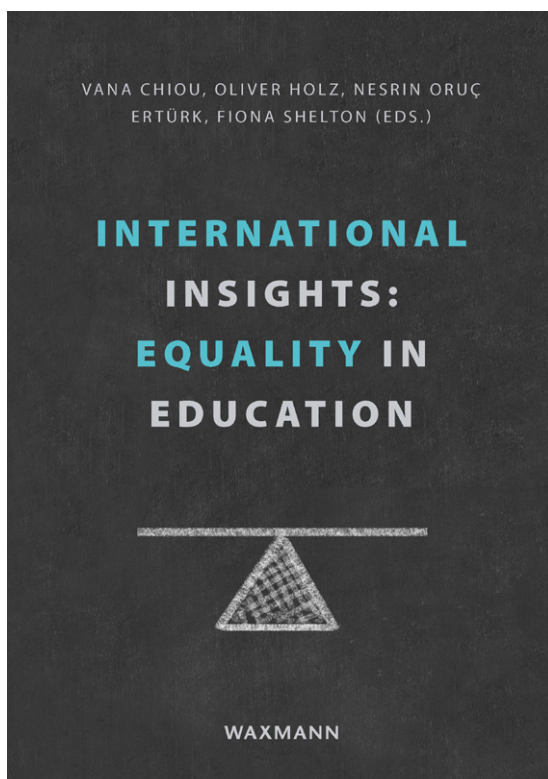


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“Understanding the World”

A Pilot Study of Effective Practice and
Provision in Early Years Settings



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“Understanding the World”

A Pilot Study of Effective Practice and Provision in Early Years Settings

Gillian Forrester, Ruth Hudson-Gill & Jim Pugh

This small-scale study explored effective practice and provision in early years settings to support children’s learning. The research was funded by an Opportunity Area programme, a government policy for dealing with social mobility through education. The research investigated the experiences and perceptions of early years practitioners in relation to the Understanding the World area of learning which incorporates three of the seventeen Early Learning Goals contained within the Early Years Foundation Stage. These Early Learning Goals are: ‘People and Communities’, ‘The World’ and ‘Technology’. The study was conducted within the city of Stoke-on-Trent in England where official published data reveals only 71 % of pupils achieve or exceed the expected standard against the Understanding the World area of learning where the national average is 83 %. The research adopted a mixed methods approach comprising an online survey and semi-structured interviews with practitioners working with children in private and maintained day nurseries and primary school reception classes where good and outstanding results are achieved for the city’s disadvantaged children. The findings of the study include the identification of best practice examples along with features of effective provision. Barriers to children’s progression and attainment of these specific Early Learning Goals were also ascertained. The implications for practice and further research are presented.

Key words: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), understanding the world, early years practitioners, effective early years provision, barriers to children’s progression and attainment.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a small-scale study which explored effective practice and provision in early years settings to support children’s learning. The research was funded by an Opportunity Area programme, an aspect of government policy for dealing with social mobility through education (DfE, 2017a). The Opportunities Area programme includes increased funding and support from the Department for Education (DfE) to tackle the greatest challenges identified in each area.

Stoke-on-Trent is economically deprived and has wards (i.e. administrative divisions of the city) where there is evidence of considerable socio-economic disadvantage. Many of the city’s children and young people experience and/or are at risk of experiencing poverty and social exclusion now, while still in compulsory education, and in the future beyond schooling. It is known that children living in the most deprived wards of this city are least likely to achieve the required standard and that their educational progression and attainment is exacerbated by economic and structural inequalities (DfE, 2017b).

The study's remit relates to Priority 1 of Stoke-on-Trent's Opportunity Area programme delivery plan (DfE, 2017b) to improve outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to enable the city's children to have the best possible start in life and learning. The aims of the research were firstly to determine the features of best practice and effective provision as identified by early years practitioners and secondly, to ascertain the key challenges and barriers to children attaining the Understanding the World Early Learning. As such, the research investigated the experiences and perceptions of early years practitioners in the Understanding the World area of learning, which incorporates three of the seventeen Early Learning Goals (ELGs) contained within the EYFS. These ELGs are: "People and Communities", "The World" and "Technology". The EYFS is a distinct phase of the English education system for children from birth to 5 years old and sets the standards and legal requirements for promoting the learning, development and safety of children in the early years (Early Education, 2012). Data shows only 71% of pupils in Stoke-on-Trent achieve or exceed the expected standard for the Understanding the World Area of Learning compared to the national average of 83% (Stoke-on-Trent Local Authority, 2016 & 2017). Gaining a more comprehensive insight into how practitioners deliver the Understanding the World area of learning and assess its accompanying ELGs may help, in part, to explain why some children across the city make progress and others do not. The research was driven by three broad questions:

