

Co-ordination, Partnership and Integration in Childhood Practice by Debbie Fanning

Background Information

My name is Debbie Fanning; I am 29 years old and currently working as an Acting Depute Head of centre. I have been qualified for 9 years and have spent 4 ½ of these years in a management position – initially in the role of a team leader within an under 3 unit, to presently acting as a Depute Head of Centre. This year, I achieved a degree in Childhood Practice after studying for the last 4 years.

I currently work in a centre, which caters for children aged 6 weeks to 5 years. Working in the area i do, with lots of input from education and health, i have experience of working with a range of families, with varying family circumstances. Working with such vulnerable children and families has given me an insight into the importance of fostering and developing emotional wellbeing from a very young age. I have a variety of experience of children from all kinds of backgrounds and all different kinds of emotional needs.

The research project I embarked on came from both a personal and professional passion for the development of young children's emotional wellbeing. This project gave me the opportunity to research the theoretical perspectives on the importance of emotional wellbeing and how it is currently supported through today's practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Action Research begins with hopes, dreams and desires. An Action Researcher hopes that they can create a change for the better, dreams of a better world and desires to make a difference. (MacNaughton & Hughes 2009:5).

This research project looks at theoretical perspectives of the development of children's emotions, environmental impacts which can be detrimental and the best ways of supporting positive emotional development. Staff, parents, children and colleagues from Education, Health and Social Work have been included in this research project.

This project was something I personally feel very strongly about, due to the client that I work with, which gave me the motivation to research my thinking further and help to improve practice within my setting. Robert-Holmes (2005:27) talks about the high levels of motivation needed to ensure that you get the most out of the research project.

My Research Questions came very easily, as there were 'niggles' which had become evident to me. These research questions were developed using a 'Thinking Box' (MacNaughton & Hughes 2009), which highlights the aims of the research and the questions I wish to address

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of children's emotional intelligence is becoming more recognised as a crucial part in a child's overall development. Children's emotions have been in the past something that is overlooked for academic ability.

Children's emotions can be affected by numerous reasons, including poor attachments, neglect, abuse, lack of stimulation, divorce, bereavements etc. These factors are not new to young children's lives, however, its impact on their emotional development is more apparent and how we support these children is crucial.

Bahman & Maffini examine the role of children's emotional intelligence as a crucial part of developing their academic learning. *"To provide a sound education for children and equip them with the right skills and tools that enable them to enhance their academic achievements and real life skills, schools need to go beyond academics and pay serious attention to developing children's emotions"*. (2008:2).

The implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence (2006) aims to ensure that children develop skills and knowledge that they will need in life, learning and work, both now and in the future. The wording of the 4 capacities of also suggests this; Responsible Citizens, Effective Contributors, Successful Learners and Confident Individuals.

Research suggests that more pressure is now being placed by local authorities to reach attainment levels in literacy and numeracy and the vision in recognising the importance of emotional intelligence is often masked by this. (Sharp 2001:75).

Goleman mirrors this view and that of my own, suggesting that the impact of initiatives, changes within the curriculum can exhaust staff. He also suggests that 'emotionally connected' pupils will have better academic success and instances of violence, bullying, anxiety, and vandalism appear less. (As cited by Hantler 2008:6).

Goleman questions, that in this climate with the current problems facing children, why emotional intelligence, which supports the important skills needed in life, should not be taught to every child, more so now than ever. (1996:287)

Children need more opportunities to explore all of their feelings as part of day to day life. This should not be taught in specific sessions, it is something that should happen as part of their learning experience as a whole. All of these emotions should be explored whether construed as positive or negative and the child given the appropriate skills and tools to deal with them. Antidote (2003:7)

suggests that when children are not given the opportunities to express any emotions they may have, this is when problems arise.

An issue that needs to be addressed when looking at fully supporting child emotions is staff training. Brotherson (2005:7) suggests that *"Emotional Intelligence is critical to life success. The part of the brain that regulates emotion is shaped early on by experiences and forms the brains emotional wiring. Early nurturing is important to learning empathy, happiness, hopefulness and resiliency."*

For some young children, their most positive early experiences come from early year's staff, which requires skilled trained staff with in an insight into all aspects of their emotional development.

Bahman and Maffini (2008:5) suggest that for teachers to support emotional development, they must be able to: recognise emotions, model suitable emotions, display empathy, provide children with time space and resources, assist in verbal skills when coping with difficult situations and support children as they build connections to their experiences. Attainment of this should not be left to chance which supports the ethos of staff training on emotional well being.

