

Research for Learning

Table of Contents:

Section 1 – page 2-4

Section 2 – page 5-8

Section 3 – page 9-13

Reference list – 14-18

Appendix - 19

Section 1 - To what extent do early years teachers view screen time as influencing the development of fine motor skills and academic or social engagement?

Fine motor skills involve the use of small muscles in the hands to manipulate objects and perform intricate tasks requiring hand-eye coordination (Strooband, Rosnay & Okely, 2020). These skills are foundational to early academic activities such as writing, cutting, and using classroom tools. Betts and Jacobs (2011) explain that when these abilities develop later than expected, children may struggle to keep up with their peers, potentially affecting self-esteem and academic performance. Supporting this, Piaget (1953) highlighted the importance of motor control in helping children make sense of their environment. A recent United Kingdom Government review found that in 2023–2024, 93.3% of children aged two to two-and-a-half reached expected fine motor milestones, which is an increase from the previous year but still below pre-pandemic levels (94.1% in 2019–2020) (Office, 2024). This points to a possible developmental shortfall and highlights the importance of early intervention and observation by practitioners. From raising awareness and realising the impact of how screen time influences the development of fine motor skills and academic or social engagement within settings amongst practitioners and teachers is crucial in promoting positive results for children's development and learning outcomes (Leonard, 2016).

Teachers/practitioners often observe that delayed fine motor skills in young children can have significant impacts. According to a recent study of 823 girls and boys conducted in 2023 of school entry age, investigating how fine motor skills contributed to attentional and academic performance, explained how fine motor skills are crucial for developing the manual dexterity needed for activities such as pencil grip, drawing and writing. These abilities are strongly connected to early academic skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy, including emergent writing, letter and number formation, and basic problem-solving (Cinar *et al.*, 2023). Betts and Jacobs (2011) note when fine motor skills are delayed, the small muscles in the hands may remain underdeveloped or weak, which can affect the child's ability to engage in activities that require hand coordination, for example, holding a pencil, forming letters accurately, or write clearly and at a suitable pace for their age. This can impact their ability to complete writing tasks effectively and fully engage in classroom activities.

Doherty & Hughes (2013) also note how fine motor control is crucial for the development of writing skills, however, expecting children to complete writing tasks before they have built adequate muscle strength and coordination in their hands can result in a delay in handwriting progress leading to feelings of frustration and inadequacy. The curriculum for Wales explains how practitioners need to be supportive and respond sensitively to learners' varied learning styles, encouraging confidence and recognizing that each learner develops at their own pace, along an assessment continuum from 3-16years old. It recognises that children's well-being as central to their learning and developmental journey (Welsh Government, 2023).

Delayed fine motor skills can significantly hinder a child's ability to engage in meaningful play, impacting their social development, confidence, and inclusion highlighting the need for supportive, play-rich environments in early education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that all children have the right to play (UNICEF, 2022), supported by the Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy 2002 (n.d.) emphasizing that play should be self-initiated and freely chosen by children. The importance of this is shown through the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, where children's learning environments should include opportunities that allow children to exercise their fine motor skills naturally through play in an enabling environment, along with various other skills, where children learn holistically (A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, n.d.).

Fine motor skills become essential for various types of play, ranging from tasks like dressing up or building with bricks to physical play and team games in the playground. In a review of research conducted in 2016 results showed that delayed motor skills can limit children's ability to join in physical play and team activities, which are key to forming social connections. This can lead to peer difficulties, loneliness, and social exclusion, impacting confidence and children's social development (Leonard, 2016).

However, according to BBC news (2018) children's play habits are shifting, with iPads often replacing traditional play material such as building blocks and craft activities, considered to effectively exercise finger muscles. While digital devices can

be convenient for parents and engaging for children, experts are raising concerns about their impact on fine motor development (Wakefield, 2018).

Currently the relationship between digital device use in children and fine motor skills development is up for debate. Are children choosing digital devices over activities that support fine motor development, potentially leading to social exclusion and reduced confidence? Or are they accessing a wide range of self-directed play opportunities that promote these essential skills?

Zheng and Sun (2021) conducted a study with 877 children aged 3 to 6 years old and found that increased screen time on digital devices was associated with poorer outcomes. In a separate study by Lin (2019), researchers compared 36 preschoolers who used tablets with 36 who did not, revealing that the non-tablet users performed significantly better on fine motor skill tasks (Operto, Viggiano, Perfetto, *et al.*, 2023). In addition to this BBC News reported that observations made by Occupational Therapists saw that an increasing number of children starting schools were lacking hand strength and coordination required to hold a pencil, which may link with a decline in physical, hands-on activities, which are being replaced by screen use (Wakefield, 2018). According to Operto, Viggiano, Perfetto, *et al.*, (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic and its social impacts have accelerated the use of digital devices and led to even younger children gaining access to digital technologies, increasing a trend that has been emerging in recent years.

