

An exploration in to the affect the Covid-19 pandemic has had on children in the early years.

Abstract

The abstract aims to highlight the main objectives of this assignment which is the affect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the early years. The situation and its affects are unknown due to no comparable data being available under the circumstance that arose from the pandemic.

Whilst preparing the portfolio, it is evident that a significant amount of research has recognised the likely severity of this topic with further research ongoing. The full implication on the educational, social, emotional and behavioural detriment to early years children may not be realised for a number of years.

The research includes reviewing various documents written by leaders in their field as referenced in the portfolio.

The rationale will include undertaking group interviews, preparation of targeted questionnaires and carrying out focus groups, discussions and reviews with parents to establish their understanding and experiences of their own children.

From an ethical perspective all collected data must remain confidential and must include anonymising any case studies strictly adhering to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This would protect the reputation of both the author and university.

It is recognised that the larger the sample size, the more accurate the resulting data is likely to be and statistically the results are likely to be more reflective of the over-all situation.

The sample would include a cross section of parents and carers of all ages, all available gender types and those from various ethical and religious backgrounds within the selected geographical area.

Literature Review

Research shows that the Covid-19 pandemic has created big challenges to the early years sector. A report by The Sutton Trust (2020) states that 68% of parents with children between the ages of 2-4 years old had access to childcare or education, however, at the beginning of lockdown this dropped to just 7% of children still attending settings. Welsh Government (2024) develop an approach that in alignment with the Curriculum for Wales, play based learning, especially outdoor learning, was seen as being an important strategy for child development. The approach mitigates the impact of any trauma a child has experienced during the pandemic. The approach from the Welsh Government supports the report from The Sutton Trust as children learning in an educational and outdoor environment aids development post pandemic which allows children to grow again after missing out on significant periods due to lockdowns.

Young Minds (2021) have written a policy report on the impact the pandemic has on education. In a survey that they conducted in 2020, it was reported that 74% of teachers and staff agreed that with schools being closed for a lengthy period, it has had a negative impact on the mental health of young people. An online article backs up the policy report from Young Minds on the mental health of young people when they mention that pupils faced quarantines and rolling

school closures, along with many staff shortages. This would have had a knock on effect to pupils mental health and education as they worry about loss of time in school. In some cases, it may lead to violence and misbehaviour (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Bakopoulou (2022) writes a journal article which looks at how the pandemic affected child transitions into school. Her article looks at outcomes from a survey which she carried out amongst families. Findings discovered that due to mandatory closures of settings, both pre-school and school, transitions for children and families were disrupted and delayed.

Within Wales, a similar research project written through the Welsh Government was conducted which describes ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic worsened structural and social lives of children which lead to the increase of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The pandemic had a big impact on speech and language development, mental health and social and emotional development (Bajjada et al., 2024). A finding that they discovered through their research was that the pandemic slowed down the Welsh language development for children who attended Welsh medium schools but came from English-speaking homes. Research also shows that due to the pandemic, there have been higher levels of deprivation and child poverty within Wales. This can be down to limited time and resources for parents to support their children.

In a report written by Children in Wales (n.d.), statistics back up what was written by Bajjada et al and that before the pandemic began, over one in four children in Wales were living in poverty. However, since March 2020, evidence shows that child poverty levels in Wales have risen and they will continue to rise as a result.

Within the Local Authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf, the Covid 19 pandemic had a negative impact on childcare providers. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (2022) created an assessment which included staffing issues due to the virus, managing positive cases and how big of a challenge it would be to providers. In some major cases, settings would require to close in the county borough for lengthy periods due to lack of staff members to keep them open. By this happening, young children were having to miss out on valuable time and learning in their early years due to setting closures. A statistic showed that the number of Rhondda Cynon Taf settings closed up until December 2020 was slightly under 50%. Since the start of 2021, the statistic had reduced. However, come the end of 2021 a new variant of the virus was announced, and the number of setting closures has risen again. By the closures and re-openings of settings being unsteady, it shows that some children lacked a stable environment to learn in. This could include both pre-school and school environments.

Methodological Considerations

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) define 'qualitative research' as having vast kinds of research with a wide range of meaning. Qualitative research provides in-depth and detailed understandings of meanings and actions. Roberts-Holmes (2018) also speaks positively about qualitative research by stating that using mixed methods is a powerful strategy in the early years and combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods. Both these books back up these types of research methods as they produce a more complete understanding of the research topic than just one approach.

