



IOE – Department of
Learning and Leadership



Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

**Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in
Early Childhood Care and Education**

Hybrid Conference: November 22–24, 2024

Online and In-Person at UCL East, London, United Kingdom



Abstract Book



INTRODUCTION

Geneva, January 2025

2024 Bright Start International Conference Proceedings

We are pleased to present the proceedings of the **2024 Bright Start International Conference—Early Years Excellence in Practice—co-organised with UCL-IOE’s Department of Learning and Leadership**. The conference was held from November 22 to 24, 2024, in a hybrid format, both online and in person at UCL East, London. This year’s event convened a diverse assembly of educators, researchers, and practitioners dedicated to advancing excellence in early childhood care & education.

With 564 attendees from 43 countries, the conference showcased a vibrant global community committed to enhancing early years practice. Key highlights include:

— **Four Conference Tracks:**

- Children 0-8 Years
- Autism and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- The New Voices of Children Pedagogy™
- Montessori Vision in Action, presented by Montessori Global Education

— **107 Sessions:** Covering a wide spectrum of topics.

— **Launch of Four International Forums:** Providing platforms for ongoing dialogue and collaboration.

— **Representation from 68 Universities and Colleges Worldwide:** Reflecting broad academic engagement.

— **Participation from Policymakers and Senior Leaders:** Including national early childhood authorities.

— **Engagement with Major Global Organisations and Associations:** Enhancing the conference’s impact and reach.

— **Establishment of Five Special Interest Groups (SIGs):** Connecting over 1,400 practitioners and researchers from 48 countries, fostering long-term knowledge exchange and collaboration on:

- The evolving New Voices of Children Pedagogy™
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Early Childhood
- Intergenerational Approaches in Early Childhood
- Professionalism and Leadership
- Authentic Assessment for Early Childhood Intervention

The theme, **“Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education”**, served as a catalyst for insightful discussions, innovative research presentations, and the sharing of best practices aimed at enhancing developmental outcomes for young children globally. The abstracts compiled in this volume reflect the depth and breadth of topics addressed during the conference, encompassing various facets of early childhood education and care.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all contributors, participants, and partners who made this conference a resounding success.

We are confident that the insights and knowledge presented in these proceedings will be an invaluable asset to educators, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers dedicated to advancing excellence in early childhood education.

Your unwavering commitment to this field is truly appreciated.

Thank you for your continued dedication to fostering excellence in early years practice.

Sincerely,

The Bright Start Foundation



<p>AI in Education: A Global Creative Exchange and its Role in Boosting new Pedagogies 7 <i>Sandra Abegglen</i>, PhD, Researcher, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada.</p>	<p>Lights, Camera, STEAM: Unlocking Children's Creativity and agency through Dramatic Play. 18 <i>Rachel Dunne</i>, Developmental and Therapeutic Play Specialist, Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies and Inclusive Education, Portobello Institute, Dublin. <i>Jade Farrell</i>, Area Manager of Early Years Service. Student at Portobello Institute, Dublin.</p>
<p>Unconventional Programme at an Early Years setting in Saudi Arabia: Parents' and Teachers' Perspective. 9 <i>Soha AlFahal</i>, Ph.D., Assistant professor, King AbdulAziz University/ Early Childhood department, Jeddah/ Saudi Arabia. <i>Mrs. Samah Bakhotmah</i>, Co- founder of Eida'a Centre, Jeddah/ Saudi Arabia.</p>	<p>Guidelines for Selecting Alphabet Books that Support Young Learners' Literacy Development 20 <i>Cindy D'On Jones</i>, Ph.D., Professor of Literacy & Director of Literacy Clinic, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, U.S.A. <i>Whitney Bowman</i>, M.Ed., Graduate Teaching Assistant & Doctoral Student, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, U.S.A.</p>
<p>Play Now & Then: intergenerational opportunities for learning and play 10 <i>Ana Aracelly Olguin</i>, Assistant Professor, Yew Chung College of early Childhood Education (YCCECE), Hong Kong Island, Hong Kong SAR. <i>Phoebe Pui Pui Cheung</i>, Assistant Professor, Yew Chung College of early Childhood Education (YCCECE), Hong Kong Island, Hong Kong SAR.</p>	<p>Young Children in Digital Society: Supporting children, families and educators with digital practices 21 <i>Susan Edwards</i>, Professor, Australian Catholic University, Australia, Melbourne. <i>Kate Highfield</i>, Associate Professor, University of Canberra, Australia, Canberra.</p>
<p>A Friendship Between Creative Arts and Regulation 12 <i>Cara Caudle</i> MEd, BAsC, RECE, Director, Childhood Connect, Waterloo Ontario, Canada.</p>	<p>Cultivating a Culture of Listening: Co-Construction and Research for Adult Learning 22 <i>Caroline El Semman</i>, Founder, Little Jungle School of Early Childhood, London, United Kingdom. <i>Abigail Kellett</i>, Atelierista, Little Jungle School of Early Childhood, London, United Kingdom.</p>
<p>Montessori's Vision in Action: Home-Start and How Volunteer Networks Foster Community Connection 13 <i>Karen Chetwynd</i>, Chief Executive Officer, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom. <i>Hayley Williams</i>, Baby-Start Co-ordinator, Home-Start West Somerset, United Kingdom.</p>	<p>Educators must make neurodiversity-affirming practices a visible priority in early years settings. 23 <i>Deirdre Field O Sullivan</i>, BA Hons degree in Early Childhood Studies, Masters in Early Childhood Studies, Teacher/Lecturer in Early Learning and Care, Cork Education and training Board (ETB), Co. Cork, Ireland. <i>Dr Marguerita Magennis</i>, Course Coordinator Masters in Early Childhood Studies, MA in Inclusive Education and SEN & Lead Lecturer BA Hons degree Early Childhood Studies at Portobello Institute, Dublin, Ireland.</p>
<p>Compassion counts: When empathy is elusive in a culture of care and kindness 14 <i>Amy Chiu</i>, MEd, Early Childhood Education Consultant at The Work of Play, Los Angeles, California, USA.</p>	<p>Montessori's Vision in Action: Addressing and Overcoming Misperceptions 26 <i>June Fileti</i>, Managing Director, International School of Musicians, United Kingdom. <i>Jayde Davies</i>, STAR Accreditation Assessor, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom. <i>Karen Chetwynd</i>, Chief Executive Officer, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom.</p>
<p>Implementing Intergenerational Storytelling in Early Years Education: A Framework for Enhancing Social and Emotional Development. 15 <i>Fey Cole</i>, Curriculum Manager, South West College Author, Early Years Specialist, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland.</p>	<p>The Evolution of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Saudi Arabia 27 <i>Nahla Gahwaji</i>, Professor of Early childhood Education, Faculty of Human Sciences and Design, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.</p>
<p>Active Play for All! Including Young Children with Disabilities in Physical Activities with Their Typical Peers 16 <i>Diane H. Craft</i>, Ph.D, Early Childhood Physical Activity Consultant, Active Play Books Conesus, New York, United States.</p>	
<p>Exploring the Globe: Inspiring Young Minds to Discover the World 17 <i>Trisha DePasquale</i>, Kindergarten Educator, Sunrise, Florida, USA.</p>	



