

How do nurseries promote a culture of empathetic practice within their setting?

Abstract

This project will research how effective management can promote a culture of empathy within nursery settings. Empathetic skills are crucial to the care of children, including the need for staff to recognise a child's emotions throughout the day and respond appropriately, to stay calm when faced with stressful over stimulating situations which when understood at the empathetic level from the viewpoint of the children will create a stable and caring reaction. Which demonstrates the importance of this research to provide an understanding of how managers can implement this culture in their setting. The sample used in the research will be from multiple nurseries across the East Midlands. This is due to research which found that local authorities in the East Midlands were struggling the least to hire and maintain childcare workers, this could represent setting satisfaction which is supported by empathetic practice. The research will be conducted by an anonymous, thorough survey which will allow for descriptive in depth answers. The survey will be completed by all nursery staff from managers to apprentices, resulting in detailed research findings which can be worked through to gather an overall understanding of how management has promoted empathetic practice within the setting. Ethically, the research will focus on the positive side of empathy, what is done right and how it can be implemented in order to replicate this across other settings in other areas.

Literature review

Solvason and Webb (2023) explain how the development of empathy in humans begins with the primitive instincts such as mimicking yawning, further developing towards a rational understanding of the inner feelings of other humans. The ability to empathise can become greater to a point where one human can feed back the necessary emotions, body language, verbal language and expressions which signify to the other human that they are fully empathising with them. In regards to a nursery setting, early years practitioners and other adults in the setting could demonstrate this advanced empathy through understanding emotions which the children do not even fully understand yet. The practitioner's role is to develop the child's empathy in this way.

Knafo et al. (2009) conducted a research study which demonstrated the empathetic responses of children during their early childhood years. The study found that at age 14-20 months children showed an increase in their empathetic response, with an even greater increase at age 24 months and 36 months. Suggesting there are certain cognitive processes and developmental milestones which can be nurtured to develop greater empathy during these age groups.

Elswick (2018)'s book for professionals and parents provides settings with a reasoning behind promoting emotive language in children. Elswick recognises the importance of other factors in a child's development such as educational development, however equates the emotional development of children to the same importance. Elswick mentions a desire to implement emotional education within settings however they have lacked efficient methods of providing this. To provide children with regular, daily and consistent access to emotive literature may give children someone to relate to in the form of characters and emotions. Assuring the setting has ample access to a large variety of books and assuring early years practitioners implement these in the daily routine, reading aloud emotively, will give children a chance to develop their emotional intelligence and empathy. There will always be children who learn in different ways within any setting. For example, children who have ample energy and cannot pay attention to a story book for long enough to take anything from it. Part of being an empathetic early years practitioner is to understand the needs of every unique child and to plan effectively enough to cater to their individual learning styles. This is where Elswick mentions play therapy as an ideal method of encouraging empathy within settings. The aim of play therapy is to encourage children to express their inner emotions through toys and play.

Assessing the emotional intelligence and empathetic capabilities of children will help settings to understand the outcome of their practice, however it has been previously noted in Zava, F. *et al.* (2021) that children who have a shy nature may often be seen as less empathetic. It may be apparent that shy children choose to hold back their emotional reactions when faced with tricky social situations, seeming to others as a lack of empathy. The research suggests this is more of a social display issue rather than a lack of empathetic understanding.

McLatchie et al. (n.d.) explains how Skinner's operant conditioning theory can be used with children. The article recognises how the expectations of childhood has changed throughout the centuries before us, although mainly always recognised as an important time period, those in childhood are not expected to contribute financially to the family unit anymore. Or not allowed an education. Skinner was just one of the influential pioneers in reforming the expectations of childhood. Skinner undertook research which gave professionals and parents insight into how positive reinforcement strategies can be used to nurture positive behaviours from children. In regard to empathy, the idea can be understood as a way to promote empathetic behaviours.

Rewarding children who display empathetic behaviour is necessary to create this culture of empathy within the nursery setting. Strategies can be used daily such as a 'Kindest person of the day award' or 'Being a good friend award', 'Kind' stickers, talking together about incidents that happen (whilst remaining within confidentiality policies) and how we resolve the incidents in an empathetic way.

Another point which McLatchie et al. (nd) makes is that Skinner's ideas can be used in the workplace. The empathetic culture in a nursery setting does not stop at early years practitioners

nurturing the behaviour in children, it must be a consistent culture within the whole workplace.

Including between practitioners, management, apprentices and all staff members. The implementation of this could reduce workplace stress and provide a safe and happy atmosphere throughout. In the article it is suggested that those in the workplace who understand this are able to accept 'bad news' gracefully and even appreciatively.