Therefore Emotional intelligence is an approach that should be encompassed and experienced throughout the whole curriculum for every child.

As highlighted above, support for children's emotional wellbeing should be an integral part of the curriculum, however, how do we fully support children with more extensive emotional needs. Throughout this project the reality of support offered to children with more complex emotional needs has been highlighted by staff and parents.

Doyle (2006:87) suggests that there are 2 opposing views regarding who can help children who have been abused. One suggestion is that it is the role of 'experts' to work with such children, whilst the other view is that any worker can do so, with the right skills.

"Practitioners are pulled to become a child's heroes, but in reality, we cannot provide the day to day, month to month and year to year commitment that

traumatized children need in order to rebuild attachments.” (Kagan 2004:270)
Kagan refers to all practitioners within a child’s life, who may come and go, causing more attachment issues.

Children who have more specific emotional, social or behavioural difficulties are now represented within the Additional Support for Learning Act (2004). Traditionally, children who had ‘special educational needs’ were supported, but this was limited to children with specific learning needs (Scottish Government 2010)

DESIGN

Ethical issues must always be considered before beginning any kind of research. Informed consent must be obtained by all participants of the study, including children, to ensure that they are fully informed of what they are contributing to. Obtaining this consent is in correlation with their Human Rights and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and respects the rights and responsibility of all participants. (Cohen et al 2004:51). Various methods can be used including written and pictorial, depending on cliental, to obtain this consent. All participants should be informed of the opt-out policy when taking part. Green states that *‘Informed staff and participation of parents, supports and enhances the development of a quality service’*. (2000:110).

Confidentiality is paramount within any research project and must be relayed to all participants, stating that exceptions will be made if a child was deemed to be at risk due to any disclosure. Kimmel (1988) suggest that unless assurance can be given on confidentiality when researching more sensitive subjects, potential respondents are more likely to refuse to co-operate. (As cited by Cohen 2004:62)

Baumrind (1964) talks about the negative effect some researchers can have on their participants by being too detached and too focused on their outcome to provide any level of engagement. The researcher has to ensure that his participants do not feel any loss of dignity, self esteem or have any negative experiences from the process. (As cited by Cohen 2004:59)

One has to be aware of their position within the research and how this can impact on the participants and the study. Reviewing Baumrind's viewpoint helped me to focus my research within my position of the management team and to enable the participants to be honest and not influenced by my position, yet still supporting them through the process in a positive way.

(Lewin 1946) a great social psychologist, discusses action research as a process leading to social action. He describes a 'spiral of steps' which encompass; planning, action and fact finding. As cited by Thomas (2009:112).

A research design (2009:70) was crucial to ensuring the research was thought through thoroughly, and mapped out with clear outcomes. This also helped to ensure that this piece of work had rigour and validity (MacNaughton & Hughes 2009:122).

Different paradigms may be used to carry out research. Using triangulation methodology is described by Miles and Huberman (1984:42) "*because you want to use different methods or sources to corroborate other*". As cited by Silverman (2000:98). This approach improves the reliability of any single method. Some researchers argue that each piece of research undertaken is valuable in its own right, needing no other verification, whereas other researchers argue that the integrity of each piece of research should be validated through numerous methods. (Thomas 2009:112).

As a primary researcher, both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques were used in the form of questionnaires, interviews and observation were used to gain vital information which helped shaped the direction of the study.

Questionnaires helped to obtain information from a larger audience. I was able to obtain a quantitative picture of staff views on a number of issues within my project. I concentrated my initial questionnaire on staff and later attempted with parents, but the limited response did not have had an impact on the study.

The results from this method alone can prove to be more limited and a multi-method approach is required to answer the questions that the results raise. Gillam states that "*results from questionnaires have a thin, abstract quality rather remote from the reality of people's lives*"(2000:81).

Robert-Holmes (2005:143) suggests that questionnaires can often raise more questions than answers and should be used in conjunction with other research methods including interviews, drawings and observations. This has been the case within my project and led me to carry on my findings in the form of interviews.

Interviews – both structured and unstructured allow the participants more of a voice in determining their views. Green (2000:13) suggests a 'combined approach' of the 2 allows for more of a balance in terms of controlling the interview with some degree of flexibility.

