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McLeod, NJ and Anderson, B

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Title: Towards an understanding of 'school' readiness: Collective interpretations and priorities

Abstract
This participatory action research study examined participants developing conceptual understanding of 'school readiness' to enhance the learning and well-being of young children as they progress through children's services. We worked collaboratively *with* early childhood educators, from a range of provision such as Private Voluntary Independent early childhood and care settings (PVIs), children's centres and schools in Knowsley Local Authority, who were interested in researching their own practice individually and collectively. We provide insight into the trusting, collaborative inquiry workshops that enabled participants to engage in a process of reflexivity, so they became more aware and critical of their own practice and were more open to a process of change. Collective priorities from different perspectives were identified for improving young children's transitions. The findings indicate a new appreciation for starting with the child's readiness for learning, alongside the need for more connections and continuity between providers and families of birth to 3 and 3-5 age ranges. Support for the home learning environment was found to be essential in supporting parents recognise their potential as the child's first educators. Participants applied their action research learning experience to inform a more open and respectful appreciation of other perspectives in daily collaborations with stakeholders.

Introduction

The study was commissioned by Knowsley's Children's Centre System Leadership, a socio economically disadvantaged Local Authority in the North of England. We sought to engage early years practitioners and teachers (educators) from children's centres, PVIs and schools who were interested in participating in an action research enquiry, 'Readiness: How do we, individually and collectively, improve the learning and well-being of young children as they progress through children's services?' This paper is about the participants engagement in reflexivity, learning and exploration so they developed an awareness, appreciation and readiness for young children's learning and well-being, and were more open to change and improvement in practice.

Our focus

This paper focuses on three dimensions of school readiness drawing on UNICEF (2012): (1) Children's readiness, focusing on children's learning and well-being as

opposed to developmental readiness for school: (2) Schools' readiness, focusing on the school environment which starts with taking children's perspectives seriously, in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) so participatory teaching supports children's voice and holistic needs; (3) Families' readiness, focusing on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning and development. All three dimensions are important and need to work collectively as children transition to school. In doing so, this paper presents a broad concept of school readiness, discussing the three dimensions above.

Concepts of readiness and its importance
Ready to Learn vs. Ready for School:

Children's readiness to learn

Readiness in the context of learning is not a new concept but to appreciate the complexities involved there is a need to look at the wider socio-cultural and historical influences.

In the history of education in the UK school readiness is evident in policy, for example the Plowden Report (1967) in which reading readiness was emphasised. However Lady Plowden also emphasised school as "a community in which children learn to live first and foremost as children and not as future adults" (187). The focus was on the individual child, prioritising opportunities for creative thinking so children could explore, be curious and follow their interests as part of meaningful processes. Nurturing positive dispositions to learning through open, participatory and democratic approaches were emphasised, so qualities such as self-discovery, intuition, curiosity and confidence were promoted (McLeod 2017 and Orlandi 2014). This social constructivist approach to learning emphasises the process of engaging in real, first hand experiential opportunities, which promotes a deeper sense of enjoyment and understanding associated with children learning and well-being as they engage at their own pace when they are ready.

Children's readiness for school

Over the last four decades, early childhood education is increasingly dominated by developmental outcomes with a focus on measuring performance of pre-determined goals (Simpson, Lumsden, and McDowall-Clark 2015). Moss (2017) considers this the result of wider economic competition, profit making and global consumer markets of

neo-liberalism. Within the context of early childhood education settings in England, such as schools and pre-schools, this has resulted in a deficit model of measurement and accountability where children are required to be ready for school, to learn in a developmental way and reach milestones (Allen 2011).