Methodological considerations

The research will be conducted by an anonymous, thorough survey which will allow for descriptive in depth answers. The survey will be completed by all nursery staff from managers to apprentices, resulting in detailed research findings which can be worked through to gather an overall understanding of how management has promoted empathetic practice within the setting.

The sample used in this research will include adults working within the nursery setting across the East Midlands. Tuc (2023)'s research suggests that the place where most childcare practitioners are hired and maintained in their settings are from the East Midlands. Farewell et al. (2021) identifies the stress factors of working within the childcare setting, these stress factors include the demanding nature of the work itself, distinctively low pay and resources or lack thereof. The lasting effects of these stress factors have often manifested as psychological illnesses, physical illnesses and overall low wellbeing. Wallace and Cooper (2020) explain how childcare workers are often undervalued and a breakdown of communication and lack of understanding of professional and work load expectations between management and staff is crucial to figures seen which show that more than one in six childcare workers leave within their first year in the workplace. It is reasonable then to assume that childcare workers in the East Midlands are the most satisfied with their career than anywhere else in the country, therefore reasonably coming to the conclusion that their management have implemented a culture of empathy between staff members and children within their setting.

The sample chosen is non-probabilistic, the sample was chosen specifically to relate to the question posed in the title 'How do nurseries promote a culture of empathetic practice within their setting?'. By choosing the sample of childcare workers which are most satisfied with their workplace environment, it is an opportunity to find a solution to the question directly.

(University of Bath, 2024)

Geeksforgeeks (2023) further categorise the chosen sample selection method into purposive sampling. To select a sample based off the belief that this sample will hold the most knowledge about the topic being researched. When the research is conducted it could give clear techniques used to nurture empathy within a nursery setting, however it can be suggested that a negative of purposive sampling is the bias it may create. Meaning the inability to implement these

techniques in every setting due to other factors which may become apparent during the research project.

The research method is an anonymous detailed questionnaire. The data collected would fall under qualitative. (Deakin University, 2021)

The questionnaire will be a semi-structured questionnaire prompting the participant to explain their answers further to gain as much detail as possible. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) explain how the flexibility of semi-structured questionnaires helps to probe deeper into initial responses. This is particularly useful for understanding the nuanced ways in which empathy is promoted, as early years practitioners may have unique and detailed practices or experiences that wouldn't emerge in a strictly structured research style. As empathy is a complex and subjective experience, semi-structured questionnaires can explore participants' personal thoughts, first hand experiences, feelings and beliefs. Providing rich qualitative data that can illustrate the practical applications and challenges. Early years practitioners can describe the specific variables of their childcare setting, which might influence how empathy is promoted. This could include cultural, social, and organisational factors that impact empathetic practices. When implemented correctly according to this research, using focus and establishing trust in regards to the research, the nature of a semi-structured questionnaire encourages early years practitioners to reflect more deeply on their practices and beliefs. This reflective process can yield insights into why certain strategies are effective and how staff in a nursery setting perceive their role in promoting empathy.

While semi-structured questionnaires offer many advantages for understanding how empathy is promoted in a childcare setting, they also have several limitations. They may lead to inconsistency in the data collected when interpreted differently by different data collectors. To reduce the risk of this, there will be key words and phrases with multiple variations of the same phrase to be noted by those collecting the data from the questionnaires, to assure differences in dialect and language are taken into consideration. Campuslabs (2018) demonstrated the process of analysing semi-structured questionnaires which could be more time-consuming compared to structured questionnaires as they require thorough analysis to identify themes and patterns.

Matthews and Ross (2010) in depth book about research methods including questionnaires gives deep understanding to assist this research project. It is apparent that some respondents might not feel comfortable or may lack the verbal skills to fully articulate their thoughts in an open-ended format, leading to incomplete or less detailed responses. This can impact the richness of the data.

Considering other research methods, observation was a possibility however it was not chosen for various reasons. These include that observations would have been incredibly time consuming considering the sample size chosen for this research project. This would not have been cost effective or time effective, leading to issues in regards to the ethical considerations of this

research project and whether or not it was a practical use of resources. Any observations would have been open to personal interpretation of the observer. The observer cannot read an early years practitioner's thoughts to know why they did or did not act a certain way, they may not understand that empathy was shown in another way, rather than what was observed or not observed.

Heale and Forbes (2013) discuss the use of triangulation including what it is, examples of use, criticisms and positives.

The data collected from semi-structured questionnaires can be triangulated with other data sources, such as observations and document reviews. This triangulation could enhance the reliability and validity of the findings by providing multiple perspectives on the same issue.