1. In terms of practice and pedagogy, what features of best practice can be identified?
2. What features contribute to effective provision regarding the settings' understanding, teaching delivery and progression and attainment of children towards the Understanding the World Early Learning Goals?
3. What, if any, are the challenges and barriers to children attaining the Understanding the World Early Learning Goals?

The research adopted a mixed methods approach to address these questions comprising an online survey and semi-structured interviews with practitioners working with children in settings in Stoke-on-Trent rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted.

The paper provides a brief review of some relevant literature in relation to the EYFS and the Understanding the World Area of Learning. The research design and methodology are then described. The findings section presents the key themes emerging and the barriers to children's attainment and progression. The conclusion discusses the contribution of these findings for local policy makers and early years practitioners. Suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Literature Review: The Early Years Foundation Stage

The introduction of formal curriculum for the early years phase (birth to 5 years) is a significant and relatively recent development in the education system in England. The introduction of the Foundation Stage in 2000 was an extension of the National Curriculum and comprised six ELGs and statutory guidance. Subsequently, in 2008, the EYFS came into being, was revised in 2012 and updated in 2014 and again in 2017. The review of the EYFS (Tickell, 2011) gave prominence to the notion of partnership between practitioners and parents/

carers; this emphasis features in subsequent versions of the EYFS. This gives weight to the claim that young children’s learning is socially mediated, and they learn through positive relationships and enabling environments (Beauchamp, 2016). The learning and development requirements of the statutory framework of the EYFS (Early Education, 2012) are covered in three prime areas: communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development. Connected to the three prime areas are four specific areas of learning, namely: literacy, mathematics, understanding of the world, and expressive arts and design (Nutbrown et al., 2013). These developments have not been without controversy, however, in relation to, for example the impact of the reforms on early years pedagogy, play, national assessment and assessment processes, national standards and mandated changes to practice in the early years (Forrester & Garratt, 2016; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Forrester and Garratt (2016) purport the changes require practitioners to relentlessly assess and monitor children. Their concerns echo those from practitioners, academics and organisations who regard the curriculum targets as too demanding for young children and the system as overly bureaucratic.

Beauchamp (2016) purports the role of early years practitioners is to support children’s positive dispositions for learning and help children develop “a variety of relationships and partnerships” (p. 424). This assists children in broadening their knowledge and experience of the wider world around them within and outside the setting by providing opportunities for observation and physical exploration. Construction of knowledge by children is reliant on the interactions with others, the learning environment and the community in which they live (Glenton, 2012). Indeed, as de Brito Miranda, Jófili and dos Anjos Carneiro-Leão (2017) suggest, this is an “intense work of creation” (p. 195) and a challenge for early childhood education professionals in their quest to understand the world of a child. Exclusion from social experiences arguably limits the child’s ability to form mental representations of their world as they grow and develop.

The challenge for educators is to determine what formative experiences children have not been exposed to and how to create these opportunities (Garrick, 2014). The Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (Early Education, 2012) outlines the “Characteristics of Effective Learning” through play and exploration, active learning and creating and thinking critically. Further recognition is afforded to the “unique child” and the influence of the child’s relationships, their environment and the communities and cultures they belong to. Given this emphasis on effective learning and the child’s social world, the EYFS only stipulates Understanding of the World to be a specific area of learning which focusses on People and Communities, The World, and Technology. Nahmad-Williams and Simmons (2018) recognise the importance of this area of learning in terms of it providing the opportunity for children to be able to explore and make sense of the world in which they live, and to recognise and appreciate its natural and man-made elements. As such, they suggest this area of learning should be taught in a cross-curricular way, embedded into all other prime and specific areas of the EYFS. Little is known about the delivery and assessment of this particular area of learning of the early years curriculum. This study sought to address this particular gap in the literature.