During his book, Roberts-Holmes also discusses how using mixed methods is a powerful strategy which is used more commonly within childhood research and it combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. Using mixed methods allows for a more complete understanding of the research topic, rather than just one approach. A strength of mixed method research is the triangulation of different types of data. Triangulation is the practice of combining different sources of evidence together to reach a better understanding of the topic. By using it, it provides validity and makes the findings more convincing. Heale and Forbes (2013) also discuss a positive of triangulation as they say a mixture of two or more approaches provides a strong picture of results. It is also thought of as a way to add richness and depth to a research project.

Triangulation and mixed methods were used and needed throughout this project so that the researcher was able to get a variety of different results about the topic instead of using one lone method.

According to University of Bath (2024), a sample is 'a group of people, items or objects taken from a larger population'. The sample which will be used during this research project is a purposive sample. Purposive sampling is a technique which is used in qualitative research to select specific groups or individuals (Heath, 2023). A major advantage to purposive sampling is that it is easier to generalize about your chosen sample compared to a random sample as with a random sample, not all participants will have the same characteristics of what the researcher is looking to find out (Glen, 2021). However, a journal article by Andrade (2020) discusses a disadvantage of purposive sampling which is that the more purposive the sample is, the more limited the validity will be.

The sample will include a group of 500 parents and carers from all areas of Wales who have children between the ages of birth and five years old who have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic due to the closures of settings, this can be in both pre-school nurseries and early years classrooms. This sample was chosen as it can gather a variety of thoughts and opinions from parents and carers as to how their individual child was affected, what support was offered to them during the pandemic and how they have developed as a result of setting closures. The sample will be done through interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. There will be a small number of participants within small focus groups, another group will be interviewed, and the remainder will be given questionnaires.

Three types of methodology which will be used throughout this research project are interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. These three methods of research can also be used during a purposive sample which can be seen above.

Interviews

Lambert (2019) edited a book which discusses the effectiveness of using interviews as a method. Within the book, Winwood (n.d), writes a section which states that interviews allow participants to discuss experiences and interpretations of situations. Interviews are an effective way of validating and exploring issues in depth which have already been raised by other techniques and add enhanced research through qualitative data. Similarly, Nolan (2013, p.92), also describes interviews as a qualitative way to gather data in research and says that interview research is a valuable way to collect data as participants are both comfortable and communicative.

According to research carried out by Young et al. (2018), interviews are a widely used method in research. They are flexible and allow an in-depth analysis of a relatively small sample size which places the focus of the research on the views of the participants. However, some critiques of interviews have been identified within the journal such as a lack of transparency in the chosen sample strategy and the choice of questions used in the process.

Other critiques which have been identified by Gabrieli et al., (2021) is the halo effect. The halo effect is 'a cognitive bias in impression formation whereby the general individuals' attributes is based on the evaluation of a single attribute'. In simple terms, this means judging people on their first impressions. An example that the journal uses is a stranger who looks good is perceived as intelligent, even though intelligence is unrelated to a persons looks. The halo effect is a limitation to interviewing in a research project because the researcher could have pre-judged the interviewee based on one attribute and not considered the others.

Questionnaires

Newby (2014) mentions how questionnaires can be used for data collection in projects. Questionnaires can obtain data from a large number of people and that data can be gathered in a structured way. By conducting a questionnaire, it is a flexible method in relation to where and when it can be completed. Imperial College London (n.d.) back up the information noted by Newby by mentioning that questionnaires can be used in both qualitatively and quantitatively ways. By using questionnaires, it can help answer the research question in a significant way.

When using questionnaires, the researcher is able to use both closed and open ended questions. Closed questions are when a simple 'yes or no' answer is used and an open question is where participants are able to elaborate on their answers. In a short video clip, Taylor. S (2019), looks at strengths of using questionnaires. Using closed questions allows information to be measure more accurately. Secondly, a questionnaire provides reliability for the researcher which allows results to be checked and tested again if needs be. Lastly, with this type of method, questions are able to be answered anonymously. This may encourage participants to be more honest with their answers.