Therefore, understanding how teachers perceive the role of increasing screen time is contributing to these delays is vital to ensuring children are supported through balanced, developmentally enriching environments.

Methodological Considerations

The sample for this study consists of early years teachers working in schools across Carmarthenshire, Wales. These practitioners have been selected due to their direct involvement in early childhood education, offering valuable insights into the specific focus of this research. This area also falls within the researcher's own occupation role, providing both practical access to participants and a deeper understanding of the local educational environment. According to the Welsh Government (2025), there are 94 primary schools in Carmarthenshire, which gives an approximate number of participants if potentially one representative alone from early years contributes to the research.

The sampling strategy used will be a non-probability sample as the research targets a specific group (teachers) and is non representative of the wider population (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The research will collect qualitative data aimed at understanding teachers' perspectives and experiences. Newby (2014) notes how qualitative research examines multiple perspectives and uses non-numerical evidence to explore the given topic, providing insights into the participants experiences and emotions regarding the research question. According to Bell and Waters (2018), collecting qualitative data offers several advantages, as it provides insight into emotions, beliefs, and personality traits, which are highly beneficial for this topic, while also allowing for personal reflection within practice during the process. However, it also carries disadvantages, including a higher risk of bias due to its use within one's own practice, and the complexity and possible extended time frame of analysing open-ended responses (Bell and Waters, 2018).

Gabriel *et al* (2021) describe the halo effect in studies as a type of cognitive bias where an overall impression of a person may influence how that person feels and thinks about their specific traits. Children's faces are often considered special stimuli that naturally capture adult attention. Due to stereotypical features such as large, round eyes adults may perceive these children as warmer, more trustworthy, and more innocent. This initial positive impression, driven by appearance, can influence further judgments about the child, including perceptions of their abilities or skill level (Gabriel *et al.*, 2021). This explains how the halo effect could be present during this study surrounding teachers' perspective in an unconscious way. This could impact

on the results gathered as the teachers will provide information based on their own pupils, classroom environment and perceptions which needs to be considered as a factor during the study.

Quantitative data which focuses on collecting factual information and analysing relationships between variables using structured methods will also be gathered in this research (Bell and Waters, 2018). Triangulation in research involves using multiple methods, as planned in this study to enhance the accuracy, depth, and reliability of findings. This serves several key purposes, using quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a better understanding of the research topic. This ensures convergence of results across methods, highlighting overlaps and differences in the data, using one method to build upon or validate another, uncovering contradictions and new insights and expanding the overall depth and scope of a study (Green, Camilli and Elmore 2006). Roberts-Homes (2018) supports this approach explaining how using a mixed method approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data provides a more thorough and well-rounded understanding of the research topic, highlighting the strengths of each method to capture a diverse range of perspectives.

The data collected will be primary data gathered directly from teachers regarding their views on how screen time influences the development of fine motor skills and academic or social engagement. Secondary data including official statistics, published materials, and unpublished documents from various sources would not be used for this research (Newby, 2014). The chosen method of collecting the data will be through a survey and interview method. The reasoning behind this, according to Hammond and Wellington (2021), surveys are a structured way of gathering information, with clearly defined questions for a specific type of research. The survey will begin with closed questions, and end with open-ended questions to maintain the participants engagement and provide more in-depth qualitative data (Hammond and Wellington, 2021).

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) note an advantage of this method for collecting information as being cost and time-effective, a reliable and an efficient way of gathering data from a large group of people offering both standardized and open-ended responses. Surveys are easy to distribute, electronically as well as physically

and can be done without the researcher present producing direct, structured data for analysis. Bell and Waters (2018) note how surveys can be distributed via personal or institutional email addresses, provided permission is granted, Google Forms would be a suitable platform for distribution. However, Hammond and Wellington (2021) note the limitations of this method, as the survey needs to be carefully designed to avoid ambiguity, has limited flexibility compared to interviews and potentially has a low number of responses if it is not well presented and introduced.

Due to the limitations of the survey method the research will also collect information through semi-structured interviews. However, Parrish and Shaikh (2023) acknowledge how this method also faces various challenges including, recruiting participants and obtaining detailed responses. The sampling strategy will involve snowball sampling, seeking to represent a defined cohort of participants. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) state how the snowball sampling involves using initial contacts to gain access to further participants through referrals. This potentially means that work colleagues can refer one another, which helps with recruiting participants. As the researcher works as a teaching assistant in a school, this referral process is useful as it provides direct access to potential participants within educational settings. Crouse and Lowe (2018) explain how due to the existing familiarity between participants and those they refer, rapport may be more easily built as the researcher has already interacted with colleagues and friends, making recruitment easier.