<p>Cultivating Creativity: Early Childhood Environments that Inspire Self-Expression 29</p> <p><i>Rebecca M. Giles, Ph.D., Professor, Leadership and Teacher Education, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL, United States.</i></p> <p><i>Paige Vitulli, Ph.D., Chair and Associate Professor, Integrative Studies, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL, United States</i></p>	<p>Playing with Words: Supporting Young Children with Language Delays 41</p> <p><i>Ragan McLeod, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA.</i></p>
<p>The Imagination Station: Empowering young learners to plan and create meaningful projects 31</p> <p><i>Anna Haydon, Cayman International School, Camana Bay, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands.</i></p> <p><i>Alyssa Lunde, Cayman International School, Camana Bay, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands.</i></p>	<p>AI as a Culturally Relevant Pedagogue: Using ChatGPT to Create Early Years Lesson Plans Responsive to Children’s Home Cultures and Languages 42</p> <p><i>Naheed Mukhi, Doctoral Student- University of Toronto and Pre-Primary Lead – ITREB Canada, Toronto, Canada.</i></p>
<p>Learning Together: Building Collaborative Communities 32</p> <p><i>Ami Hirsch, Sabine Luckhardt and Ghida Jalloul, KG Teachers, American Community School Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE.</i></p>	<p>Innovative Approaches for Teaching Young Multilingual Learners 43</p> <p><i>Karen Nemeth, Ed.M., Author/Consultant, Language Castle LLC, Allentown, PA, USA.</i></p>
<p>Engaging Young Minds: The Power of Hands-On Learning in Early Education 33</p> <p><i>Ms. Amber Jayne, Founder of Loving Start Learning Centers and The Loving Start Way, Northern California, USA.</i></p>	<p>Multi-modal musical intervention influences communication and social interaction development in early years. 45</p> <p><i>Stephanie O’Kelly (Ang), United Kingdom and Singapore.</i></p>
<p>Development and Implementation of a STEAM Education Program through Diverse Physical Play for Young Children 35</p> <p><i>Maho Kabasawa, Graduate School Doctoral Program, Niigata University, Niigata, Japan.</i></p> <p><i>Toshio Murayama, Associate Professor, Niigata University, Niigata, Japan.</i></p>	<p>Successes and innovations – How Montessorians’ varied careers make a difference in their communities 46</p> <p><i>Jess O’Brien, Director of Partnerships and Operations - Montessori Global Education</i></p> <p><i>Jo McIntyre, STAR Co-Ordinator - Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom.</i></p>
<p>Harnessing the power of the visual arts: Nurturing children’s working theories and expression 37</p> <p><i>Debi Keyte-Hartland MA, Associate Consultant with Early Education and MA Associate Tutor with CREC (Centre of Research in Early Childhood), Birmingham, UK.</i></p>	<p>“You Can Do It: Boosting Independence and Discovery with Creative Arts through STEAM Stations in the Early Childhood Classroom” 47</p> <p><i>Amy Orville, Assistant Professor, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, Slippery Rock, USA.</i></p> <p><i>Julia Williamson, Teacher, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, Slippery Rock, USA.</i></p>
<p>Empowering Parents: Transforming Early Autism Intervention Through Remote Coaching and Video Intervention. 38</p> <p><i>Nicolas Krueckeberg (MA), Senior Clinical Advisor, Transforming Autism, London, UK.</i></p>	<p>From Buds to Blossom – The Blossom Room 49</p> <p><i>Annie Pendrey – Educational Consultant and PhD researcher, United Kingdom.</i></p>
<p>The Gift of the Hummingbird: Intergenerational learning in early childhood education for community wellness and social justice 39</p> <p><i>Dr Elisa Lacerda-Vandenborn, Associate Professor in Counselling Psychology, the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada.</i></p>	<p>Montessori’s Vision in Action. The Value of Opportunity: Seeing Potential in Every Montessori Moment. 50</p> <p><i>Preeti Patel, Director of Education and Community, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom.</i></p> <p><i>Marvin Reyes, Organisational Director and Head Vincerola Academy, Vincerola Academy, Cologne, Germany.</i></p> <p><i>Andrea Garcia, Montessori Early Years Educator, Marketing and Communications Officer, Montessori Global Education, Mexico City, Mexico.</i></p>
<p>What Would They Say? Empowering Children’s Voices through the Integration of Art and Literature. 40</p> <p><i>Hala Mirza, Assistant professor, Early Childhood Department, King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia.</i></p>	<p>Incorporating Sensory Strategies to Support Children’s Learning 51</p> <p><i>Phoebe Pui-pui Cheung, Assistant Professor, Yew Chung College of Early Childhood Education (YCCECE), Hong Kong.</i></p> <p><i>Ana Aracelly Olguin, Assistant Professor, YCCECE, Hong Kong.</i></p>