Whitebread and Bingham (2011) lament the missed opportunity when the potency of a child's entrance into school is overshadowed by their perceived lack of attainment. In 'Unhurried Pathways', Moyles (2012) set out an approach which aimed to shift the discourse about young children away from a statutory, 'politics-centred' approach, towards one in which educators reclaimed their autonomy and professionalism, so diversity could be actively welcomed, rather than being undermined by an ideology of uniformity, mechanical compliance and 'normalisation' (4). However, the growing focus on outcomes and readiness in the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2017) detracts from appreciating the unique differences of individual children's readiness to learn. Associated with this is a formal, very instrumental and developmental model of teaching based on a transmission and reproduction of knowledge rather than an aptitude and love of learning based around children's interests and engagement (McLeod 2017). The recent 'Bold Beginnings' (Ofsted 2017) is an example of how children's learning is viewed in England as being ready for formal education. The priority is on reading, writing and mathematics through direct teaching every day, implying a didactic transfer of knowledge as a priority. As such early years education is viewed as a precursor to a more valuable knowledge, understanding and skills set associated with the National Curriculum in Key Stage One. In doing so it negates the principle of early years education as valuable for its own sake, and at its own time (Dockett and Perry 2003). If children are always viewed as being in preparation for the next developmental stage of life, any one moment or phase is devalued. For example, by using the term 'school ready', the implication is that the developmental expectations as part of schooling are more important than the unique needs of an individual child (McDowall-Clark 2017). Rather than children being ready for school, we would suggest schools and educators need to be ready to meet the individual holistic needs of each child so children's experiences and well-being are valued alongside their academic readiness (Vogler, Crivello, and Woodhead 2008).

There remain many issues associated with a cohesive understanding of the concept of school readiness and its application to improve the holistic nature of children's learning,

so development and well-being are valued (UNICEF 2012). As a result, next we consider the need for school educators to be ready for children and appreciate children as individuals with varying interests and needs.

Ready schools

Perceptions of children and developing a listening culture

More recent approaches stress the relationship between the purpose of education (as a process or a product), perceptions of children (as vulnerable or rich in potential), power relationships (control and independence) and pedagogical approaches applied (Moss 2017). Education as a process is linked with a democratic approach to learning where children are perceived as rich in their potential, capable of voicing their opinions and participating in meaningful ways. In many cases (in England), children are viewed as needing to receive knowledge and experiences chosen and provided for them by adult educators as part of a developmental approach such as Piaget's staged theory. More recently though in response to recognising new demands of our changing world, the dominant discourses of developmental deficit models are being challenged with a rethinking of pedagogy and practice so children can think for themselves, and make informed decisions. Children's participation in their learning is a sign of quality and enables opportunities for connections as they talk their ideas through and make sense of their learning. An emphasis on the process of learning and an appreciation of constructive thought and communication rather than the transmission of knowledge is key. Such approaches are central to an ethical, socially just approach to learning and well-being (Bath 2009). For educators to enable such participatory learning, there is a need to start by taking children's perspectives seriously, in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC which acknowledges children's right to express their views on matters that affect them and for their views to be considered. This requires a listening approach and an understanding of how to share adult power. School readiness in this way is "the product of the interaction between the child and the range of environmental and cultural experiences that maximize the development outcomes for children" (UNICEF 2012, 6). As Bath (2009) suggests in the context of early childhood policy and education, an opening up is essential as part of "truly reflexive practice" (34). Such practice offers hope for a renewed culture of childhood and establishes schools as part of a democratic society where there is an ethical awareness driven by curiosity, openness and a desire and willingness to question and reflect critically. Significant change in schools'

readiness for children is therefore based on responsive, mutually respectful and reflexive teaching which begins with educator readiness to question and develop a consciousness about oneself as an educator (Feldman and Weiss 2010). Only then can alternative views be appreciated (McLeod, 2017). In this way, transitions can contribute positively to children's well-being and sense of self (Vogler, Crivello, and Woodhead 2008).

Family / Parent Readiness

Here we focus on parental and caregiver attitudes and children's involvement in their early learning and transition to school. In doing so perceptions of parents by educators who are working in children's services are central to the success of parents feeling valued as a child's first educator (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014) and nurturing a positive home learning environment (Sammons et al. 2004). Quality early years provision is linked to enhancing the life chances of children particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Melhuish 2004). In recent years, policy has focused on more targeted provision rather than universal provision in order to 'narrow the gap' for children from low income families: for example the 'Two year old offer' and 'Early Years Pupil Premium'. As McDowall-Clark (2017) acknowledges, while "there are strong associations between a child's social background and educational success, poor results are not inevitable" (74). A key factor shared by schools and early years settings that succeed in supporting children successfully is challenging the tendency to stereotype children from ethnic or low-income families (Campbell 2013). Effective engagement with parents can increase the chances of moving out of poverty and social mobility (Blanden 2006). In addition, Vogler, Crivello, and Woodhead (2008) reinforce the need for multidisciplinary, culturally sensitive collaboration and interventions for engaging both parents and children in important early childhood transitions. As McDowall-Clark (2017) identifies "parenting is the key mechanism by which poverty affects children's development and progress" (74). Working collaboratively using respectful, open, non-judgemental ways can help in overcoming deficit perceptions of school readiness by parents so cycles of bad experiences of education as part of their own schooling can be healed and new perceptions can begin to be established. While Ofsted (2014) report that Children's Centres are well positioned to support parents' confidence, Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014) identify how early years services (market systems) tend not to be attuned to parents' needs and are not good at working

