

BERA-TACTYC

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH REVIEW 2003-2017

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE REVIEW

British Educational Research Association Early Childhood
Special Interest Group and TACTYC: Association for
Professional Development in Early Years

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, over fifty academics from two early years organisations, TACTYC: Association for Professional Development in Early Years (then chaired by Jane Payler) and the BERA Early Childhood Special Interest Group (then convened by Elizabeth Wood) came together to co-lead a research-focused collaboration to produce policy advice, to revisit and update the 2003 BERA research review and to produce a professional user review. These will both be freely available for download from the [BERA](#) and [TACTYC](#) websites. Although limited expenses and production costs have been paid by BERA EC SIG and TACTYC, the work has been largely unfunded and the research team and reference group members have given freely of their time and expertise.

The Review considers research findings from UK research since 2003 pertaining to five identified themes and their policy contexts: Professionalism; Parenting and the Family; Play and Pedagogy; Learning, Development and Curriculum; and Assessment and School Readiness. The 2017 Review has not taken policy or inclusion as separate themes, because these are threaded through all of the chapters. The age range of the review is birth to seven years. The term early childhood includes children, their families, communities and the adults who work with them in different contexts – centre- or home-based, formal and informal settings. Early childhood incorporates education and care as inseparable aspects of provision.

In this document we summarise the key findings from the Review under each of the themes.

PROFESSIONALISM

Jane Payler and Geraldine Davis

- ECEC workforce has shifted to one with higher levels of qualification, but this has not been reflected in policies *requiring* higher levels of qualification, nor in improvements in status, pay, career pathways or conditions of service.
- Workforce is still largely female, younger than in other sectors and hampered by a lack of coherence in policy relating to qualifications and associated career progression.
- Turnover of staff has reduced but challenges remain in recruiting sufficient staff, particularly in recruiting and paying qualified staff.
- Settings employing staff with higher qualification levels tend to be associated with greater likelihood of achieving a higher inspection rating. However, opportunities for graduates to influence practice in their settings vary. Context for leadership matters and a shifting policy context and underinvestment have made it difficult for roles to be improved and embedded.
- Shifts in the conceptualisation of professionalism continue to challenge its formulation in policy and government rhetoric. Emphasis in research on the high levels of skill, sophisticated levels of operation and emotional and attitudinal competence demanded of practitioners in early years settings belie policy direction characterised by managerialism, based on rhetoric that suggests a view of the workforce as deficient.
- Models of professional development and learning have become characterised by process-oriented effective learning communities. These acknowledge the challenges faced by increasingly complex demands on the sector, for example in interprofessional practice and care and education of the youngest children, and therefore the need for emotional containment and mentoring over time.
- Quality narratives run throughout policy and research in relation to professionalism. Though a contested term, the influence of 'quality' is felt in relation to qualifications, roles, the evolving nature of professional practice, leadership and children's experiences and outcomes.

PARENTING AND THE FAMILY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Pam Jarvis and Jan Georgeson

- Parenting has been construed as a skilled role and has become a site for individual accountability in the neoliberal context of 'freedom of choice', where making the 'correct' choices is paramount.
- Working class parents, particularly mothers, are in a double bind of being expected to work long hours away from family for low wages, while being expected to invest time and expertise into parenting well.
- Relationships between ECEC staff and parents rarely address adequately the inherent tensions in their identities, particularly for working class parents whose parenting can be construed as deficient.
- Universal parenting programmes have lower than desired take-up rates and tend to be modelled on middle-class parenting values, 'common-sense' or traditional parenting activities. Some apparently universal schemes are actually targeted through the locality in which they are offered.
- Programmes aimed at reducing social inequalities such as Sure Start and Incredible Years show outcomes related to reducing social inequalities. Yet few policies address the conditions that make consistent parenting more likely at the societal level.
- Targeted parenting interventions are most frequently centred on children's behavioural development, which tend to have better evidence of effectiveness than those focused on attachment or cognitive development.
- Negative parenting strategies involving punishment are more likely to be associated with parental and child mental health problems.
- Non-specific programme factors, such as relationships between helper and client can make it difficult to garner strong evidence to support the widespread use of interventions.
- The strongest evidence overall is for programmes targeting early risk in child development.
- Measurable effects of intervention programmes are most likely to be ascertained in large-scale, strongly framed programmes. Yet, while smaller flexible and tailored programmes are unlikely to meet evaluation criteria so well, they may in fact produce better local outcomes.

PLAY AND PEDAGOGY

Elizabeth Wood and Liz Chesworth

- Play is a golden thread that runs through much of the literature related to learning and development. The early years curriculum continues to be hindered by controversies related to increasing formalisation of content delivery and the didactic role of adults. Further research is needed to show how practitioners in the four UK contexts are responding to these challenges.
- The tensions between adult-led and child-initiated play remain evident, with policy emphases on educational play tending to privilege 'teaching through play'.
- Children's multi-modal communicative practices in play reveal the complexity of their thinking, understanding and relationships. Content knowledge is evident in children's play, but practitioners do not consistently recognise or build on this in their teaching.
- The links between play, learning and development are not consistently established across the different areas of the curriculum. Further research is needed on the funds of knowledge that children bring to their play, and how these can be developed within education settings.
- Children's interests are evident in play, which has the potential to strengthen curriculum and pedagogical decisions.
- Progression in play is not understood or represented in policy frameworks, especially beyond the age of five.
- Children's agency is central to how they organise and develop their play with peers and with different materials.

LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND CURRICULUM

Janet Rose and Louise Gilbert

- UK early years specialists should consider the growing evidence from the neurosciences regarding early brain development and its impact on learning, particularly in relation to executive function, self-regulation and metacognition.
- New understanding about the neurophysiology of social and emotional development and its impact on learning requires further exploration, as does the importance of articulating both practitioners' and children's underlying emotions and their impact on behaviour, learning and practice.
- More attention is needed on broader elements of mathematical learning beyond numerosity, as well as a greater emphasis on scientific enquiry.
- More research is needed on the importance of physical literacy, movement play and the potential neuro-developmental impact on all areas of learning.
- Health promotion is an under-researched area and merits further attention in relation to early years settings
- Arts-based learning also merits further exploration.
- More research is needed to address the conflicting evidence of the benefits and drawbacks of digital technology in children's learning and development.
- Debates about whether curriculum and practice should be driven by policy and political agendas rather than by developmentally and culturally appropriate evidence-based practice need to be resolved, in order to address continuing conflicts between pedagogical principles and the demands of performativity
- Conflicting evidence regarding adults' roles in learning and development needs to be addressed through a comprehensive review.
- Research on early learning and development should accommodate the interplay between local and global influences in a context of changing views of early childhood, early learning and early years pedagogy.

ASSESSMENT AND SCHOOL READINESS

Phillip Hood and Helena Mitchell

- Research has suggested various diagnostic assessments that might predict later attainment and has been cautiously positive about potential benefits, but drawing conclusions about cohorts from assessment measures remains difficult.
- Assessment systems always have a washback influence on curriculum and pedagogy.
- Assessment that is formative, individual and based on rich, situated accounts of children's learning and agency are most valued, although such assessment runs counter to government directives in England for score-based baseline assessment.
- Policy-driven focus, particularly in England, on assessment of 'core subjects' shows substantial gaps in attainment between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children at ages 4-5 years. However, the narrowing of the focus and format of assessment and its use for performance monitoring define a particular and limited version of a 'successful learner', effectively marginalising some children such as bilingual learners.
- 'School readiness' as a concept did not really appear in English government rhetoric until 2011 and then began to show increasing influence in policy-related documents between 2012 and 2014. The Scottish Executive recognised the different conceptualisations and complexity around school readiness as early as 2004.
- Conceptualisations of quality and school readiness are both closely aligned and contested, and are frequently left inadequately defined.
- Contradictory policy discourses about the nature of children's learning and thus about their 'readiness' can make it difficult for parents to understand their children's progress.
- Research points to gender differences, age-in-cohort differences and to differences in the experiences and needs of bilingual learners and disabled children in relation to 'readiness' and transitions. Pedagogic strategies that are dialogic and personalised and thus supportive of children's agency and self-regulation are associated with children's developing confidence and competence.

POSTSCRIPT

There are significant gaps in research in ECEC. Firstly, the Review shows that where diversities are incorporated, there tends to be a focus on social class, inequalities, gender and, to some extent, the inclusion/exclusion of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and related issues for families. There is less focus in the UK on issues of race and ethnicity. Secondly, there is little research on the impact on practice of regulatory bodies, such as Ofsted, and relatively little policy research. Critical, post-modern and post-human perspectives are showing promise here, with attention to the power effects of policy on children, families and communities.

Thirdly, there are few large-scale and longitudinal studies, probably because these are costly to fund, but also because they are most likely to be international or at least EU studies. If such studies are UK-funded, they tend to follow particular policy drivers (for example 'what works', effective interventions) with an underlying economic effectiveness imperative. Finally, there is a need for interdisciplinary research to shed light on multi-faceted and complex issues, and for co-produced research that draws on a wide range of methods to engage children, families, communities and professionals. Key questions remain about whose voices are heard from research, and how research can be used to influence or change policy and practice.

The voices of members of the ECEC professional community are important, in practitioner research, in independent academic research, and in critical analyses of policies and their effects. Fortunately, this 2017 BERA TACTYC Review shows that research in ECEC is thriving: many of the research themes in the UK connect with international research, and there is much scope for international collaboration and comparative research. The ethical nature of our research connects to wider socio-political concerns with equity, equality and diversities in society. ECEC research must continue to reflect changes in society, to engage with different communities, and to have sustained impact to those who matter most – children, their families and practitioners.



The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is the home of educational research in the United Kingdom. BERA is a membership association committed to advancing knowledge of education by sustaining a strong and high quality educational research community. Together with our members BERA is working to advance research quality, build research capacity and foster research engagement. Aspiring to be the home of all educational researchers in the UK, BERA provides opportunities for everyone active in this field to contribute through its portfolio of publications, annual conference and other events, and active peer community of 33 Special Interest Groups.



TACTYC promotes and advocates the highest quality professional development for all early years educators in order to enhance the educational well-being of the youngest children.

TACTYC was founded in 1978 by a group of early years teacher trainers who recognised how isolated they were feeling in their work and how supportive and developmental it could be to come together with others in a similar position on a regular basis. Today, TACTYC has broadened its base to welcome people from a wide range of early years backgrounds; early years researchers, education consultants and professionals working with children and families in day-care, education, health, play work and social service contexts. TACTYC also warmly welcomes students from across these areas.

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ISBN 978-1-5272-0997-8