<p>Sojourner Children’s Perceptions of their Ethnic Identities through Drawings 52 <i>Shahd M. Qutub</i> PhD, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.</p>	<p>Montessori’s Vision in Action: Meeting the Challenge of Shaping, Sustaining, and Promoting Your Early Years Brand, Ethos, and Vision 63 <i>Geeta Sidhu-Robb</i>, Chair of Montessori St Nicholas and Founder & CEO WCorp and Nosh Detox, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom.</p>
<p>Montessori’s Vision in Action: Ongoing school evolution to raise ambitions 54 <i>Marvin Reyes</i>, Organisational Director and Head Vincerola Academy, Vincerola Academy, Cologne, Germany. <i>Preeti Patel</i>, Director of Education and Community, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom.</p>	<p>Embedding the rights of babies, toddlers and young children as foundational in the updated Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland. 64 <i>Dr Sharon Skehill</i>, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Ireland. <i>Lorraine Farrell</i>, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Ireland.</p>
<p>Realising a Pedagogy of Voice and a Pedagogy of Listening for Young Children in Early Childhood Settings: Stories from the Field 55 <i>Prof Emer Ring</i>, Dean of Early Childhood and Teacher Education, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. <i>Dr Lisha O’Sullivan</i>, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland.</p>	<p>Transforming Early Childhood: Interprofessional Screening for Health and Development in Resource-Limited Settings. 66 <i>Dr Robyn Smith</i>, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.</p>
<p>Metaphorical Thinking, How to Encourage and Stimulate Meaning Making 57 <i>Eloise Robinson</i>, Atelierista, Little Jungle School of Early Childhood, London, United Kingdom.</p>	<p>Creative Classrooms 69 <i>Shari Tallon</i>, Music Educator Toronto, Ontario, Canada.</p>
<p>Using Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in a Comprehensive Assessment System to Include all Children 58 <i>Dr. Nicol Russell</i>, Chief Academic Officer, Teaching Strategies, USA. <i>Donna Fowler</i>, Senior Director, Learning Solutions Implementation, Teaching Strategies, USA.</p>	<p>Advantaging the Disadvantaged: Breaking Barriers; striving for success in the Early years. 70 <i>Rebecca Tarplett</i>, Director TickHub, Primary and Early Years Consultant, Chelmsford, England.</p>
<p>Trócaire insights on how Development Education may be understood in the context of Aistear - the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to 6 years in Ireland. 59 <i>Colette Saunders</i>, Early Years Development Education Office, Trócaire, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland.</p>	<p>Let’s Explore the World 71 <i>Uzm. Psk. Hande Kızılöz Uluca</i>, Bilfen Anaokulları Coordinator, Istanbul, Turkey.</p>
<p>Push Past It! A P Positive Approach To Challenging Classroom Behaviors. 61 <i>Dr. Angela Searcy</i>, Simple Solutions Educational Services Frankfort, IL USA.</p>	<p>STEM Early Years: A Multimodal Approach to Early Years STEM Instruction 73 <i>Simone Wellington</i>, Instructional Designer and Subject Matter Expert, Discovery Education, Charlotte, North Carolina, U.S.A.</p>
<p>New Human Rights Treaty on Early Childhood Education 62 <i>Bede Sheppard</i>, Deputy Child Rights Director, Human Rights Watch, New York, USA.</p>	<p>STOP! Cradle to prison pipeline for Black preschoolers: Strategies towards eradicating suspensions, expulsions, and exclusionary practices 74 <i>Dr. Brenda K. Williamson</i>, Professor/Educational Consultant, Durham Technical Community College/ BECS, Durham, United States of America.</p>
	<p>Bringing a community together: stories from participatory research with grandparents 76 <i>Dr Daniela Mangione</i>, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford <i>Dr Mallika Kanyal</i>, University of the Arts, London, <i>Dr Luisa Mascoli</i>, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, <i>Dr Paulette Luff</i>, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, United Kingdom.</p>

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



AI IN EDUCATION: A GLOBAL CREATIVE EXCHANGE AND ITS ROLE IN BOOSTING NEW PEDAGOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Open Education is a transformative approach grounded in the belief that knowledge should be freely accessible and shared (Inamorato Dos Santos et al., 2016). It promotes the idea that everyone, regardless of background, should have access to quality educational resources and experiences. By removing barriers, Open Education aims to democratize learning and broaden participation across communities globally. The essence of openness in education extends beyond resource access—it embodies a praxis of collaboration that transcends national, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries (Abegglen et al., 2023). This collaborative spirit enables educators, researchers, and students to co-create knowledge, share best practices, and engage in innovative teaching and learning methods that reflect diverse perspectives.

The international #creativeHE in AI in Education team, supported by the Imagination Lab Foundation and the Playful Hybrid Higher Education project, has embraced this ethos by curating two open-access, crowdsourced collections: *Towards AI Literacy: 101+ Creative and Critical Practices, Perspectives and Purposes* (Abegglen et al., 2024) and *101 Creative Ideas to use AI in Education: A Crowdsourced Collection* (Nerantzi et al., 2023). These collections provide a platform where contributors from around the world can share their insights and experiences regarding AI's role in education. By making this content available under a Creative Commons license, the collections encourage continuous exploration of AI's potential to transform education, inviting educators to consider how AI can be leveraged to foster inclusivity, creativity, and critical engagement.