'with' low-income parents. Often educators unfairly assume that poor parents are bad at parenting and that they are responsible for their own poverty (Simpson, Lumsden, and McDowall-Clark 2015). There is a failure to recognize the cultural structural inequalities which affect disadvantaged children significantly. In contrast educators, who understand poverty and do not have a deficit model view of parenting, have more success engaging with parents in sensitive respectful ways. As McDowall-Clark (2017) reinforces, "parents can feel undermined and patronized by clumsy intervention practices" (75). For parents to be valued as children's first educators, educators need to develop an awareness of conflicting values and beliefs upon which assumptions are based (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014). Without poverty awareness and sensitivity, educators are unlikely to have an impact on supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Simpson, Lumsden, and McDowall-Clark 2015). With large scale cuts in children's services recently, building positive relationships with parents and supporting the home learning environment (HLE) is essential as this impacts more significantly on children's holistic development than parental education, occupation, or salary (Sylva et al. 2004). What parents *do* is more important than *who* they are (ibid). In terms of the sorts of activities that are valuable for nurturing a positive disposition to learning, Rogoff (2003) emphasises the importance of activities which act as guided participation and part of normal cultural daily routines, such as setting the table, pairing socks, sorting and tidying toys away, brushing up and making lists of what is needed from the supermarket. While these real-life experiences are key in helping children to make sense of everyday life as well as learning valuable skills and concepts, educators tend to prioritise literacy based activities (McDowall-Clark 2017). Thus, the terminology of school and school readiness differs from the home context, increasing the possibility of miscommunication and lack of understanding of the values placed by families and schools on particular activities. As Blanden and Machin (2010) identify oral language and a rich vocabulary is key in underpinning successful literacy skills. Therefore, family members scaffolding and modelling new skills and introducing new vocabulary informally through play based activities is vitally important. Additionally, Sammons et al. (2004) reinforce how a positive HLE can counteract disadvantage in other areas, but the quality of the HLE provided will be influenced by parents' own experiences of life and education (Coghlan et al. 2009).

Our key research aim in relation to readiness was:

How do we, individually and collectively, improve the learning and well-being of young children as they progress through children's services?

Research questions:

The research questions were:

- How do we develop a shared understanding of school readiness for children and adults / educators?

- How can we establish a means of evaluating personal practice in light of others' insights and critiques?

- What connections are possible between different priorities for improving the transition of young children?

- What is a shared vision and purpose for a way forward?

Methodology

Design

The most appropriate design for supporting conditions for change, was a participatory action research approach (McIntosh 2010) which is concerned with both the process and the end product of inquiry (Leitch and Day 2000). It is about working *with* participants to develop their ownership and understanding of their own situation so otherness is valued (Mason 2002). The emphasis was on the underpinning principles of action research according to McCormack and Boomer (2007) as follows:

- working with the participants' beliefs and values
- 'working with' rather than 'doing to' the participants
- valuing the participants as co-researchers / informants
- placing an equal emphasis on action and process
  (McCormack and Boomer 2007 p 20).

As McIntosh (2010) identifies, the nature of action research "is designed to explore concepts of quality and value" (33), that are personally important and uncovered democratically through a process of reflection and exploration rather than being

imposed. This becomes possible through enlightenment (understanding self), through empowerment (courage to change self) and emancipation (becoming what we need to be) (McCormack and Boomer 2007). This project was about participants' capacity to identify issues or problems in relation to their own ways of seeing the professional context of school readiness. We were interested in the reflexive processes at the heart of action research so the participants were empowered (Grundy 1982) but also. there was a focus on changing practice. Both reflexivity and the process of participatory action research were important for us.