Triangulation in research refers to the use of multiple methods, data sources, theories, or investigators to enhance the credibility and validity of the study's findings. It is a strategy employed to cross-verify data and interpretations by approaching the research question from different angles. Triangulation helps to overcome biases and limitations inherent in a single method of research, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Rugg (2010) states several different types of triangulation which includes methods triangulation, using more than one method to gather data. For example, combining qualitative methods (like interviews and observations) with quantitative methods (like surveys and experiments). This approach can provide a fuller picture and verify findings across different types of data, and data triangulation, using different sources of data for example, collecting information from various groups of people such as teachers, parents, and children in a childcare setting to see if the findings are consistent across sources. These were two methods of triangulation considered for this research project.

Ajemba and Arene (2022) identify the benefits of triangulation. Triangulation can increase the credibility and validity of the results by showing that different methods or sources result in the same findings. It allows for a more thorough understanding of the research problem. Helping to confirm findings by cross-verifying information from different sources and methods. Also it can mitigate the biases and limitations associated with a single method of research,

In summary, triangulation can strengthen research by leveraging multiple perspectives and methods, enhancing the robustness and depth of the study's findings.

This research project has only selected one method of research, semi-structured questionnaires.

The reasoning of this is to create a replicable and trusted method of collecting data. The researcher has chosen a method believed to be able to find the answer to the title question and to also collect data effectively. In a cost effective, time effective methodology. As well as having the ability to reach a large sample size in a familiar method of data collection, the

semi-structured questionnaire can be worked through as a team in the setting. If chosen to do so by the nursery, or it can be completed in their own time, which would make it completely anonymous. The anonymous nature of the questionnaire, which would not have been present in an observation research method for example, allows for honesty from the participants.

Contributing to high quality data collected.

Ethical Considerations

Sandu, Frunza and Unguru (2019) express in their in depth book 'Ethics in Research Practice and Innovation' how gaining consent from participants and ensuring their willingness to participate are crucial ethical considerations when conducting research. There are various strategies which can allow for this to be achieved ethically. One technique is to prepare a clear research explanation which outlines the research purpose, objectives, and what the aim of the study is regarding empathy promotion in childcare settings. This will include positive attributes about why they were specifically chosen as a sample. For example stating the research which suggests they are the most satisfied workforce in the UK. Giving an in depth description of the research method, including what is needed by participants, how they should answer the questions, what will happen before, during and after. In this sense, the participants will be asked to take themselves into a calm, noise free environment where they can focus on the questionnaire for an ample amount of time. They will then be asked to read the questions carefully and to answer fully, taking breaks as and when needed. They will be asked to include real life examples, their feelings, emotions and reasoning behind certain key points. After they have completed the questionnaire they will be instructed on how they can submit their answers, by post with a freepost envelope already provided within the questionnaire kit. They may also be given a deadline of when it needs to be completed to assure data is received in time.

Resnik (2020) explains the importance of ethical considerations when conducting research, reflecting on the article there are key procedures which can be put into place to assure ethical practice. There should be an option for potential participants to contact the researchers with any questions or worries they may have, providing a research project phone number or email may be helpful. The participants should be made aware that their data will be kept confidential and it should be explained how the researchers will protect their privacy. There must be an emphasis that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time without any consequences. Outlining potential benefits, for example, contributing to better childcare practices and risks such as discussing uncomfortable topics, will allow participants to hold a level of competency before they choose to undertake the questionnaire.

Department for Education (n.d.) explains how a crucial part of the process of consent is to include a statement of informed consent that participants can read and sign. Providing a space for

the participant's name, signature, and date. Ensuring the language is clear and accessible to all participants, possibly providing translations if necessary.

Even with a consent form signed, there must be an easy and clear way for participants to opt out, both before and during the research. This should be an easily accessible method for all participants regardless of language and communication skills.

A final step in assuring an ethically correct research project is to take the time to provide follow up care to all participants and those effected by the research project. In this case it may simple be the participants however it could be suggested that the nursery settings and other staff experience effects after the research project. Therefore a clear follow up strategy which outlines all areas of consequences will be useful. As a basic rule, after the research is complete, giving participants time to think about their experiences and following up with them to confirm their willingness to participate will allow for any issues to be dealt with promptly and to assure the ethical validity of the research project. (von Allmen et al., 2015)

As the questionnaire is anonymous, there is reduced pressure on participants who may feel more comfortable expressing their true feelings without identification.