MAIN POINTS

The #creativeHE collections offer a wide array of perspectives on AI in educational contexts, addressing both the opportunities and challenges it brings. The contributions showcase diverse methodologies and practices, ranging from practical applications of AI tools to critical reflections on the ethical dimensions of AI in learning environments. The collections emphasize creativity, inclusivity, and adaptability, presenting approaches that allow AI to support varied learning needs effectively. This open-access resource empowers educators by providing them with adaptable frameworks to help integrate AI in ways that enhance both student engagement and community building.

Moreover, the collections underscore the importance of fostering AI literacy from an early age. Early Years Education, for example, can introduce foundational concepts about technology and digital literacy. Simple activities, like discussing how voice assistants work or using interactive AI tools, can create an early awareness of technology's role for learning. Programs directly focused on digital literacy can cultivate interest and creativity, allowing young learners to become critical digital citizens. Involving parents, caregivers, and the broader community in these initiatives ensures a well-rounded approach, aligning with shared goals for responsible technology use and the ethical integration of AI in learning.

CONCLUSION

Awarded the OEGlobal Award 2024 for Open Curation/Repository, the #creativeHE collections stand as a testament to the collective effort and innovation of educators worldwide. These resources not only contribute to the growing dialogue around AI in education but also exemplify a commitment to open, collaborative educational practices. They invite educators, researchers, and policymakers to reflect on how AI can be used meaningfully and equitably in diverse educational settings. Through these collections, the #creativeHE team has created a community-driven resource that supports ongoing exploration and adaptation of AI in ways that promote creativity, inclusivity, and accessibility in education. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, such resources offer valuable pathways for more responsive and socially responsible approaches to AI in learning.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The #creativeHE in AI in Education team includes: Sandra Abegglen (University of Calgary), Chrissi Nerantzi (University of Leeds), Antonio Martínez-Arboleda (University of Leeds), Marianna Karatsiori (University of Macedonia, Greece), Javiera Atenas (University of Suffolk), and Chris Rowell (University of Arts London).

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



UNCONVENTIONAL PROGRAMME AT AN EARLY YEARS SETTING IN SAUDI ARABIA: PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE.

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of early years centres in Saudi Arabia has created a variation of the services offered by these centres. Which resulted in a huge market for parents to choose from before deciding where to enrol their children. Some centres chose a pure academic approach and work on promoting academic related skills in young children. Other centres, however, tend to follow a more child centred approach and work to foster academic readiness skills through focusing on the child's interests and needs, such as the centre on this presentation.

Lev Vygotsky in his sociocultural theory discusses the scaffolding concept which tend to focus on children's ZPD, scaffolding and social interactions. Similarly, Eida'a is an early childhood centre from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that focus on approaching children and developing the whole child from four dimensions: mind, body, soul, and heart, by applying it's unique and unconventional method that focuses on preliteracy skills more than literacy or academic skills. The applied approach follows a five steps method: 1. It is based on a 1:1 learning. 2. The child is always approached starting from his/ her interests. 3. Trust was built through the use of close observations of the child which allow more room to better understand the child and let him/ her be part of the decision-making process. 4. Setting customised and flexible goals, and finally, 5. Joy: making sure that the child is having fun and enjoying going to the centre. In this presentation we present three case study examples of success stories which are based on anecdotal record collected from parents and teachers who work closely with these children, over the period of two years. The evidence suggests a strong correlation between the applied method and the progress on children's communication skills.

KEY WORDS

Preliteracy skills, communication skills, early childhood centres, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



PLAY NOW & THEN: INTERGENERATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND PLAY

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INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational programs have been around for many years mostly drawing from theoretical frameworks from Erikson's (1963) lifespan approach and in some cases Allports's (1954) contact theory.

In summary both Erikson and Allport posit the need for meaningful contact between generations especially between young children and elders such as grandparents. Intergenerational programmes with clear objectives benefit both groups. For young children an increased respect and appreciation for the elderly and increased social skills; for the elderly improved well-being and self-esteem, a great sense of interconnectedness (Dunham & Casadonte 2009; Femia et al. 2008; Gamliel & Gabay, 2014; Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008; & Heyman et al. 2011).

In all, creating meaningful activities were both young and old can take turns in teaching and learning from one another might ensure a successful program, in this case success is measured by participant satisfaction (Giraudeau & Bailly, 2019).

MAIN POINTS

Knowing the immense benefits of intergenerational programmes, the team at the play-lab located on the ground floor of YCCECE known as Pamela Peck Discovery Space (PPDS), designed a series of events to encourage intergenerational play. One event in specific 'Play Now & Then', was intentionally designed for multiple generations in a household to participate in carefully curated activities which provided opportunities to exchange and share knowledge among all the participants. The team at PPDS consisted of 4 full-time teachers, one centre manager, a receptionist a dedicated janitor and the director. The whole team collaborated in different ways. Our objectives for this project were as follows:

- To provide a playful space for interactions among members of different generations
- To develop intentionally curated learning through play activities to facilitate engagement among generations
- To lead intergenerational caregivers in playful educational activities

Planning and Organizing

It is important to understand that the process of creating such event takes time and careful planning. All team members collaborated during the planning process. In the Space I began referring to our full-time teachers as teacher-curators. A curator is someone who engages in the development and planning of educational activities, and also administrative tasks related to specialized undertakings (Rose, et al., 2016). Persohn (2021) proposes that the process of 'curation consists of seven steps presented in Figure 1. We adopted this framework to guide our planning.