3. Research Design and Methodology

Focusing specifically on practice, the research explored perspectives of early years practitioners in relation to delivering and assessing the Understanding the World aspect of the early years curriculum. The research adopted a mixed methods approach to address these questions comprising an online survey and semi-structured interviews with practitioners working with children in settings in Stoke-on-Trent with good and outstanding Ofsted results. The online survey was regarded as the most suitable means of reaching early years practitioners in a range of different settings in order to capture their attitudes. This method also reduced the potential for biased interpretations and provided greater opportunity to generalise findings. Conducting follow-up interviews was advantageous for investigating in greater depth the context in which practitioners work and obtaining a more detailed understanding of their perspectives. Ethical approval to conduct this research was granted by Staffordshire University's Ethics Committee. The research also adhered to the Ethics Guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

3.1 Sample

The early years settings comprised private and maintained day nurseries and reception classes in primary schools and reflects the array of provision in the UK where the forms of early years provision are diverse and are grouped in three sectors. There is the public sector provision; these providers of early years education are maintained and funded by local authorities (who are responsible locally for a range of public services) or funded by central government. There is the private sector provision, which charges fees and also the voluntary sector provision comprises, for example, community playgroups or nurseries. With regards to the public sector provision for children aged under four years old there are local authority-maintained nursery schools and nursery classes linked to a primary school for children aged under four years old. Reception classes are for children aged four to five years old and children begin formal compulsory education when they enter primary school. The survey invitation was distributed, via the Stoke-on-Trent Local Authority (LA) Early Years and school lead officers, to 74 early years settings and 70 school-based settings. After the data were cleaned, for ex-

Table 1: Sample of survey respondents

	Role/position held within the institution	Number of respondents
Schools	Head teacher	4
	Deputy head teacher	1
	EYFS lead/teacher/assistant head	14 (2 Special Educational Needs Coordinators – SENCOs)
Nurseries	Nursery manager	4 (2 SENCOs)
	Key person	1
Total		24

ample to remove incomplete responses, the number of respondents totalled 24, which is a response rate of 21%. Fifteen LA primary schools, 6 academy schools and 7 nurseries were contacted with view to arranging interviews with early years practitioners in 4 nurseries and 4 primary schools. Of the four primary schools in the sample, two were LA primary and two academies. Four interviews were undertaken with nurseries. Tables 1 and 2 below show the two sample groups.

Table 2: Sample of interview participants

Role/position held within the institution	Number of participants
Nursery manager	2
Nursery deputy manager	2
Early years lead practitioner (School)	4
Total participants	8

3.2 Research Tools and Data Analysis

The city’s EYFS Profile data (Stoke-on-Trent Local Authority, 2016 & 2017) was drawn upon for desk-based research and analysis of recent trends and patterns (space constraints regarding the maximum length of this paper prevent their reporting here). Helpful preliminary discussions were conducted with a lead practitioner (nursery) and two reception teachers (primary school) in relation to developing the research questions. Seventeen questions were designed for the online survey which comprised a mix of question types; some closed/nominal questions, some multiple choice and some questions using a Likert scale. Respondents were asked to comment on all three ELGs within the Understanding the World area of learning in relation to areas of best practice, features of effective provision and challenges and barriers to progression and attainment. These questions generated quantitative data to calculate simple statistics (frequencies) as relevant. The survey also contained some open questions to generate qualitative responses, these were analysed with the interview data. Eight questions were developed for the interview schedule with practitioners. These focused on addressing the main research questions in terms of practice and pedagogy by asking participants to provide examples of best practice, to inquire what they consider the features of effective provision in their early years settings and challenges and barriers to children’s progression and attainment in relation to their setting. The interviews also explored the extent to which participants’ initial training and continuous training aided their delivery of Understanding the World. Each interview was then transcribed, and the data were analysed. The findings are presented below.

4. Findings

4.1 People and Communities ELG13: Best Practice

Survey respondents were asked how often they talked to children about events in their own life (Figure 1); 94% reported this was at least half of the time the children attended to always talking to children about their home. Children share with the setting home information 73% of the time. When asked how often providers share information with parents about events from the setting 100% felt this was at least half the time the child attended to always. However, 29% of respondents felt parents shared events from home around half of the time to always in relation to their child’s attendance at the setting.

Best practice was described by participants as, “bridging the gap between nursery and home” (Nursery 2) and included “spending a lot of time” promoting home links with families and creating links and networks with the local community. Parents and grandparents were invited into the setting and contributed their professional skills, for example. Participants emphasised the time taken to create links and maintain these relationships overtime to aid future visits from family members and organisations.