However, this method may also face challenges if initial contacts are unwilling to refer others within practice, (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). This highlights the importance of Parrish and Shaikh's (2023) points of ensuring that the purpose of the research is clearly explained to participants at the outset to clarify any questions, expectations, or concerns they may have before taking part.

Newby (2023) explains how semi-structured interviews offer both structure and flexibility, using a topic guide rather than fixed questions, allowing the interviewer to ask additional questions where appropriate, whilst maintaining the structure of the interview. They are more in-depth than surveys but more directed than unstructured interviews (Newby, 2014). According to Parrish and Shaikh (2023) interviews are a common method in educational research, used to explore people's perceptions,

beliefs, and opinions. The interview method is considered ideal when in-depth insights are needed beyond just facts or numerical data, useful to gather information based on challenges teachers face within practice. Parrish and Shaikh (2023) also note how a quiet, convenient location is needed to record the interview.

However, Lambert (2019) suggests that even when there is structure to an interview, the phrasing of questions can lead to varied interpretations based on how they are worded or delivered, resulting in inconsistency through delivery. A key limitation of structured interviews is that they may not capture complicated topics effectively, as they could heavily rely on fixed questions, researchers need to ensure to align their understanding with that of the interviewee, which rigid formats can make difficult. Parrish and Shaikh (2023) highlight other limitations when conducting interviews, factors including time effectiveness, in analysing information, especially as longer or more in-depth interviews reduce the number of participants that can be included. This could be a factor as further questioning, due to the flexibility of a semi-structured method could result in lengthier responses.

The Hawthorne effect refers to the tendency for individuals to alter their usual behaviour when they are aware that they are being observed or studied (Oswald, Sherratt and Smith 2014). This could be a factor during this research if teachers' comments are being analysed, they may alter their evaluations (consciously or unconsciously) because they know their responses are being examined, which could be present in both methods of data collection. This may result in teachers rating a child's abilities more positively to align with what they think is expected, or their interpretation of the situation not so much the broader reasoning behind the study, with the results being at risk of a greater personalised bias.

However, using a survey method for gathering information reduces how the Hawthorne effect could become even more problematic as opposed to an interview method of gathering information. Bell and Waters (2018) explain how surveys can be completed immediately, privately and therefore can make the participant feel less pressured, reducing the participants likelihood of changing their behaviour and thought process in a less pressured environment.

Ethical Considerations

During this study ethical considerations will be central to the research gathered which involves gathering teachers' perspectives regarding children in their classroom. Ethics is the study of concepts including duty, virtue, and choice in practical reasoning, as well as the nature of moral claims. It also examines the foundations and meaning of moral judgments, (Oxford Reference, 2025). The British Education Research Association (BERA) (2024) emphasizes that educational researchers must uphold an ethic of respect for everyone involved in or impacted by the work done during research. This is important as it includes treating all individuals with fairness, dignity, and sensitivity while recognizing and valuing their diverse identities, rights, and backgrounds.

Gaining consent for this research will involve several ethical considerations. Consent must first be obtained from the headteachers (gatekeepers), in line with ethical and safeguarding procedures within their settings, before they approach teachers. According to BERA (2024), researchers should seek initial approval through gatekeepers to ensure the research aligns with school policies and maintains the welfare of the children. Following this, consent will be obtained from teachers who will participate in the research and share relevant information concerning the children in their classes. BERA (2024) also highlights while gatekeepers in this study may give consent for participation, it is essential that teachers have the option to opt in or out of the research to ensure ethical transparency. To ensure further transparency and uphold ethical standards, a letter will be sent to parents or legal guardians informing them of the research project. This letter will explain the purpose of the research and clarify that children's identities will remain anonymous and personal information/identifiers gathered will be confidential.

A consent form will be prepared, alongside a covering letter that clearly introduces and explains the purpose of the study. These documents will be distributed via email to headteachers initially and forwarded to participating teachers. Parrish and Shaikh (2023) highlight how the consent forms must clearly outline the aim of the research, how the data will be collected and used, the rights of the participants, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any

time. According to Newby (2014) once this information is provided, participants can give valid informed consent to take part in the research.

According to BERA (2024), research must comply with legal standards for managing personal data, including the UK Data Protection Act 2018 regulations. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and United Kingdom law define personal data as any information that can identify an individual. This research will protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity as noted by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) by not disclosing any information that could directly or indirectly identify the individuals taking part which could lead to their identities being known. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) also suggest avoiding discussions about the participants with others or sharing information that could reveal the participants identity. This research will ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality are protected throughout the study and when sharing research results. Fully anonymised notes will be used to prevent identification of individuals. This includes removing or obscuring any direct personal identifiers, email addresses, or other sensitive information, following guidance from the UK Data Protection Act 2018 on anonymising research data (GOV.UK, 2018).