Curation Step	Definition
Collect	Corral and organize potential artifacts for study
Research	Learn about the artifacts through the study and work of others
Conceptualize	Begin to develop thematic ideas based on the artifacts
Select	Choose artifacts that well-represent the thematic ideas
Contextualize	Compose texts to convey themes around selected artifacts
Arrange	Group, sort, and order artifacts and texts to create flow of thematic ideas
Interpret	Review artifacts and texts to further develop thematic ideas for sharing

Figure 1 Curatorial verbs and their definitions summarized

In planning for this event we used the framework and applied them to our project for planning and organization (Figure 2). These verbs are offered as a blueprint to be applied "to the specific content and contexts of their project" (Persohn, 2021, p. 33).

¹ The author does not refer to this as a framework but a methodology

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



Curation Step	Implementation for Play Now & Then project
Conceptualize	We start here as we come up with the theme first
Collect	Brainstorming different activities and artifacts for the project
Research	Learn about activities and artifacts to prepare the project and information for the public
Select	Choose from all the ideas generated
Contextualize	Create information flyers explaining the activities and material usage
Arrange	Prepare the environments to create the appropriate flow
Interpret	Review as a whole, including participant feedback in order to inform next round

Figure 2 Using curatorial verbs as planning and organization guides in our project

After completing a couple of rounds of the filtering our ideas through the framework and carefully evaluating the options (activities) that would better help us facilitates joyful, meaningful, and playful interactions, the team decided to offer the following:

Thrift shop owner	Canton classic children's rhymes	Shadow puppets
Chapteh	Dressing up	Painting bowls

Day of the event

We received a total of 85 people (adults & children included). They explored PPDS before enjoying a 3 hour session of play. The Space offered free choice and a flexible schedule with some designated times for our teachers to engage families in specific activities. We call this engagements 'gentle invitations'. Overall, based on the Yew Chung Approach to ECE we respect the rights of and trust that children and families will choose their play journey through the Space. Therefore, instead of moving them from activity to activity, we invite them to join these engagements as another possible option.

Families enjoyed this intergenerational opportunities and the pictures we took show their active participation, engagement, and joy. We also witnessed families talking and playing with other families they had just met. We asked families to complete satisfaction surveys at the end and overall the responses were positive. Out of 85 families, we asked one survey completed by family. We received 59 responses or 61%, which is more than half the families and a good response rate. For the questions on level of satisfaction the families rated most response between highly satisfied and satisfied.

CONCLUSION

Without a doubt the "Play Now & Then" project was successful and equally a great opportunity to learn for further improvement. We used several different methods to effectively plan and for the first time we used a flexible framework proposed by a museum curator (See Persohn, 2021). We found this framework helpful and indeed flexible. During our time with the families we witnessed knowledge exchange reciprocity between the generations. The children listened to adults in their families, children in their families but also children and adults from other families. The adults delighted in listening to the children and sharing their knowledge of traditional games. We believe overall we were able to meet our objectives but we also acknowledge there is always room for improvement and we plan on continuing working towards that goal..

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

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A FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN CREATIVE ARTS AND REGULATION

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INTRODUCTION

This workshop explores how creative arts, when thoughtfully embedded within learning portfolios, support children's emotional regulation and enhance well-being, especially during transitions in daily routines. Early childhood educators will gain insight into leveraging portfolios to capture and reflect on children's creative expressions, using these reflections as a tool to foster engagement & cooperation during daily transitions. This session highlights the power of creative arts not only as an outlet for expression but as a pathway to emotional self-regulation.

MAIN POINTS

Purpose and Value of Learning Portfolios in Transition Support: Learning portfolios are introduced as an adaptable resource that aids children in navigating transitions. Participants will discover how portfolios provide a tangible, visual record of creative achievements, which helps children reconnect with their strengths and achievements, supporting a calm and grounded approach to transitions while also prompting collaborative sharing and reflection with peers.

Key Portfolio Components for Emotional Regulation: Participants will explore essential elements within each portfolio—such as children's artwork, reflective notes, and pedagogical documentation—that allow educators to identify and nurture individual needs during moments of change.

Storage, Accessibility & Display for Seamless Transitions: By exploring strategies for organizing portfolios to ensure accessibility and engagement during transitions, educators can empower children to use portfolios as a tool for self-regulation, creating a sense of continuity that reinforces emotional security.

Creative Arts as a Pathway to Wellbeing: This section underscores how engagement with creative arts can provide comfort and consistency. Documentation within portfolios captures moments of focus and creativity, which educators can revisit and relaunch with children to foster a calming influence during routine shifts and transitions.

CONCLUSION

Participants will leave with practical tools and strategies to create, organize, and utilize learning portfolios that not only celebrate children's creativity but also provide essential support for emotional regulation. By integrating these portfolios into transitions, educators can reinforce a trusting, nurturing environment that promotes well-being and resilience through relationships with creative expression.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



MONTESSORI'S VISION IN ACTION: HOME-START AND HOW VOLUNTEER NETWORKS FOSTER COMMUNITY CONNECTION

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Hayley Williams

Baby-Start Co-ordinator, Home-Start West Somerset, United Kingdom.

TOPIC/RELEVANCE

A prime example of our work to illustrate the varied and innovative early years practice with which Montessori Global Education engages, and tackles barriers to access and issues around inclusivity, head-on. Home-Start West Somerset offers support and practical help to families with at least one child under five, in Somerset (South-West, UK). Home-Start schemes are rooted in the communities they serve and managed locally with a strong network of volunteers. A commitment to supporting and enhancing access to Montessori principles and practices, for a community-based volunteer scheme enables the Montessori Philosophy to be seen "in-action", open and transparent in sharing the approach with educators, non-educators, volunteers and supporters.

KEY POINTS/FINDINGS

One in four children under five in the UK has a difficult start in life, because their families are under pressure. Yet every child deserves the best possible start; to be loved, to play, to learn and to grow in confidence. When this happens in a happy, secure family, a child's health, schooling and life prospects all improve. Home-Start believes that parents play the key role in ensuring that children have a happy and secure childhood, but even the most dedicated parents can face challenges that prevent them from doing all they want to for their children.