Participants

The study involved working *with* two groups of early years educators (n=14) from a range of provision such as PVIs (Private, Voluntary and Independent), Children's Centres and Schools in Halewood and Kirkby. Both areas are in the Borough of Knowsley, a socio economically disadvantaged Local Authority in the North of England. Overall the number and proportion of children living in relative poverty in Knowsley has increased for children under-5 and has the second highest proportion of children in poverty in the region, which is higher than the national rate (Knowsley Council 2014). With local budgets shrinking and ongoing effects of the economic downturn and welfare reforms affecting residents, there are significant on-going challenges in dealing with the consequences of child poverty in the borough. Knowsley's Public Health recognises the impact of poor living conditions, challenging home environments, and the importance of creating appropriate environments so children can talk about their feelings and emotions (Knowsley Council 2018).

Cobain (2017) describes Kirkby and Halewood as areas of social housing, developed in the 1960s as "overspill" from the poorer neighbourhoods of Liverpool (p 1). Many of the research participants are from Knowlsey themselves and all have worked in the borough for many years. Consequently, there was a real awareness and sensitivity in terms of recognising the impact of poverty on family life and the value of education. They were interested in examining their own understanding and practice associated with 'school readiness' and were invited to attend a series of 5 regular collaborative action research inquiry based workshops facilitated by 2 local university researchers (the authors) over a period of four months. As researchers, we valued the participants openness to engage in reflecting collectively. We worked individually and collectively

as part of two groups and created agreed conditions for learning at the start of the project (as explained below). Although two participants chose to withdraw (potentially through prioritising other aspects of their work), the trusting collaborative and reflexive nature of the workshops enabled an appreciation of different perspectives and a sharing of concerns and tensions for those who continued with the project. Various priorities and strategies were identified that could enhance learning and well-being of young children in their care with regards school readiness.

Ethics

All participants were interested in the aim of the project and requested to take part. The participants were involved as co-researchers at every stage and gave their written consent. An ethical approach consistent with embedding a trusting, safe space was evident throughout.

Creating safe, trusting conditions for learning

The project started by creating agreed conditions for a community of practice to identify shared tensions between birth to three provision and school attainment priorities. This was made possible by creating a safe, trusting, respectful environment (McCormack and Boomer 2007). For example, at the start of the project whilst discussing ways of capturing the content of the workshops (explained below), one of the participants was uncomfortable being filmed and so everyone agreed that verbal recordings would be more appropriate. Collectively the participants identified the following conditions necessary for creating a safe space.

Insert Table 1 here - Conditions necessary for creating a safe, trusting space

The interpretation by the group helped to establish a unified process. Creating a safe, trusting space was crucial for encouraging the participants to be ready and open to share their authentic priorities with regards school readiness, including reasons for their current practices (McLeod 2015).

Through open and honest sharing, they began to listen, appreciate the views of each other and evaluate personal practice. They were 'ready' as McLeod notes (2019 and 2015) to engage in a process of reflexivity. The following reflexive framework was integrated as part of the workshops.

Insert Figure 1: Reflexivity Framework (McLeod 2019 and 2015) **here**

It was important to start with where the participants were, in terms of their openness, awareness of personal values and experiences in relation to 'school readiness' and their readiness for change. As Moon (2008) reinforces, a person cannot be made to reflect. The effectiveness of the collaborative workshops was therefore dependant on appropriate conditions so the participants would begin to see for themselves the influence of their own thinking habits on their practice.

The format and focus of the workshops
A series of 5 facilitated participatory action learning workshops were the hub of the project. The focus was as follows:

Session 1 - Creating conditions for learning *with* participants / sharing views and conceptual understandings of 'school readiness'

Session 2 – Self-awareness of where values come from / personal perceptions of children

Session 3 - Emotional influences on views and understandings

Session 4 - Identifying one priority for change / appreciating different perspectives

Session 5 - Evaluation: collective priorities / capturing key learning / sustainable changes

Each three-hour workshop took place on a mutually agreed afternoon and consisted of the participants engaging in open dialogic practical activities, which were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The collaborative approach was supported by a relaxed

atmosphere, and the willingness of the participants to engage. They tapped into seemingly forgotten memories and emotions, which in turn unearthed a consciousness of themselves enabling fresh perspectives of how personal experiences influenced their own practice (Leitch 2005). Each of the three hour workshops followed this format:

1. Reflections on the transcript from the previous workshop
2. Sharing individual follow up activities
3. Exploring new 'school readiness' related themes
4. Agreeing on a new follow-up activity

Each workshop started by spending time reflecting on the transcript of the previous session (previously emailed to each of the participants by the researchers) to identify anything the participants found interesting, valuable or challenging, or were proud of; and points of agreement or dissent. The process involved some clarification, encouragement and demonstrating on the facilitators' part particularly as part of our first workshop. Time was also dedicated to discussing the follow up actions that the participants had completed beforehand. As McDrury and Alterio (2003) identify "when we encourage students to articulate and process experiences through storytelling we provide them with opportunities to clarify and question their assumptions" (175). Between us we agreed on an aspect of each participant's practice that was appropriate to consider. For example, at the beginning of the project the participants were asked to identify one feature associated with school readiness practice that was currently in place in their setting. The purpose was identified and its effectiveness was evaluated so any changes could be considered. This meant the task was aptly pitched in terms of motivation and challenge, but perhaps most importantly, the reflective focus was decided by the individual participants.

Almost half of the workshop time was spent exploring a new 'school readiness' concept (such as expectations, routines, outcome pressures). This was an exchange of knowledge, involving reflections on conscious and unconscious experiences, understanding and ideas. The workshops enabled the educators to identify a deeper self-awareness, and a consciousness of personal practice, which consequently identified areas for development that ultimately required shifts in habits of mind and being.

Results

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As the participants shared their own 'readiness' viewpoints and various priorities, they grew in their awareness of the need to value different perspectives (McLeod 2015) such as:

- The child's perspective
- Educators' perspective: (PVIs, Children Centres and Nurseries perspectives) and (schools and school nurseries)
- Parents and carers' perspectives
- Health and Social Services perspectives
- Local Authority Perspectives

By developing a synthesis of practices from multiple perspectives, a number of key priorities were identified collectively, which enabled the participants to make connections between different priorities for improving young children's well-being as part of transitions (Bradshaw 2016; Kingdon et al. 2017).

Six school readiness priority areas emerged as part of the workshop discussions, as follows:
1. Routines and expectations
2. Information sharing and appropriate communication
3. Family / relationships with parents / the Home Learning Environment
4. Hard to reach families / reducing inequalities
5. Integrated working with multi agency teams
6. Progression through provision

There was an appreciation by the participants of the longer-term impact across children's services from birth to five with a focus on education as a process. For example, for birth to three, attachment was identified as a key priority and through sharing, the participants began to see connections with three to five provision such as transition and the key person role (Kingdon et al. 2017).

Underpinning each of these priorities, the participants identified the following 'essential features' for effective well-being readiness:
- Valuing difference

- Respect
- Valuing individuals
- Relationships
- Being Ready / open
- Ownership
- Trust
- Confidence
- Different perspectives
- Identity
- Listening / Consulting
- PSED / creating the environment
- Time / long term / sustainability

Insert here Figure 2: Readiness for children's learning and well-being: the process

Figure 2 highlights the elements involved as part of the collaborative process and how the participants developed their awareness and readiness for appreciating new ways of seeing young children's learning and well-being. These features are key in relation to the pressures and tensions that the participants identified as being created by the top down approach of Government Policy and Local Authority priorities around goals and targets (Moss 2017).

Through an on-going process of self-awareness, and readiness for valuing different view-points, using McLeod's Reflexivity Framework as identified above, the participants became more conscious of otherness and began to take ownership of their understanding of 'school readiness'. They made distinctions between transition to school and being ready for children starting school, the consequences of which are identified in the six priority areas as part of Figure 2.

Analysis and discussion

The thematic analysis of the collaborative action research workshops did not wait until the end of the study; instead, the workshop data was continuously analysed for new understandings and interpretations in relation to the nature of school readiness

throughout the study (McCormack and Boomer 2007). The participants were involved in both the generation of data, through their engagement in the workshops and the analysis of data (through their identification of themes, and categories) by commenting on significant elements and aspects after reading each workshop transcript. At the end of the project, a creative, collaborative hermeneutic process was used to make sense of the data and capture the essence of their new understanding of school readiness (McIntosh 2010). It was important to remember that the original analysis of the data had been carried out collectively by ourselves and the early years educators as a collective group, and so going back into the data was only used as a means of enhancing or reinforcing interpretations rather than creating new understandings.