During the recorded interview protecting anonymity can be done through blurring visuals to obscure confidential content (GOV.UK, 2018). By applying these methods, the research will maintain ethical standards of confidentiality and ensure that participants' identities are protected throughout. As suggested by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) participants will be clearly informed in a letter that the sensitive and personal information they share will be treated as confidential to the research and identities anonymised. The United Kingdom's legislation (2018) on managing user research data and participants privacy also states that participants' contact information and other personal details need to be removed as soon as they are no longer required for managing their involvement in the research and protecting confidentiality and anonymity (GOV.UK, 2018).

The information will be collected through surveys via email and interviews will be conducted in person or recorded over video calling. Microsoft Teams video link platform can be used to simplify the interview process by removing the need for travel, or special equipment. This can make it more convenient for participants as

they can join easily through a browser without needing to download apps or create an account, making the process more accessible and efficient (Microsoft.com, 2025).

According to UK Government (2018) research data must be stored securely using approved devices and storage platforms. Data needs to be transferred promptly to encrypted storage and deleted from original devices. Therefore, the information gathered will be stored on an encrypted, password protected device to ensure the information is securely stored. Encryption is a security method that transforms sensitive information into an unreadable code, making it inaccessible to anyone without the correct decryption key. To decode and view the original content, a specific key or password will be required to access the content (uk.norton.com, 2018). This data and information will be stored this way to comply with the Data Protection Act 2018, ensuring confidentiality and safeguarding personal information which will protect participants' privacy, promotes transparency and will be easily available for future use (UWTSD, 2022).

The information gathered during this research will comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. The United Kingdom's Government (2018) provides information on how to legally manage personal information and that it is used fairly, lawfully, and securely. In the UK, data protection is regulated by the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (Gov.uk, 2018). Key principles, including limiting data usage to what is necessary, keeping information accurate, and ensuring secure storage being paramount to this study. This will protect individuals' privacy and prevent misuse of their data (UK Government, 2018). According to data protection laws, participants have the right to know how their personal data is used, to access it, request corrections, or ask for it to be deleted. They can also limit or object to how their data is processed (UK Government, 2018). This is supported by BERA (2024) who reiterate how important informed consent is before the research begins with a clear explanation of how the data will be shared, and how participants need to be aware of how the data will be handled, in compliance with UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018. This promotes transparency and keeps participants well informed of how the data will be handled ensuring they understand the principles of their consent.

From a teacher's perspective, participating in research can involve significant stress and pose risks to well-being, especially when considering additional pressures such as performance expectations, workload demands, or concerns about professional reputation (Atkinson, 2012). Supported by BERA (2024), ethical research practice includes being aware of the time, workload, and demands placed on participants. These pressures can affect the mental health and well-being of both participants and researchers, highlighting the need for careful planning and support mechanisms throughout the research process. Noted by Ofsted (2019) teaching staff in the UK experience some of the highest levels of work-related stress, anxiety, and depression, according to the Health and Safety Executive. According to Wiles (2013) these risks to participants can be minimised by ensuring the researcher clearly explains potential harms and benefits during the consent process, providing ongoing opportunities to opt out, as mentioned in the consent form, and remain attentive to signs of distress. Options including stopping the research and rescheduling should be offered if the participants may not be able to complete the research as planned (Wiles, 2013).

This research may also pose to be a risk to the university the researcher is enrolled at. The University of Wales Trinity St Davids (UWTSD) (2022) explains in their code of ethics how the researcher may be at risk of misconduct if they fabricate, falsify, or plagiarise data, or fail to meet ethical and legal obligations such as informed consent. Such actions can harm individuals, undermine research integrity, and damage the university's reputation. The university shares responsibility for upholding standards and addressing any misconduct. However, UWTSD (2022) also explains how this risk is minimised by ensuring supervisors are responsible for overseeing the research and monitoring for any ethical issues. If a project initially had no ethical concerns but changes during the process, it is the supervisor's duty to reassess and ensure it goes through ethical review. This ensures the research stays compliant with university and ethical standards.

Throughout the process of this research risk to the researcher is also important to consider. BERA (2024) explain how researchers face risks to health and well-being through additional workload and professional risks to reputation. These risks can be mitigated through specified training, risk assessments, ongoing safety monitoring as

mentioned, and institutional support. Employers must also ensure fair working conditions and promote researchers' wellbeing and career development during the process (BERA, 2024).

This research examines early years teachers' views on how screen time affects fine motor development and academic or social engagement in young children. It highlights the need for balanced use of digital technology, the importance of hands on learning, and highlights ethical responsibility of researcher throughout the process.

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Appendix

I have not used AI.