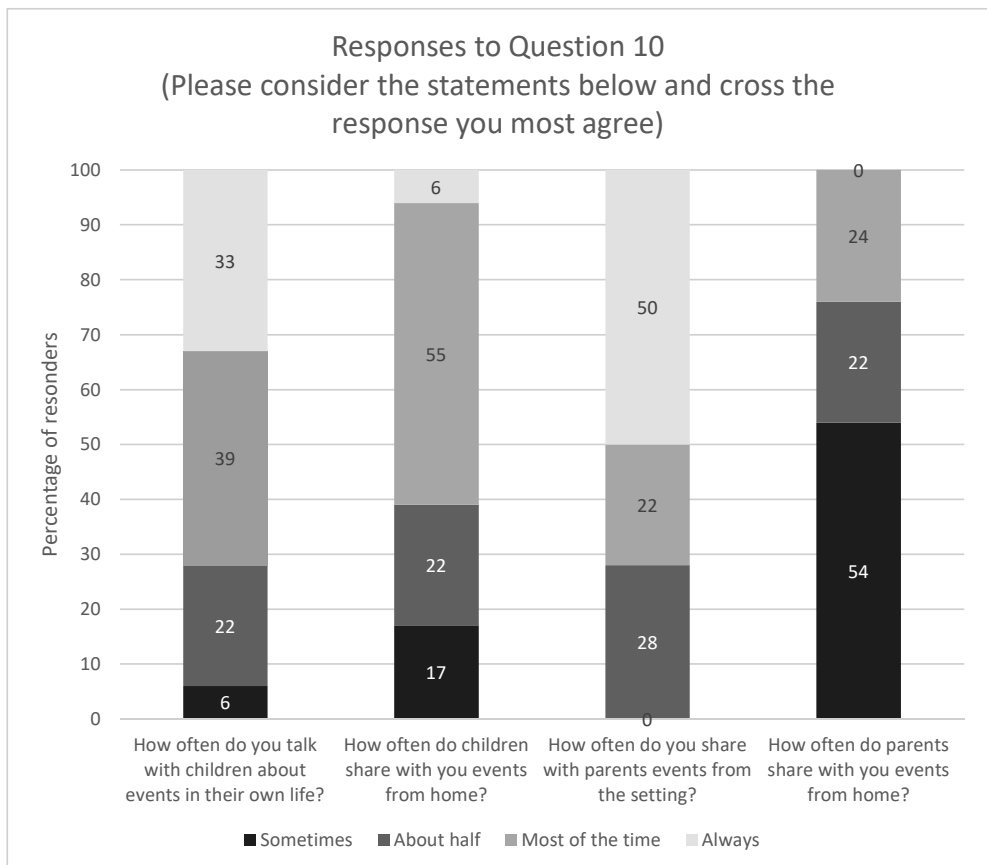


Figure 1: Q10 survey data

4.2 People and Communities ELG13: Effective Provision

Participants demonstrated creativity in developing links with people living and working in the wider community and this contributed to effective provision. The ability of providers to build relationships with parents and learn about their wider lives, for example, work experience, cultural traditions and interests, required an investment of time. This time investment was viewed positively because it provided opportunities to share relevant examples with children who could often demonstrate heightened sensitivity to difference and acceptance. Five providers have developed a strong relationship with local community police officers. The officers called into their provision regularly, offered activities and occasionally worked with the children who were then able to demonstrate understanding of their role. For example, “Our PCSO [police community support officer] is so helpful, they become familiar to the children who see them in the community too” (School 2). Other local services also support progression and attainment, six interviewees mentioned the fire service. For example, “The fire service visits are so much fun and aid language” (School 3) and “We are arranging for the Fire Service to come in, the children take so much from this” (Nursery 2). This is due to these kinds of visits providing opportunities for practitioners to model language use, to give children a real purpose for using words they might not typically encounter, and to extend dialogue. Providers invited professional staff and parents to talk with the children about their work or traditions which also deepened the children’s opportunities to understand different viewpoints and experiences. Providers also worked to identify ways to engage the children in the wider community by visiting local landmarks, and community facilities.