Creative evaluation of the project

Simons and McCormack (2007) note how the use of creative arts can help participants "convert their tacit knowledge (knowledge we know but cannot tell) into a different context" (34). All participants were invited to select a picture from a selection of images by Bijkerk and Loonen (2009) that captured their story of engaging in the project and their new understanding of school readiness. They worked in pairs and as one person shared their experience, the other listened and wrote what was spoken verbatim. In this way the creative evaluation, was a collaborative analysis (Armstrong Smith Davies and Paulson 2011). The text below is a transcription of the narrative spoken by some of the participants.

Participant 1: *"This is me inside but allowing the outside (new understandings of school readiness) to come in, willingly. I have exposed myself.. a little more…. and I feel ready now and more receptive to seeing and appreciating from the child's perspective."*

Participant 2: *"This picture sums up our new appreciation of open and respectful team work across the Local Authority schools and Early Years settings. Like the footprints, we've left a trail on children's lives. I feel I've been brave enough to break out and do what's right for children so that I am ready for the child and not the other way round."*

Participant 3: *"This is me reaching out to others in the group; listening and respecting all the priorities we've identified. I see differently because of the respectful relationships we've built."*

Participant 4: *'Together we are stronger and more connected in our priorities….we now have an appreciation of other views….. but there's still work to do'.*

Participant 5: '*We've been building more open relationships with each other so we can appreciate and support children and families' perspectives. Parents are so undervalued and the home learning environment is so important*'.

Participant 6: '*I've taken a leap of faith and now I appreciate the whole picture…what's important and not just expectations from a teacher perspective*'

Discussion

Underpinning this discussion is the value of creating a safe, trusting environment, which in turn revealed a new 3-way view of school readiness: firstly, school and educator readiness for the child including an appreciation of the child's experiences before school as part of children's services (Moyles 2012 Whitebread and Bingham 2011). The need for a more coherent and open communication system between each was highlighted (Vogler, Crivello, and Woodhead 2008). Secondly the need to value parents in recognising their potential as the child's first educator and the HLE was recognised (Blanden 2006), and thirdly child readiness (Kingdon et al. 2017) was acknowledged as significant. The findings reveal the importance of valuing individual children's progression through children's services and into school as a holistic journey rather than one consisting of disparate elements, thus valuing prior experiences. In doing so the success of 'child readiness' is reliant on school and educator readiness, open communication and valuing parents as children's first educators (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014).

Selected quotes by the participants as part of the workshops are provided to demonstrate the open and respectful thinking, sharing and appreciation of the collective priorities as identified by the participants. Links to relevant literature are also included to substantiate the discussion.

1a. *School and educator readi**ness**

In creating appropriate conditions for learning, the group revealed a willingness to be open and to be challenged in the way they perceived and understood 'school readiness (McLeod 2019; 2015). Initial views included:

"*wanting children to be ready*" and "*children coming to school rea*dy".

As Mezirow (1997) advocates, for learning to be transformational, the learning goes beyond content knowledge acquisition and needs to be interpreted from new and different perspectives. Right from the start by involving early years educators from a range of provision such as PVIs, Children's Centres (CCs) and schools, different priorities and pressures were identified (Moss 2017; Allen 2011). Those that were educators identified assumptions around birth to three provision being care focused, whereas the reality was that three to five provision focused more on learning and education. Airing differences between CCs and school priorities was key in moving forward. For Children's Centres, recruitment, training and retention of community volunteers who support service delivery, were priority areas. School participants acknowledged tensions between the demands of following Government directives given their understanding of the importance of young children's unique Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2017) developmental trajectory.