Farrell (2005) specifies research regarding children, or in the setting of children. Relating to this research project, there are some steps which can be put into place to assure that all those involved with the research project feel comfortable and competent when it comes to understanding the project itself. Working in partnership with managers to facilitate the consent process, ensuring they understand the study can help with communication amongst the workforce. Holding informal meetings or information sessions for staff to explain the research, answer questions, and distribute consent forms. The use of both written and oral communication to cater to different preferences and communication levels.

Treating consent as an ongoing process, not a one-time formality and regularly checking in with participants to confirm their continued willingness to be involved will allow for ample evidence to suggest the researchers had full consent.

By carefully preparing information materials, clearly communicating the study's details, observing participants' cues, and reinforcing the voluntariness of participation, researchers can ethically and effectively gain consent and recognise if participants do not wish to participate in the research.

To demonstrate openness in research and provide clear, comprehensive information to participants, the information sheet should cover the following key points. This will help ensure

that participants understand the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study, making them feel comfortable and informed about their participation. A title clearly stating the research. The purpose of the study, an understandable explanation of the aims and objectives of the research. Such as “This study aims to explore how childcare settings promote empathy within the entire setting. We are interested in understanding the strategies and practices used by early years practitioners, managers and nursery staff members which contribute to empathy.” It will also be useful to include the details and contact information for the researchers with an open invite to contact them for any queries. An important part of this information will include the procedures used in the research, such as the type of research method (Semi-structured questionnaire), what this means and how it is being conducted. A clear emphasis that participation is voluntary and that participants can withdraw at any time without any consequences and an explanation of how it will be ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant’s information remains intact. Along with a description of how the data will be used, including any plans for publication of the findings.

By including these elements, the information sheet will demonstrate openness and ensure that participants are fully informed about the study, their role in it, and their rights as participants.

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in the study, it is important to anonymize data by removing or replacing any personal identifiers (names, addresses, specific details) from the data. Store data in secure, password-protected files and databases, using encryption for digital data storage and transfer. Keep physical copies of data in locked cabinets. It is also very important to limit access to data to only those directly involved in the research. Ensuring all team members understand and comply with confidentiality agreements.

The politics and ethics of representation in qualitative research : addressing moments of discomfort (2022) gives insight in regards to reducing risks to the participant. It is important to identify risks such as emotional distress when discussing sensitive topics. Allowing participants to skip questions or withdraw at any time without consequences is a factor which allows them to feel safe and comfortable. It could be in the researchers ethical considerations to provide information on support services for participants who may experience distress.

To reduce risks to researchers themselves it is important to ensure researchers are trained in ethical guidelines, confidentiality, and data protection. As well as providing debriefing sessions for researchers to manage stress and ethical dilemmas.

For the university, reducing risks includes compliance with ethical standards. Adhering to university and external ethical guidelines and standards and obtaining necessary ethical approvals from the relevant people. Following the university’s data protection policies and procedures will assure the research is compliant and can go ahead.

(GOV.UK, 2018) Data collection must be laid out and clearly understood by all involved. In regards to the

GDPR 2018 and Data Protection Act 2018, data collection must only collect the data necessary for your research purposes. This further supports the need for anonymity in this research project. Researchers must ensure data collection methods are secure and respect participant's privacy. Another factor to assure is followed as outlined above, is to clearly inform participants about what data is being collected, how it will be used, and their rights. Storage of data is of utmost importance with data being stored securely using encryption and password protection for electronic data and secure storage facilities for physical data. Data should only be retained for as long as necessary and deleted as soon as possible.

Data Protection Act (2018) The above guidelines are crucial for various reasons, such as to protect participant's personal information from unauthorised access, to respect the privacy and confidentiality of participants and to comply with the GDPR and Data Protection Act.

Participant's withhold the rights under GDPR 2018 and DP Act 2018 for access, they can request access to their personal data. For rectification, they can request corrections to inaccurate or incomplete data. For deletion, they can request their data be deleted under certain conditions. For processing, they can request a restriction on processing their data.

To assure legislation is being closely followed there are certain steps which can be taken. The importance of this is clearly mentioned above and will be beneficial to all, reducing risks and issues that may arise. Creating clear data management policies that comply with GDPR and the Data Protection Act and ensure these policies are communicated to all team members will demonstrate good communication and ethical honesty. Providing the team with regular training on data protection and ethical research practices will assure everyone understands their role and how they can and can not overstep certain boundaries. By following these guidelines and taking these measures, the research will be able to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, reducing risks to all parties involved, and complying with relevant data protection legislation. This will enhance the integrity of the research and ensure ethical standards are maintained.

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