Home-Start supports parents as they grow in confidence, strengthen their relationships with their children and widen their links with the local community. They work closely with health professionals, children's centres, social workers, pre-schools, police, housing officers, drug counsellors and more, to provide a joined-up service for families in the UK.

A network of committed and caring volunteers, who are usually parents themselves, offer friendship and informal support to parents during difficult times in their lives. They visit families at home for two to three hours each week, and are friendly, approachable people who are relied on and trusted by parents to listen without being judgmental, and to respect the needs of each individual family member. It is this aspect of support, training and consideration of Montessori Principles as an ethos, a developmental method of considering how to engage with families and their children, that Montessori Global Education seeks to continue.

SUMMARY/POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS (CTA)

An engaging workshop session designed to illustrate, explore and invigorate concepts of inclusive practice and open-access tools to uncover the Montessori Approach, and enhance early years practice everywhere. Discuss volunteering models, training and support opportunities or even Home-Start's wider work in the UK - because every parent should have the support they need to give their children the best possible start in life.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



COMPASSION COUNTS: WHEN EMPATHY IS ELUSIVE IN A CULTURE OF CARE AND KINDNESS

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INTRODUCTION

These days, there is a huge emphasis on cultivating empathy in young children as a part of social and emotional learning, but what do we do when empathy isn't quite there yet? Educators can focus instead on fostering compassion, or the desire to take action to help others. Many young children already exhibit compassion even when empathy, the idea of sharing the same feelings as someone else, is elusive. We can harness that intrinsic desire to help others through curriculum and everyday moments in the classroom.

By the end of this session attendees will better value compassion as a vehicle for social and emotional growth, empower children to help one another during everyday occurrences, and create curriculum to foster a culture of care and kindness.

MAIN POINTS

1. Young children naturally demonstrate care for others even when they don't exactly know what the other person is going through. Educators are in a prime position to notice these acts of compassion and amplify the children's desire to care for and be helpful towards others.
2. We have a very powerful tool at our disposal, the ability to model the values and behaviors we wish to see, living and embodying compassion. We must work to align our actions with our words and examine the underlying messages children learn when there are 'mixed messages.'
3. We will look at common barriers to growing compassion and empathy in young children and what we can do instead:

Deficits-based mindset

Fear-based teaching

Not allowing children to feel the full range of emotions

Not giving children a chance to problem solve

Emphasis on compliance

Focus on academics at the expense of 'whole child' development

4. We will discuss curriculum that support compassion and empathy:

Babydoll dramatic play

Pet Vet office

Book Doctor

Nature-based learning

Focus on teamwork

5. We will discuss teaching tools:

Modeling

Active listening/serve-and-return

Perspective taking

Peer-to-peer learning

Strengths-based view of differences

Non-verbal communication: facial expressions and body postures that promote connection and compassion

Co-regulation

Self-compassion

CONCLUSION

Change begins with us. We must do the self-work to uncover habits, biases, and practices that impede compassion. We must prioritize fostering connection in the classroom and enabling children to practice working with peers. To amplify compassion in young children, we must first lead with compassion. When our values and actions are aligned, empathy is sure to follow.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



IMPLEMENTING INTERGENERATIONAL STORYTELLING IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

Fey Cole

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation highlights the transformative potential of intergenerational storytelling in Early Years Education. Drawing on the work from 'Intergenerational Practice in Schools and Settings' by Fey Cole (2024), it examines the impact of structured storytelling sessions between children and grandparents on emotional, social, and cognitive development. Intergenerational learning encourages a sense of belonging and strengthens children's identities through shared narratives. Grounded in Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Erikson's Psychosocial Development, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this model offers a sustainable, adaptable program that aligns with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, and other Early Years Curriculums.

KEY POINTS

Neuroscientific and Developmental Basis: Positive experiences during early neural development reinforces social bonds and brain growth, crucial for children's sense of belonging. This intergenerational programme leverages attachment and trust through repeated, meaningful interactions, aligning with Bowlby's and Erikson's theories on identity formation.

Programme Structure and Practical Framework: The six-session model guides children and grandparents through stages of relationship building, character creation, story development, and final storytelling. Each session is adaptable to local needs, ensuring relevance across various educational settings. By developing collaboration, children improve their literacy and communication skills, bolstering their self-confidence and empathy.

Home-School Integration and Community Engagement: Extending these activities through postcard exchanges and community events strengthens familial bonds outside the setting. Collaborating with local libraries or cultural centres also situates children's learning within their community, enhancing the curriculum's impact on social and identity development.

Evaluation and Reflection: Feedback from participants, observational tools, and portfolio assessments document growth in literacy, communication, and socio-emotional skills, facilitating continuous programme improvement will be explored.

Conclusion: This approach to intergenerational learning addresses crucial developmental needs by cultivating a supportive community network and enhancing emotional resilience in young learners. As shown in Cole's research (2024), incorporating intergenerational practices can significantly contribute to sustainable Early Years Education. This presentation offers a pathway for educators and policymakers to develop long-lasting connections within educational settings and beyond.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



ACTIVE PLAY FOR ALL! INCLUDING YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES WITH THEIR TYPICAL PEERS

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INTRODUCTION

Physical activity is key to all children's optimum development. Young children need physical activity to help prevent childhood obesity, promote brain development, and develop the habit of a physically active lifestyle. Providing young children with multiple daily physical activity opportunities is a responsibility of early childhood educators. It is important to include all children together in physical activity to establish inclusion as the norm during the early years when attitudes are forming. But how can educators design physical activities to enable young children with disabilities to participate with their peers?