4.3 The World ELG14: Best Practice

Best practice features of this area include similar activities for People and Communities with an emphasis on pro-active engagement of providers to spend time organising and planning enriching events that encompass this ELG. For example, one provider commented that “we are a resource, we are the best resource that the [children] could have . . . it has to come from us really” (Nursery 2). The range of best practices shared include caring for living things in the setting such as class pets and having their own garden to grow plants. Those settings with wider access to grounds and outdoor areas had more opportunities to provide children with a wider range of experiences such as forest school (School 1, School 2, and Nursery 3). Relating these experiences to the children’s own experience was reported as an important part of The World ELG to help children associate the differences between, homes, the setting and the wider world.

One question worth highlighting here is the response to survey Q13 which addressed the myriad of components within the ELG to gain an understanding of these and provider confidence in delivery to support children’s understanding to aid progression. Respondents are extremely confident that the setting supports children well to understand similarities and differences between objects, materials and living things (see Figure 2). Respondents are less confident that the settings can support child comprehension of similarities and differences between places, features of the child’s environment and others (see Figure 2). This may be

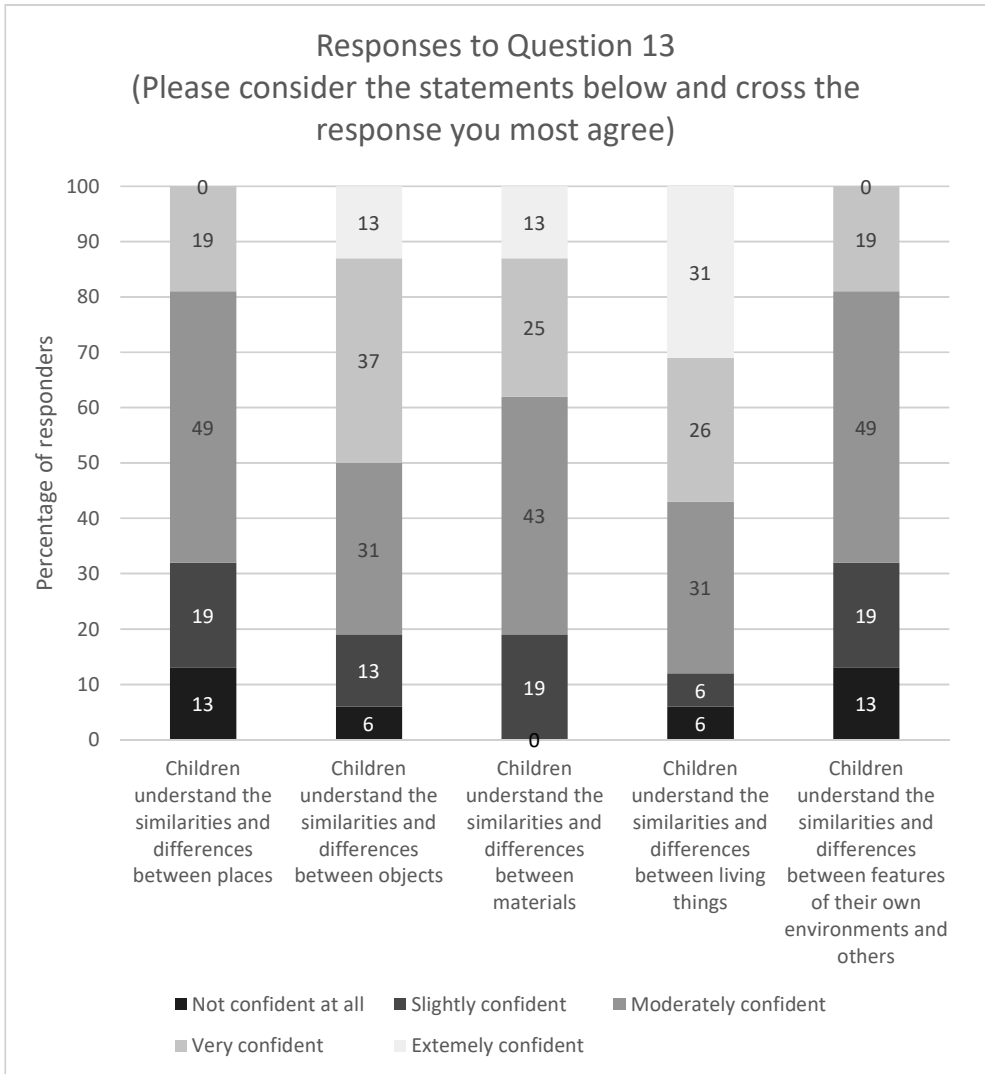


Figure 2: Q13 survey data

due to a range of cultures and limitations to families accessing external opportunities to build the foundations of understanding for these components (School 3).