Adams, Anne and Cox, Anna L (2008) wrote an online book the The Open University which outlines the use of Questionnaires. They mention that using questionnaires is an important tool, and the design needs to be easily understandable and so that users are able interpret and complete it. This will then increase the accuracy of each response that the researcher gets for their project. They also discuss the structure and length of the questionnaire and that they

should be a suitable size as people have short attention spans so longer questionnaires can be less accurate.

Focus Groups

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2020) describe focus groups as facilitating a discussion. The facilitator is the main person who leads and guides the conversation. Focus groups usually occur when a researcher would like to understand participants views and experiences. This type of group can be used to get feedback either before, during or after research and can be used when the researcher has open-ended questions. Similarly, in a book by Lambert (2019), he also says that these types of interviews are used because of participants interests and involvement in the topic of the research. He also mentions that by bringing people together in a group, the researcher can encourage them to interact and develop discussions which leads on debates and exploration.

Adams, Anne and Cox, Anna L (2008) says that focus groups are very similar to interviews and should ideally not exceed more than six or seven participants and should be no smaller than three people. Possible limitations to focus groups is that too large a group and participants may split off into sub-group and leave others out of the discussion, but too small a group and there may not be enough depth for the discussion. Another limitation to using focus groups is that there may be concerns about confidentiality and anonymity as others in the group. This limitation is because other participants are able to hear contributions and discussions from other participants.

A method which was not chosen for the research project was observations. This is because observations take time and lots of effort to ensure the observation has been carried out effectively and it takes careful and advanced planning (Bohart, H. and Procopio, R, 2018). Palaiologou. I (2008) names two types of observation techniques in the book which both have limitations. Participant observation is when Early Years workers work with the children and record brief events that happen at the time. However, this type of observation will not give a complete picture of the event and professionals will rely on memory.

Palaiologou. I (2008) also talks about non-participant observations at that they require professionals to step out of their role and not interact with children. Instead, they act as an observer to the activity. If children are familiar with the observer and know them well, this could impact how accurately the observation is completed. Along with this, preparation and organisation for this type of observation needs to be planned in advance.

Ethical Considerations

When carrying out a research project, there are a considerable number of issues that need to be taken into consideration when it comes to researching and involving children and families.

‘Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice, in recognition of both their rights and their differences arising from age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant characteristic’ (BERA, 2024). The meaning behind this quote from BERA is that when a researcher is setting up their research methods, any individual involved should be thought of the same and everyone treated equally.

As part of the information sheet for the project, there will be a number of sections which will go in to detail about what the project is about, what the project aims to achieve, who it is for, different policies that the researcher must follow (confidentiality and safeguarding). Informed consent is an agreement that requires participants to be informed and understand the research they are about to partake in. This being a combination between the informing part and the understanding part (Ethical Research Involving Children, n.d.). Department for Education (n.d.), say that gaining informed consent for research should have a minimum of two, in some cases three, levels of consent. This could be from the child and a parent or a child, parent and a responsible adult. Brooks, te Riele and Maguire (2014) also write about how informed consent is participants freely declining and withdrawing from the research without any consequences. Each participant should be given the chance to withdraw from a research project if they wish. If they decide to withdraw, all data of that participant can be requested to be withdrawn and destroyed too (Loughborough University, n.d.).

Confidentiality is seen as an agreement to limit access to a subject’s information.

Confidentiality concerns about how data is handled. Confidentiality exists when a promise has been made by researcher to a participant. Within research, it is common to limit the distribution of information about the subject to those who need to know and to not discuss information with those who do not need to know (Ethicist, 2015).

When considering the ethics of research, there are risks which need to be considered and how to reduce them. The researcher should consider the participant, the researcher themselves and the university.

Participant

The risks to the participants in the study could include health and safety, emotional distress, financial disclosure, the transfer of personal data and sensitive information. A webpage written by Department for Education (2023) outline the safeguarding of participants in research. It is important within a project to protect their health and well-being and the right to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. As researchers, any procedures that are carried out should done in a safe and protective environment. When preparing research with participants, researchers also need to be ready to any safeguarding concerns. To mitigate the risk of safeguarding participants information, the researcher should take the project in a professional manner and follow the Data Protection Act 2018, if they are a researcher through a company. The act controls how personal information is used by organisations or businesses (GOV.UK, 2018).