MAIN POINTS

This session provides ideas for modifying physical activities to enable children two-to-five years of age with varying abilities to all participate together. Five areas of potential structured physical activity modification include changing the environment, equipment, rules, activity, and skills. The **environment** can be modified to add structure by providing each child with a home base while also eliminating distractions. **Equipment** can be modified by offering a variety of easy-to-catch balls, along with sound makers and assistive devices. **Rules** can be simplified and revised to be sure everyone is active all the time. This avoids elimination activities in which the least skilled child is the first eliminated. **Activities** can be adjusted to vary the challenge to fit the ability of individual children. The rule of thumb is to enable an individual child to succeed at least three out of four attempts. This success rate helps maintain children's motivation for continuing to attempt activities. In addition, cooperative activities with everyone working toward a group goal are better choices to promote inclusion, rather than choosing highly competitive activities in which only a few children win and everyone else loses. **Skill** demands can be modified to fit each child's ability. Changing the distance to be traveled, the reaction time required, the balance needed, the demands for accuracy, and the way in which a child travels from one place to another are all options for modifying an activity's skill requirements.

CONCLUSION

The presenter couples the above ideas for modifications with examples of physical activities that illustrate these modifications. These physical activities are developmentally appropriate and age-appropriate for young children two-to-five-years of age. The activity examples require only inexpensive equipment, and several can be played in small spaces such as classrooms and family homes. Best of all, these activities are FUN for children to play and educators to lead! Use these activities to enable children of varying abilities to reap the benefits of physical activity while all playing together.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



EXPLORING THE GLOBE: INSPIRING YOUNG MINDS TO DISCOVER THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

Children have a natural curiosity about the world. They have questions about how it works and deserve to know more. I have discovered in my years of teaching 5–8-year-olds that many adults do not realize how much children are able to comprehend. As a result, they do not teach them about global awareness at an early age.

Children also do not get the opportunities to use their imagination like they used to. If a child gets bored, their parent will hand them a device to keep them entertained. I consistently faced these two issues in the classroom: how to teach children more about the world and how to get them to use their imagination. I created a teaching method to solve both problems.

MAIN POINTS

Welcome to Passport Adventures. This is one of the strategies used in my teaching methods: having children learn about places around the world by pretending to travel there - using their imaginations. During a Passport Adventure lesson, children practice geography skills by locating the place on a world map. They learn about the weather and basic needs, such as what they will need to pack if they were actually going to travel there. Imaginary suitcases get opened and children pack what they will need for this imaginative trip. Once their suitcases are packed and zipped close, they learn about other important facts such as: the local currency, popular foods, or key phrases in the country's native language. Instead of just showing the children a picture of an important landmark, such as the Giza Pyramids in Cairo, the children are addressed as if they are actually there. We have conversations about a landmark as if we're standing right in front of it; yet another way for children to use their imagination.

The use of movement enhances the lessons as well. Students might turn their chairs backwards and sway side-to-side to pretend they are riding a camel around the pyramids. They might move their arms and legs around as if floating in the Dead Sea, or walk around the classroom pretending to be hiking up the steps to Fira on the island of Santorini, Greece. At the conclusion of the lesson, children get the opportunity to draw a picture of themselves at the location. They can draw what they would like to do if they went to visit that place in real time.

Another way I have enabled my students to use their imagination is on our Flight to China Day. We spend an entire day of school pretending to fly on an airplane to China...without even leaving our classroom! In my session, I'll be walking attendees through each step on how to transform a place into an airplane and having children imagine as if it was the real thing. Attendees will receive free resources to enhance this day for their students.

CONCLUSION

Children create their own travel bucket lists as a result of these teaching strategies. They speak about different cities and countries on a daily basis, and surprise their families with the knowledge they have about these places. My former students now send me videos about places they travel to and reminisce with me about places we pretended to travel to years after they have left my classroom. Educators who implement using imagination while teaching children about the world will discover their students craving for more. They will be surprised by the ideas the students come up with and how much more imaginative they become in their daily lives. I'll be sharing several examples about my students who have taken their Passport Adventures to the next level.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



LIGHTS, CAMERA, STEAM: UNLOCKING CHILDREN'S CREATIVITY AND AGENCY THROUGH DRAMATIC PLAY.

Rachel Dunne

Developmental and Therapeutic Play Specialist, Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies and Inclusive Education, Portobello Institute, Dublin.

Jade Farrell

Area Manager of Early Years Service. Student at Portobello Institute, Dublin.

INTRODUCTION

This session focuses on the importance of dramatic play and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education in early childhood, highlighting their roles in fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development. Grounded in classic and contemporary theories, it explores how pretend play supports problem-solving, creativity, and children's self-regulation. Practical strategies, including incorporating children's voices and creating engaging environments, empower children as active learners. By addressing implementation challenges, especially in STEAM, and highlighting educators' and families' crucial roles, this session promotes holistic, inquiry-based learning that enhances children's engagement, agency and curiosity.

MAIN POINTS

This session delves into the significance of dramatic play, the integration of children's voices in play, and the role of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education in early childhood development and education. Dramatic play has long been viewed as essential to children's learning and development, a concept grounded in the work of pioneering pedagogues and theorists. For instance, Froebel identified play as a primary pathway for learning (Beigi, 2021), while Isaacs emphasized its value for emotional expression (Howard and Mac Innes, 2013). Vygotsky's work highlighted that pretend play promotes abstract thinking and self-regulation (Smolucha and Smolucha, 2021), and Dewey believed that play supports experiential learning (Beatty, 2017). Contemporary research reinforces these ideas, showing that pretend play fosters problem-solving abilities (Lillard, 2017) and enhances children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as communication skills (Lyu, 2023).

This session will explore methods for incorporating children's voices into pretend play. Strategies such as implementing a listening culture in the classroom are influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRA, 2010). Additionally, the session will discuss practical approaches, including observing children, creating engaging and stimulating environments, and modelling and mediating play. These techniques enable educators to center children's perspectives in play, empowering them to express themselves and actively contribute to their own learning experience.