4.4 The World ELG14: Effective Provision

Practitioners explored The World ELG using themes which they incorporated across their respective early years setting and linked to external activities. For example, one participant explained how they link a number of activities to one theme, in this case “Under the Sea” providing resources to identify sea life. The setting is decorated to this theme and outside activities will also be thematic “we put sea life creatures (models) in the water trays outside”

(Nursery 1). Effective practice to support themes included the use of social media resources, including shared Facebook groups with other early years practitioners and resources and Pinterest. All nursery participants interviewed cited identifying and gathering these kinds of resources in their own time. One participant described changing continuous provision from teacher to child-led (School 1).

4.5 Technology ELG15: Best Practice

Practitioners described a range of technologies that are used widely across the settings such as interactive whiteboard, story tins and headphones for story times (Nursery 3) and mobile

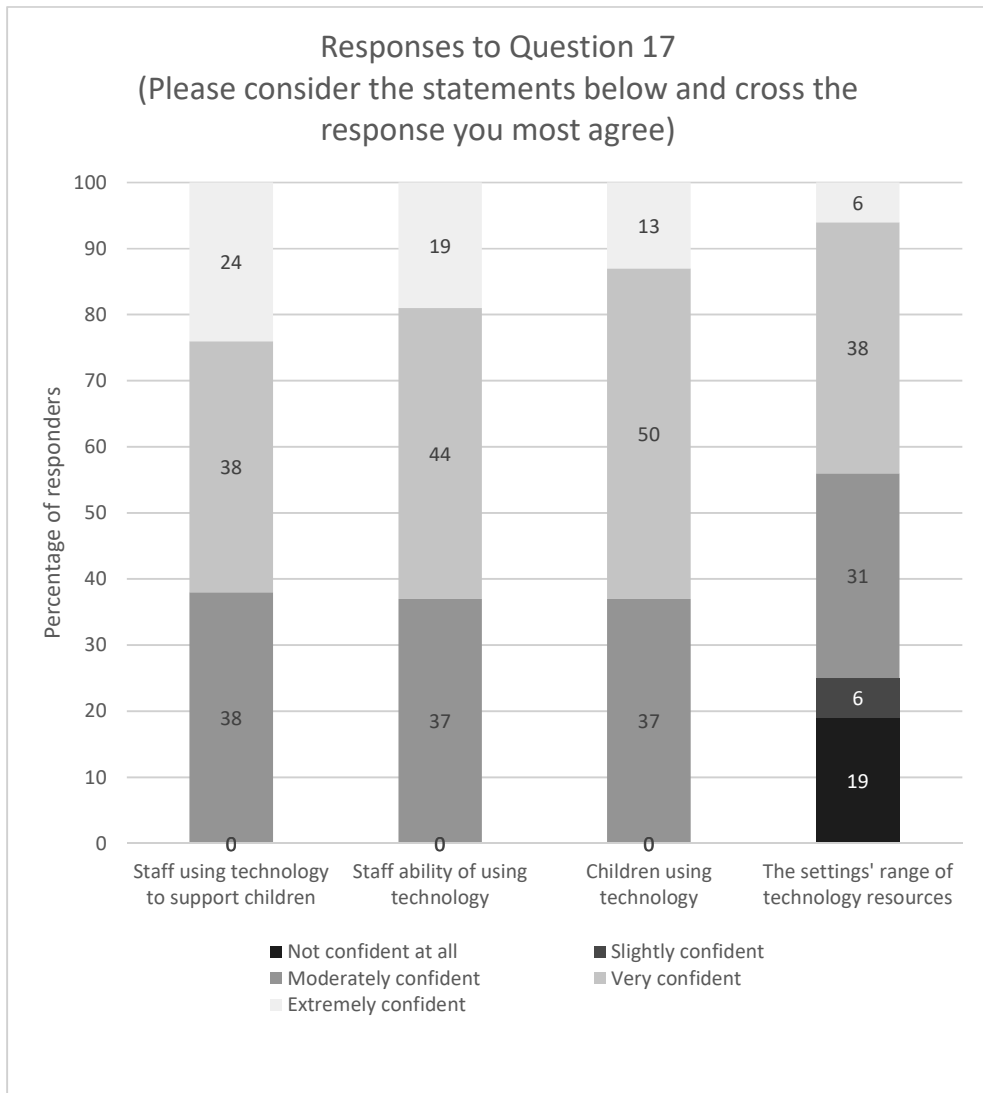


Figure 3: Q17 survey data

devices such as iPads for learning. Nursery 2 commented that children have access to such devices at home and therefore their focus was on how to use a range of technologies associated with household devices. Nursery 1 confirmed the technology-rich home environment. This provided a holistic technological experience for children for this ELG. Practitioners further reported the open-ended nature of technology, for example the use of cameras to record role play experiences that are processed and displayed for further conversations to be engaged in. Further to this, programmable toys, and other similar resources provided children with an opportunity to actively problem solve with the potential to aid wider achievement across the EYFS.

Participants expressed their confidence (see Figure 3) in using the technology to support learning and confidence in children's abilities to use the available resources. They were less confident in the range of resources available and how limited resources would impact on their ability to deliver a robust experience for the children. Nursery 2 raised