Researcher

Risks to the researcher in a project can include issues such as health and safety, accusations, physical distress, emotional distress and conflict of interests. As a researcher, some big risks can have a psychological impact. According to Ostrowski. T (2019), to get valuable information for a project, researchers are required to get connected to participants as some research cannot be done from a distance. Psychological harm can include the physical and emotional stress along with conflict. The risks can be threats and abuse with some rare cases including second-hand trauma. Interviewing or observing participants can sometimes reveal an experience or emotion which can have an impact on wellbeing. In order to reduce the risks, researchers can build up resilience and prepare themselves to deal with stressful events when they occur. A second way that Ostrowski discusses is by getting support. Researchers can attend support sessions run by psychologists which monitor emotional states and well-being.

A health and safety risk for the researcher which was discussed by University of Essex (n.d.) could be the location of where the research is carried out. Some examples which the article uses is visiting or working in the participants home, working in remote locations and high crime areas. To reduce the risk, researchers could organise to meet the participant in suitably located areas which are well known to the researcher and participant.

University

Some risks to the university can be adverse publicity, loss of funds, reputational risks and data protection. Data protection is an important part of a research project and ethical consent for the study and data protection link up with each other. Grech. V (2018) addresses how data protection safeguards important information which emphasises on the protection of privacy and confidentiality. As a university, data protection must be adhered to at all times. To lessen the risk to the setting, Universities should adhere to the Data Protection Act 2018.

Linked with the protection of data, universities can come under security threats by those who create cyber-attacks and try to use it to their own advantage against other people. In a write up by Universities UK (2023), they lay out guidance which is available to universities to help against security threats. Some areas that the guidance covers are protecting reputation and values, protecting the people associated with the university, protecting campuses and protecting partnerships.

One example that the write up discusses is the UK Research and Innovation Principles. The principle provides guidance on how to manage information sharing alongside any legal implications of a research collaboration. The meaning behind this is that universities can follow trusted guidance to ensure they protect themselves as safely as possible and to prevent any misconduct.

Data collection is the responsibility of the researcher, who needs to ensure they collect and store the data correctly in line with up-to-date legislations. Loughborough University (n.d.) mention that researchers must ensure that data should only be collected if it is relevant to the study and that they should think carefully about their data collection methods for the project. Researchers should provide details such as who will own the research data, who will have access to it, the length of time the data will be retained, what the data will be used for and whether and where the data will be archived.

When using personal and private information of participants in a project, the researcher should always consider the General Data Protection Regulation which came in to effect in 2018. The regulation looks at personal data broadly and can include data such as identification markers and location, different rules around informed consent and the withdrawal of consent and lastly, it has strong requirements for documenting and auditing the research. To ensure data management and privacy comply with this law, it is recommended that the data obtained is reviewed by an expert or legal adviser in the organisation (GOV.UK, 2018b). During this research project, the General Data Protection Regulation will be adhered to at all times to ensure that data is stored correctly and that there is no risk of data getting exposed. Data storage can be done via physical hard drives, disk drives, USB or virtually in the cloud. Files should also be backed up in case a system error occurs (CDW, 2022).

The Information Commissioner's Office (2019) have written an online book which give an insight in to what the Data Protection Act is and why the Act is necessary. The Act gives individuals the freedom to take control of their personal data and to support organisations with the processing of it. Elizabeth Denham, the Information Commissioner quotes "provides tools and strengthens rights to allow people to take back control of their personal data." The meaning behind her quote is that individuals are allowed to decide what happens to their own information and are entitled to retract it at any point.

A benefit to the Data Protection act is that it makes sure everyone's data is used fairly and properly. This meaning that if the researcher or university has participants details such as contact details, address, confidential names of their children and their medical details, they will get stored away safely. A benefit to complying with the Act is that it shows to the participant that their information is cared about. This is good for the individual that is carrying out the research and also the organisation that they are linked to (Information Commissioner's Office, 2023).

Throughout University of Wales Trinity Saint David, the university is obliged to process all information in line with the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act.

A handful of reasons why the university need to follow these regulations is to monitor performances of students, record achievements, recruit new students on to courses and to pay staff members. As a professional organisation, without following these regulations then staff payroll details are at risk of being shared with a wider audience and new student recruit details, such as home address, mobile numbers and email addresses could be leaked.

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