Kitwood (1977) questions the element of bias within an interview and suggests there could provide 'potential obstacles' to the research project. This is something that should be considered in the research design to ensure that it does not enter the study in this way. (As cited by Cohen et al 2004:267). The element of bias should be noted when ensuring the validity of the study.

FINDINGS

When starting this research project, there was a clear aim and focus for what I wanted to achieve. In reflection, I had a perceived knowledge of how I thought this research project would develop and the conclusions that would come out of this. Johnston (1994) states that "*research conclusions 'should not' derive from 'received wisdom about a subject' , but rather from what the researcher discovers during the course of the study*", as cited by Colman & Briggs (2002:4). The results I had perceived would be concluded as having indeed altered my original thinking on this subject.

To help begin the data analysis process, coding was a useful tool as described by MacNaughton & Hughes (2009:174) "*codes can simplify and standardize data ready for analysis.*" Through coding the data, I was able to identify associated

themes, a process advised by Mills (2007:123). The following themes emerged from the data analysis of interviews, questionnaires, observations and focus groups. **1)Resources; 2)More complex needs; 3)Training; 4)Practice to support emotional development.**

1) Resources

Staff identified resources currently used to support emotional well being and highlighted that difficulty arose with the resources for those children with more complex emotional needs.

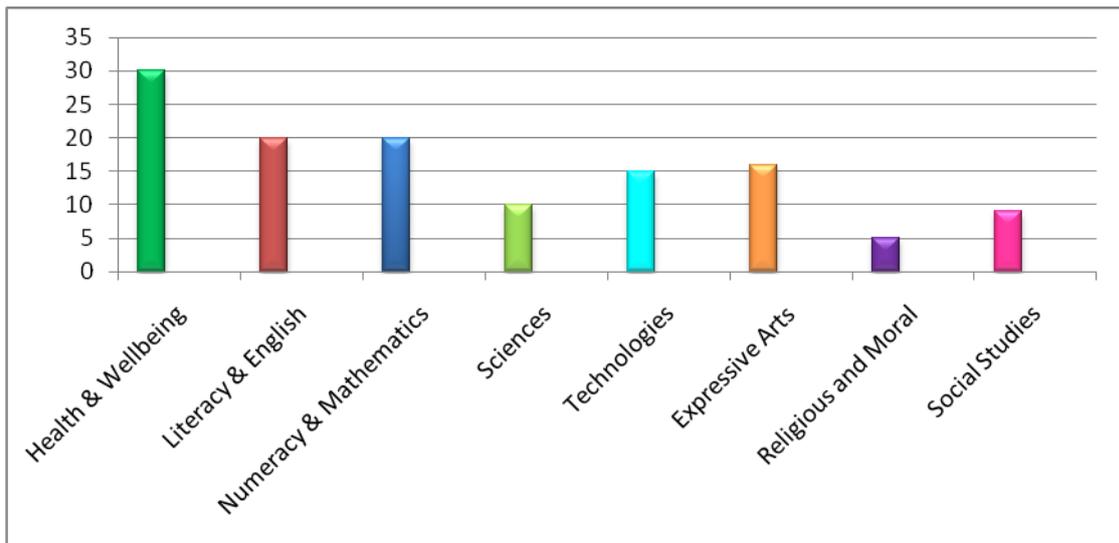
On the contrary, some parents felt that there were adequate resources and could identify circle time and the use of puppets as good examples of practice. Parents of children suffering trauma in some way, stated that staff may not have been as well equipped with resources to support their child on a specific subject i.e. death, but added that the nursery were very quick to buy new resources to support their child.

2) More complex needs

Staff indicated the varying need in children's emotions that they were working with. 85% of staff were able to identify children with more complex emotional needs as those children who had suffered trauma, poor attachments, abuse, neglect and grief. Staff felt that that they were equipped to deal with supporting children's emotions through play and positive praise and behaviour management strategies, however, felt ill equipped with the more challenging children.

3) Training

Staff felt that with the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, they have had lots of training on planning, assessing, the principles of the curriculum and more specific to the outcomes, literacy and numeracy. Staff held a strong views on the importance of Health & Wellbeing within the curriculum, however have had no training in this area, as highlighted within questionnaires. (Highlighted below).



Outcomes and Experiences

The results from 30 questionnaires of Early Years staff highlighted that all staff questioned viewed Health and Wellbeing as one of the most important aspects of the curriculum. Followed up by interviews, 30 staff all stated that they had not received any local authority support on this area of the curriculum.

