newby, 2014). Ethical considerations are based upon a set of principles. Good professional conduct are moral values (Kumar, 2019) When research involves people voluntary informed consent must be gained from all participants. Ensuring this involves providing them with all relevant information before they commit to the research. Participants must be informed about how the information they give will be used and reported on, containing any potential risks and the benefits. (Arthur et al, (2012). These moral values are some of the researchers ethical thinking when approaching participants. Furthermore, it will involve specifying they can withdraw at any time and giving respect for privacy whilst paying caution to confidentiality and anonymity. (Arthur et al, 2012). It would be considered unethical to collect information from people without their prior knowledge and willingness to provide informed consent, making participants fully aware of the purpose and how it would affect them either directly or indirectly. (Kumar, 2019). This shows the researchers openness to all involved participants from the start. As this research project is using questionnaires Bartram, (2019) points out there is an advantage for the researcher and participant with using questionnaires as they offer anonymity and confidentiality, which quite often contribute to a high number of returns with frank and honest

answers. As an option to encourage a high response the researcher could highlight this point to respondents on the questionnaire providing confidence their personal view would be unidentifiable (Lambert, 2019).

According to ERIC, (2020) when children are participating in research obtaining consent is of utmost importance. This will demonstrate respect which underpins the researcher's responsibility in upholding children's rights. Allowing children to assess for themselves of potential risks and the right to withdraw at any time over their parents or guardians wishes. This research project is gaining information for children and does not require children to be directly involved as no observations or interviews will be conducted. However, if there was need following on from the survey undertaken, the first step would be for parental consent. ERIC, (2020) states that parents of children are fully informed and are given a full explanation of the reasons for the research. Where children are old enough to understand, the UNCRC recommends children are given all the information required of them allowing them to make their own choice. (ERIC, 2020). According to Palaiologou (2012) the term 'Ethical practice' is when people are involved with Early childhood research and how considerations are made with different points of view, how these are justified in ethical practice and what accounts for children to have a good life. Palaiologou, (2012) continues stating 'Ethical practice' for professionals working in Early Years can look to 'shelter' young children causing unintentional harm. Gorman, (2007) claims how research is vitally important for further knowledge, enhancing and improves practice. Incompetent ethical research can cause harm towards the individual, institution and the whole profession. Thus, effecting any future of research with other potential participants (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2007). BERA, (2019) states how it is the researcher's responsibility to maximise the benefits whilst ensuring the risk to participants is at a minimum. BERA, (2019) believes that whilst there is respect towards participants, this should also include themselves as the researcher. Operating in an ethical manner treating all individuals with respect, dignity, and recognising all persons differing backgrounds. (BERA, 2019). For the researcher to keep in line with BERA guidelines where health professionals are involved within this research, further ethical clearance may be needed in accordance with the NHS guidelines. The researcher may need to devise a form incorporating elements from both BERA and NHS (BERA, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 – Respect the views of the child

Article 13 – Freedom of expression acts as a good reminder for the researcher during Early childhood research. (Mayne, Howitt, and Rennie, 2018). Following all these considerations during the planning process of obtaining ethical consent, information sheets provide the researcher assurance from all necessary information is gathered. The information sheet will outline for the participants that it provides all reasons of what is expected and their rights to withdraw at any time. (NSPCC, 2020) Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2011) agree suggesting a covering information sheet provides purpose by conveying to the respondents the importance of the research topic whilst assuring them of all their rights and maintaining confidentiality. With this in mind, consent that is in writing provides researchers with the protection and reassurance from any accusations of failing to secure informed consent. (NSPCC, (2020). The researcher should bear in mind that in some cases the participant cannot voluntarily agree due to their age or capacity and that they should investigate how they can explore with assent. In these cases, the researcher should endeavour approval first with those who are responsible. (BERA, 2020). In this particular research project where children are between the ages of 0-2years, the use of assent would be required. According to Page, Clare and Nutbrown, (2013) this was demonstrated within a study by Wailling, (2005) with two five-month-old babies where the ethical standards were of a high level and carefully planned out whilst considering all ethics throughout with use of an ethical framework. Wailling, (2005) explained the benefits of the framework was how it was a useful working tool that could be adapted to suit specific purposes that would be relevant to the researcher. It provided protection for both the researcher and the participants involved, allowing sudden changes to happen or a need to stop if needed during the study. This is particularly helpful when undertaking research with babies and young children. Wailling, (2005) described how ensuring ethical issues that included consent and safety for all persons involved, these requirements are now mandatory for all research studies under BERA, (2011) guidelines. (Page, Clare and Nutbrown, 2013). UWTSD agrees by requiring a framework to follow for research. As the researcher would be representing their university it is expected all ethical standards are fostered to the highest level. The UWTSD code of practice is what is required from the university (UWTSD, 2022). All the data collected during this research project will be stored safely where questionnaires are returned electronically will be password protected avoiding memory sticks and hard copies filed away in a locked cabinet. If

any of the data was to be misplaced this could have a negative effect on the researcher due to the implications, it would bring. Ensuring this is complying with the Data protection Act, 2018 ensuring no breach of confidentiality and anonymity. (BERA, 2019) Under the General data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Participants have the right to view any information if they choose to, therefore it should be easily accessible to them when they request it (UWTSD, 2022). Any research involving human participants involving any research method are somewhat intrusive and invasive, which can cause undue anxiety to vulnerable people. It is there therefore the researcher moral responsibility to ensure any adverse affect is avoided. (UWTSD, 2022).

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