lack of mobile devices such as tablets and apps due to financial limitations. School 1 was focused on broadening understanding of technology and using digital technology very specifically on limited projects due to: "massively delayed language" through excessive home access to digital technology. School 3 expressed the budgeting challenge of updating technology in line with the resources children can access at home with language barriers and delays affecting assessment. An example was given by the practitioner in School 3 who explained the problems with home access links "they [the children] know more than you think but, we need access to translators".

4.6 Technology ELG15: Effective Provision

There were diverse views around what constituted effective provision in terms of technology. Practitioners agreed that access to some form of technology was generally positive in their settings, but there was no consensus on what type of technology this should be. In five settings a range of resources were available including touch screen devices and laptops and another setting focused on using household equipment such as hoovers and washing machines. There was disparity in terms of children's access to technology across the settings; this was not necessarily related to affluence as School 3 explained "every child in our class has access to a tablet at home but, some are not from affluent homes".

However, effective provision seemed to require technology to be thoroughly embedded across the setting to be used throughout the curriculum and would include some access to digital devices as well as household appliances. Providers suggested effective provision was to give "constant use... linked to topic or theme" (online survey). Alternatively, a provider (Nursery 2) took the position that the children had exceptional access at home and did not require this level of access in the nursery. An example was provided by a practitioner from Nursery 2: "from the relationships we have with families and the feedback, well, they don't come here to do that". This quote shows how the provider interpreted parents' feedback that using technology is not the main purpose of attending the nursery settings and that children are attending the nursery for a broader range of experiences.