To further investigate this area, 17 staff were interviewed and given a forum to suggest what training they felt would enhance their practice in working with children's emotional development. 2 areas of development were identified by the largest majority of staff – 32% suggested they needed more knowledge on attachments and 32% felt they needed more support on strategies for dealing with traumatised children. (As highlighted below).



4) Practice to support emotional development

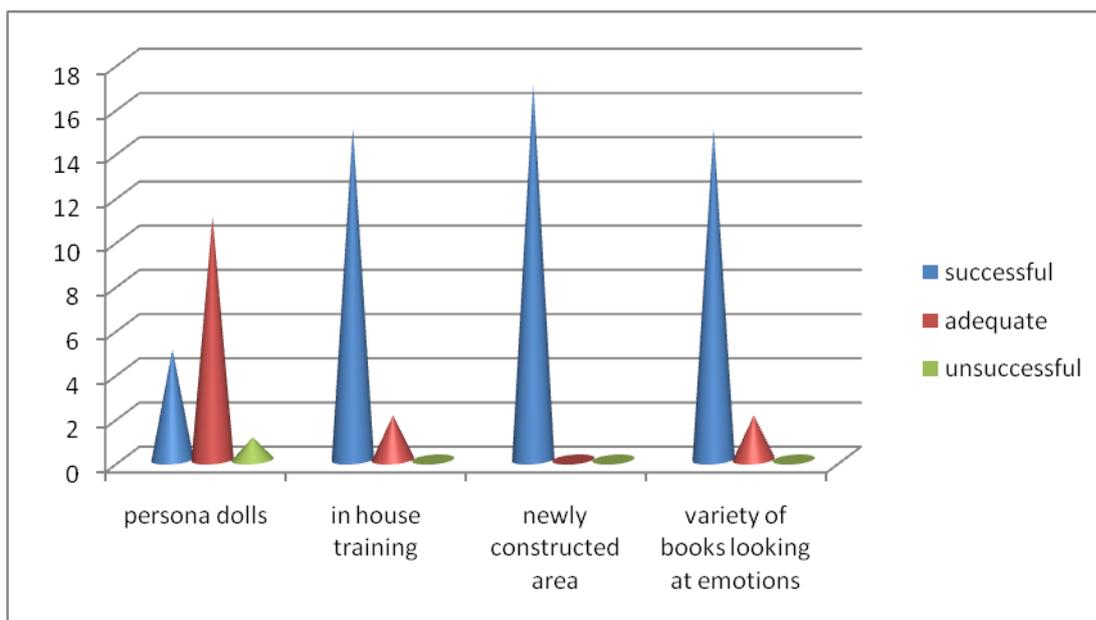
Through utilising information from staff meetings and follow up interviews, staff were able to identify what they would perceive to enhance their practice in promoting children’s emotional wellbeing. I was able to substantiate enough evidence to inform an action plan to enhance practice. The following information was highlighted from this evidence.

- Purchase new resources; including books, any resources that enabled children to explore their feelings (i.e. ‘a box full of feelings’)
- Training on attachments, dealing with traumatised children.
- Create a specific area in which children can explore emotions with or without adult support.
- Review of the principle of circle time for newer members of staff who did not receive the Jenny Mosley training.

Recognising the need to offer support in dealing with vulnerable children’s emotions, in service training was offered to staff. Jenny Mosley’s suggests that if you want to esteem children, focus on the adults who care for them. We need

to raise staff moral through personal and collective care plans and to keep a check on mental health and our most valuable resource, staff energy. The feedback from this training highlighted the support that was needed to allow staff to recognise how their emotions could have an impact on the child and also to have a greater understanding of the process of environmental factors on children’s emotional wellbeing.

The review of current practice has led to the development of an area in which children can access on their own or with an adult to explore their emotions. Observations have highlighted that of the children accessing the area, over the period of a week, 90% of the children using the area for a purpose were those children who have Staged Intervention or IEP’s to support their emotional development. Interview results highlighted staff views on how successful implementations have been in supporting children’s emotional development.



Of all implementations put in place, the newly constructed area has proved to be the most successful, with 100% agreeing to this. All other implementations have proven to be successful in some ways. 88% agree that the training offered had been successful and evaluations highlighted that it had helped staff re evaluate their thinking.