In the second workshop, one member of the collaborative group noted:

"*I just thought of perspectives, just one word…perspectives. Everyone has a different perspective depending on our values and priorities.*"

By establishing open conditions for learning (McCormack and Boomer 2007), the members of the group felt comfortable challenging each other. For example, rather than seeing differences, they began to see and appreciate connections as part of each child's journey. As one Foundation Stage teacher noted:

> "*Actually, it (achievement) goes right the way through and that's what annoys me with this celebration of 'well done year 6 teacher, fantastic SATS results'…Hang on a minute!! That's been going on since me in Reception. Don't be giving her a box of chocolates!*"

> *Another participant noted: "It's that step before and it's not recognized and valued is it? Each experience before should be appreciated as a whole and you should be able to track right back and go right from the beginning, to the home because from a child's perspective, all of these people and experiences will have an influence."*

There was a clear appreciation and respect for 'differences' of educator priorities, knowledge and parents and family experience (Nutbrown et al. 2005). Together they began to recognise and value what comes before, rather than prioritising what comes next (McDowall Clark 2017). For example as children's centre educators talked about the importance of attachment for children in birth to three provision, participants who work with 6 and 7 year olds began to make connections with transition and see the relevance with children's ability to form relationships and the key person's role (Vogler, Crivello, and Woodhead 2008). As one participant said, they began to appreciate education, as a "*journey of processes rather than a product at the end*". They were able to stand back, appreciate different perspectives and evaluate the value of different types of children's centre provision (McLeod 2019; 2015). Likewise, the impact of baby massage and 'stay and play' sessions on building secure and positive relationships were valued as being an essential part of well-being and fundamental in effective learning (Kingdon et al. 2017).

The safe, trusting nature of the collaborative group modelled the requirement for open and respectful communication between different stakeholders, early years educators and different multi-agency teams. The need to share information so there was an awareness of different roles and offers available to support children and their families was quickly identified, alongside the recognition for clear information sharing between and across birth to three and three to five provision, rather than the sometimes-disjointed picture that was portrayed by participants. As Taylor (2007) identifies the "natural affinity" (p. 177) between action research and action learning enabled a new understanding to develop in the midst of bringing about change.

The participants learnt from each other as they evaluated personal practice in the light of others' insights and critiques. Ultimately the most significant change in thinking was their recognition of needing to be ready for the child, rather than the child being ready for school. They recognised new implications, not just in terms of what they expected of children but in relation to their newly founded view in terms of the purpose of education (McLeod 2019; 2015) so children's well-being is nurtured (Bradshaw 2016). They demonstrated the importance of questioning 'how' and 'why' different expectations are appropriate and consequently the need for incorporating more open and creative, play based teaching approaches.

As participant 2 commented: *"I think it's getting the message out about valuing play in all settings and the wider community."*

> *"The 'what' is important so you're not dictating what children should be ready to learn, but we need to ask 'how' and 'why' more….asking why do they need to learn at that particular point in time and why do I expect children to be able to put their hands up to answer a question?"*

> *"I thought about the 'EYFS Development Matters' …there at the bottom of every single page, it says about them not being used as a checklist and every child is different and that is something we need to remember. There is just so much pressure on reading and writing and mathematics."*

> *"When we look at the Early Years Foundation Stage and what's important, it depends on our interpretation of what we see as important doesn't it, for example it should be the characteristics of learning underpinning how, but we tend to just focus on the what."*

Finally, as participant 6 noted, '*The uniform could suggest how children may possibly be 'ready' for school, but in fact we as educators need to be ready for each child. It is our duty to find out and know as much about those children before they come to school*

on their first day'. How can we do this?'

1b. *An appreciation of the child's prior experiences and open communication between services and schools*

Having developed an awareness around appreciating the child's perspective through engaging in the workshops (McLeod 2019; 2015), in their commitment to meeting the needs of children in their care, the participants asked, "*How can we make further connections to join up our thinking?*" As one participant suggested *"We need to get to know the family' through a co-ordinated holistic approach by children's centres."*

They asked, *"How can we do this?"* One educator suggested considering the emotions and feelings of children and families when making contact for the first time. They wondered, "*what the children would be feeling.*" This caused another participant to acknowledge: "*There's a gap and we're missing it.*"

Again, having experienced the significance and influence of emotions as part of earlier workshops as part of the project, one participant noted, *"Valuing emotions and their influence on parents' and children's experiences, and our awareness of these has implications for our practice."* There was a clear commitment to moving forward together and really understanding the need "for *parents to be able to trust educators"* and also the significance of *"educators supporting parents' confidence in the meaningful learning experiences provided as part of home learning"* as Vandenbroeck and Lazzari identify (2014).