4.7 Challenges and Barriers to Children’s Progression and Attainment

The research identified a range of factors that impacted upon practitioners’ capacity to gather evidence for Understanding the World for purposes of children’s progression and attainment of the ELGs. Firstly, there is a lack of any relevant training and the lack of opportunities for any continued professional development (henceforth CPD) in relation to this Area of Learning. The only training/CPD reported was in relation to receiving training and undertaking a qualification for forest school. Practitioners appear to have relatively little if any training for the Understanding the World area of learning. For example, “we have done our own training really just through research. . . we do a lot of digging around ourselves” (Nursery 2). Secondly, the capacity of practitioners to build relationships with parents, community figures and other provision is paramount for effectively delivering the People and Communities ELG. However, this was considered challenging and an area that “we have strived for” (Nursery 2). There is evidence in the data to suggest some practitioners make effective use of their parents and members of the local community inviting them in to share experiences, cultural backgrounds and professional roles. The investment of time required to engage fully with the wider community can be a barrier to attainment because of other pressures on their time. A third barrier was identified as resources in terms of budgets and funding. For example, to “take the children further afield in the community . . . access to a minibus to take them out to different places, to buy resources . . . not a lot of parents have got a lot of money to pay for extra trips, so we have to go to free venues . . .” (Nursery 1). Due to lack of access to funding some practitioners are resourceful however by seeking resources which are “free” or “low-budget”. Provider confidence in delivery of ELG14 The World represents a fourth barrier to attainment. The data demonstrates a notably reduced confidence around how children understand the differences and similarities between places. In addition, how children understand similarities and differences between features of their own environments. A fifth barrier relates to language in relation to acquisition and speech development and English as an Additional Language (EAL). Parents and children present with a range of language needs based on the diverse population in the area. Thus, some providers struggle to engage parents in learning, for example, “I think we can miss things because of the language barrier, we are working on this” (School 3). Lack of formal opportunities to learn from other settings via the sharing of best practice with other similar settings represents the final barrier identified. The lack of opportunity to collaborate with other early years practitioners in the city was regarded by some as a barrier which mitigated against learning from others as well as sharing ideas, resources and understanding. Some practitioners clearly collaborate with those in other settings and periodically visits are made to other similar settings. However, on the whole it was felt greater opportunities for collaboration particularly between nurseries and primary schools would facilitate a greater understanding of the delivery of this Area of Learning and in the way assessments of the ELGs are made.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Across all ELGs, providers indicated they were proactive in arranging learning experiences and the interview data illuminated their passion for ensuring the children had the best opportunities available for children to thrive in nursery and primary school. With regards to People and Communities (ELG13) best practice aids progression and attainment through secure and consistent links with community organisations, participation of family members in the setting through sharing professional and cultural practices and instilling a sense of community through connections with others and how to be part of a responsible and valued social network that promotes positive behaviours. Effective provision aids progression and attainment through consistent engagement with the local community, embedding a variety of opportunities to capture evidence continuously and offering realistic learning experiences and activities which develop language. This practice bodes well with Beauchamp's (2016) view of the important role of practitioners in helping children develop a range of relationships. However, and as Beauchamp (2016) acknowledges, the previous experiences of children are varied, and children will have had different levels of exposure to the wider world. Our findings suggest these experiences can be quite limited when children have disadvantaged backgrounds. Nevertheless, despite having limited funding practitioners are resourceful and imaginative in facilitating learning opportunities, for example, by utilising the knowledge of families and the first-hand experiences of local community members. This facilitates the building of a sense of collaboration and shared experiences (Glenton, 2012).

In relation to The World (ELG14), best practice aids progression and attainment through provider capacity to create time and professional resource skills to enhance the quality of experiences children have access to. Access to onsite and external facilities that are low cost financially, assist in broadening children's often limited experiences. Effective provision aids progression and attainment through broadening access to the outdoors, utilising thematic topics and child choice. As Garrick (2014) suggests children who have no or limited opportunities for outdoor play at home will benefit immensely from opportunities created by practitioners for planned outdoor provision. Such exploration allows for the gaining of understanding of the world through natural outdoor play and which develops early scientific understanding and skills.

For the Technology ELG (15), best practice aids progression and attainment through providers identifying the most appropriate resource for their cohorts to enhance learning and using resources to facilitate a wider application of technology (such as household items) in the children's day. Participants indicated most children have access to a range of technological tools at home from an early age and are adept in their use, which resonates with Glenton (2012). Practitioners can extend these skills by incorporating a broader definition of technology beyond, and in response to, the child's experience. Embedding the use of technology across the EYFS supports Nutbrown et al. (2013) and Nahmad-Williams and Simmons' (2018) suggestion that effective practitioners do not focus on areas of learning per se but make cross-curricula links to extend knowledge and learning. The research found effective provision aids progression and attainment through thoughtful planning and consideration of appropriate technology use. Participants revealed that observing and interacting with chil-

dren through play-based activities and by asking appropriate questions can support learning considerably.

The research is not without its limitations, however, and these are recognised. This was a small study (with a modest sample) which audited provision of one ELG in a very short time-scale. As such, it is acknowledged that the data generated does not fully capture the full extent of provision in the individual early years settings which participated in the research. Nevertheless, a range of issues were captured in the data, including practitioners’ knowledge and grasp of the Understanding the World Area of Learning, how it is taught and delivered by practitioners, and the progress and attainment of children from two to five years old. The findings of the study address the three research questions in relation to the identification of best practice examples along with features of effective provision. Barriers to children’s progression and attainment of these specific ELGs namely, People and Communities, The World and Technology were also ascertained. In light of the study’s findings future research should investigate in greater depth issues surrounding language acquisition and development particularly in relation to the extent to which parents/carers interact and communicate with their children at home. Further research could investigate the delivery of this area of the early curriculum over a longer period of time and with a larger sample of practitioners in the city in order to explore in greater depth some of the very interesting, complex and pertinent issues which have been identified in this project.

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