ANALYSIS OF PROJECT

Coleman and Briggs (2002:287) discuss the process of analysis in 2 stages. The first stage, encompasses all of the data including the presentation of graphs, charts, summaries of interviews, and the patterns, differences, trends that emerge from this. The second stage involves analysing these patterns and discovering what this means in terms of the desired outcomes of the project.

The initial research questions had to be altered for this study as 'time' was a key issue. Cohen et al suggests that planning for time injects reality into the study and allows the practicalities of the studies to be looked at first (2004:74). I had planned how much time would be needed to carry out the research I wanted to undertake with the children, however, I had not foreseen the interruptions that went on with the day to day running of the nursery.

My research questions were then altered to focus more on the views of staff, parents and other professionals in supporting the children. Unfortunately, views from other professionals including Education Psychologists and Quality Improvements Officers could not be included in the study due to insufficient time on their behalf. Much of the research has been based around the views of staff and parents and observations from practice.

Qualitative data collection techniques were the primary research methods that were used within this research project. The initial course of methodology was questionnaires with staff from 4 staff Early Education and Childcare Centres within the local authority. The depth of my 2nd questionnaire was informed by the pilot which proved too vague.

The use of the Likert Scale (Thomas 2009:178) within the questionnaires was informative in determining viewpoints on a fuller scale. When constructing the questionnaires, I considered the use of Routing questions (Gillham 2000:33) but felt it more appropriate to follow up the questionnaires with interview.

After conducting and analysing a series of questionnaires, I learned that one sole method of research did not result in my perceived or desired depth of answers that would assist me in developing an action plan for improvement or indeed

help me to answer the research question. Cohen et al (2004:112) suggests that using a triangulation approach (the use of 2 or more methods) ensures validity in the research and can reduce the element of bias.

On interviewing, the structured interview was used initially with staff and parents; however, it proved to be too restricting and did not give participants a chance to develop their thoughts further within the questions asked.

“What distinguishes structured from semi structured and unstructured interviews is the degree of control exercised by the researcher over the nature of the responses and the length of the answers allowed by the respondent.”

Denscombe 2004:167 This is something that I’d agree with and it was a skill that I had to master quickly. The content of my first semi structured interviews were very sporadic in detail and very easily strayed from the point. .

Denscombe (2003:184) suggests that recording the interview can lose some of the authenticity could be lost when recording, as the researcher has to edit and tidy up the talk to make it understandable. The opposite proved more problematic when writing notes during the interview as some key point could be missed as the researcher tries to listen to the participant whilst taking notes.

CONCLUSION

There are many misconceptions that a child’s learning is all about literacy and numeracy and this should be given the highest regard within the curriculum. The research highlighted suggests otherwise and has built on several theories that building a child’s emotional intelligence being paramount to their overall learning and achievements in life. Still, more studies and research have to be conveyed, particularly within local authorities to highlight the importance of these theories and its place within the modern day curriculum.

With the curriculum for excellence, emphasis is based on equipping children for their future development with a bank of skills as well as knowledge. Now, more priorities have to be placed on the training needs and competencies of staff working with young children and realising the important role they play in their

lives. The findings within this project have highlighted the views of staff working with more vulnerable children and their complex emotional needs. Staff feel unsupported in dealing with issues that could potentially shape a child's future education and skills needed in life. I would consider staff to be the main resource in supporting a child's emotional development and this resource should be utilised to their full potential.

Goleman (1996:262) argues that emotional intelligence should be integral part of the curriculum for all children and not be singled out for 'troubled' children. Whilst I agree with this in principle, in my opinion, there must also be support given to those 'troubled' children to give them the equal opportunities within their education and development of their future.

He suggests that the goal of developing children's social and emotional well being is to build a set of skills and understanding that is essential for all children. The Curriculum for Excellence shows more potential in developing this in young children within the 4 capacities and responsibilities for all in terms of health and wellbeing, however, one question the importance placed on this area when there is no staff development support.

Policy documents and legislation offers a level of commitment to children's emotional wellbeing, particularly the Additional Support for Learning Act (2004), however these policy documents have to be filtered down to the staff working with the children and training provided accordingly.

By engaging staff and parents in this research project, I feel that they have become involved in the journey I have undertaken to investigate the support given and emphasis placed on children's emotions in the early years. Mills states that *"for educational change to be successful, all those involved must be optimistic about the results of the transformation."* (2007:158)

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