Another participant commented: *"This has made me realise what we're doing, working with parents, we need to make sure they feel confident in what they're doing is the right thing. The home learning environment is really important in sustaining a holistic approach involving parents"*

2 *Valuing parents as the child's first educator and the home learning environment*
Recognising the influences on their own practice, and appreciating different priorities for birth to 3 and 3-5, the participants were now able to step back and appreciate connections between different roles as part of their practice more clearly (Moss 2017). As they explored different perspectives, they appreciated the significance of supporting parents in recognising their potential as their child's first educators (Vandenbroeck and

Lazzari 2014). The importance of the home learning environment (HLE) was re-evaluated in that the learning taking place in and around the home environment did not necessarily comply with that promoted by Sammons et al.'s research (2004). Activities within the family system are often rich responses to the demands of the well-being of the household and require valuing rather than educators assuming there is a lack of worthwhile knowledge.

As *one participant noted: "The things that struck me were the families, parents and partnerships and understanding… the importance of their role. We really need to stop being so narrow minded and prioritising being ready for limited literacy expectations."*

3. *Readiness of the child*

Concurrently as the above priorities emerged as part of the action research workshop discussions, so there was a new appreciation by the participants of readiness: that is their readiness rather than the child's readiness (Kingdon et al. 2017; Orlandi 2014). They showed a new awareness of children as unique, rich learners, capable in their own potential rather than relying on educators to receive knowledge and experiences as part of developmental deficit models. There was a rethinking of their pedagogy (Moss 2017) as the group recognised the need to be open and flexible in their thinking and practice (McLeod, 2015), particularly in terms of engaging hard to reach families and reducing inequalities (Rogoff 2003 ; Sammons et al. 2004; Campbell, 2013). Collectively the group as co-researchers, agreed this should be included as a priority area.

In summary, priorities for action identified by participants included the following:

- Valuing positive relationships between educators and children, and educators and families with a focus on well-being and an appreciation of the importance of attachment on young children's lives
- Valuing parents as children's first educators and the need to empower parents in this role
- Recognising the importance of the HLE and supporting parents in being confident as children's first educators
- Improving Communication systems between birth to 3 and 3-5 provision
- Seeing and valuing children as unique and individual

- Making a difference for families
- Appreciating and allowing for learning over time from birth through to KS1 and beyond (as opposed to constant testing)
- In tracking progress to raise standards, focus on learning and well-being in a way that is meaningful for the child and families

What is particularly significant, is how the use of participatory action research was central in enabling a change in thinking and practice by the participants; from seeing families as being ready, to recognising the need for a change in terms of being ready themselves and also valuing families and the HLE (Bradshaw 2016).

Limitations

As with any research, there are several limitations, most critically, this was a very small-scale project, consisting of 14 participants from one Local Authority. While we have provided as much detail as possible about the individual and collective understanding of 'readiness' and ways for improving the learning and well-being of young children as they progress through children's services, we make no claims as to their generalisability.
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Implications for Early Years Educators

We believe we have explored something of interest to the field and have contributed insight into a three-way view of school readiness. Firstly, educator readiness, including a coherent open communication system between professionals as part of children's services and schools. Secondly engagement with families which is respectful, so parents are valued as children's first educators. Thirdly, children's uniqueness and valuing their prior experiences. Our study and its use of reflexivity and participatory action research is particularly useful and encouraging for educators in the current climate of education, which is increasingly dominated by developmental outcomes, with a focus on measuring performance of pre-determined goals (Simpson, Lumsden, and McDowall-Clark 2015).

The safe trusting environment was the first step in encouraging the participants to be ready to engage in a process of open and honest critical reflection and appreciate

different priority areas in relation to school readiness. The ongoing nature of evaluating by becoming self-aware to inform actions rather than merely fact-finding was at the heart of the action research process. In line with Convery and Townsend (2018:10), we appreciated that 'there are situational understandings that can only be achieved through adopting (participatory) action research approaches', and working *with* participants. The fresh ways of seeing and being were significant in changing practice.

In conclusion, we hope others see the potential of participatory action research for looking at readiness individually and collectively to consider ways of improving the learning and well-being of young children as they progress through children's services. School Readiness has several aspects which are inter-related and must be considered holistically for a true representation of the picture, most essentially valuing the process as a whole and understanding the need to celebrate the uniqueness of each individual as 'being' alongside standardisation benchmarks.

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