The session also examines STEAM education's importance in early childhood settings. Specifically, it reviews how STEAM is integrated into early years education in Ireland (NCCA, 2023; DE, 2023; Walsh, 2023) and its benefits for children's development. STEAM education fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities in young children (Erol, Erol, and Basaran, 2023). It also enhances engagement and intrinsic motivation for learning by inspiring curiosity and joy (Hunter-Doniger, 2021). However, there are several challenges to effectively implementing STEAM education. These include limited pedagogical knowledge and negative attitudes toward STEAM subjects (Su et al., 2023), parental perceptions (Wang, Jiang, and Zhan, 2021), and a lack of adequate training for educators (Walsh, 2023). Addressing these barriers is essential for promoting STEAM learning opportunities for young children.

The practical component of this session presents a case study conducted in an early years educational setting, where theoretical concepts related to dramatic play and STEAM education were applied in practice. Key findings from the case study reveal that children learn most effectively when they are actively engaged in inquiry-based activities and take ownership of their learning process. STEAM-inspired dramatic play was found to support holistic development, including cognitive skills, social and emotional growth, and specific abilities such as turn-taking, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and problem-solving.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



The study also highlighted the critical role of educators in facilitating STEAM-inspired dramatic play. Educators are responsible for creating a rich and stimulating environment that encourages children's exploration and engagement. In addition, it was revealed that educators and families benefitted when educators shared insights about STEAM and the benefits of learning through play with families to promote a shared understanding of its value. Educators' communication with families helps build parental support, enhancing the broader community's recognition of the developmental benefits of STEAM and dramatic play.

CONCLUSION

This session argues that both dramatic play and STEAM education are essential for promoting young children's holistic development, including cognitive, social, and emotional growth. By incorporating children's voices in play and utilising STEAM activities, early years educators can enhance children's engagement, creativity, and problem-solving skills. The session highlights the educator's crucial role as a facilitator, outlining the importance of teacher training in STEAM methods and fostering partnerships with families to strengthen community awareness of play-based learning. It recommends that early years educators prioritise ongoing professional development in STEAM education and dramatic play facilitation, while policymakers and Higher Education Institutions training institutions should further establish guidelines and resources to support inquiry-based, play-centered approaches. Additionally, sustained family engagement is essential to share the benefits of STEAM and play-based learning, ultimately supporting children's best interests.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING ALPHABET BOOKS THAT SUPPORT YOUNG LEARNERS' LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Alphabetic knowledge is essential for learning to read and write. In fact, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) emphasized that children's knowledge of the alphabet is the strongest, most durable predictor of later achievement in literacy including decoding, comprehension, and spelling. Progress in this essential skill requires development of proficient and automatic recognition of alphabet letter names, sounds, and forms. Otherwise, children will experience difficulties with word reading and use ineffective techniques in reading and writing.

MAIN POINTS

Preschool educators, caregivers, and parents play an important role in providing preparatory exposures and experiences with the alphabet. A simple and essential preparatory exposure and experience is reading aloud alphabet books. This can begin early in a child's life, even with toddlers, as a first step in engaging children with the alphabet. In selecting books for this purpose, it is helpful to consider several important characteristics of the alphabet books.

In this session, we present information from our recent study about how to select alphabet books that best support alphabet knowledge development for young children. Our *Five Traits of Highly Supportive Alphabet Books* can be used to identify exemplary alphabet books and to increase learner support with all alphabet books. We will then share top selected alphabet books based on these traits and ideas for how to use alphabet books when reading aloud.

Objectives for this session include:

1. Present the *Five Traits of Highly Supportive Alphabet Books* to assist selection of alphabet books that best support alphabet knowledge development for young children.
2. Share results of our analysis of alphabet books based on these criteria, including select highly-supportive books.
3. Discuss ways to effectively use alphabet books to increase alphabet knowledge when reading aloud to young children.
4. Engage attendees in brief analysis reviews of selected alphabet books.

CONCLUSION

We invite you to join with us in discussing this important foundational concept of reading and writing.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



YOUNG CHILDREN IN DIGITAL SOCIETY: SUPPORTING CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS WITH DIGITAL PRACTICES

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Kate Highfield

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INTRODUCTION

This workshop draws on the findings of a four-year project funded by the Australian Research Council investigating the digital practices that best support children, families and educators to use digital technologies and the internet safely and well in the early years. The project was conducted in collaboration with leading national organisations involved in the care and education of young children, digital media production, online safety and parenting education, including ABC Kids, eSafety Commissioner, Raising Children Network, Early Childhood Australia and Australian Federal Police amongst others. In this workshop, attendees will reflect on their own perspectives about young children and digital technologies in the early years and engage with important ideas from philosophy of technology that help adults interpret the digital experiences and learning needs of young children. A range of digital practices that can be enacted by adults with children that support children's relationships, health and wellbeing, citizenship and play and pedagogy with technologies and the internet will be explored. This exploration will include access to purpose-designed resources intended to facilitate implementation of the practices with children and families in diverse cultural, socio-economic and geographic settings. Attendees will reflect on the relevance of identified resources for supporting digital practices in their own early years communities.

MAIN POINTS

- Considering professional perspectives about young children and digital technologies.
- Understanding philosophy of technology as way of interpreting young children's digital experiences and learning needs.
- Recognising the range of digital practices that support children's relationships, health and wellbeing, citizenship, and play and pedagogy when using technologies and the internet.

CONCLUSION

Young children are known to be highly engaged with digital technologies and the internet across a range of socio-economic and cultural contexts. As children interact with digitally-networked technologies in their daily lives, early childhood educators are increasingly called upon to support children with digital learning. Professional perspectives about young children and digital technologies can influence the learning opportunities educators provide young children. Understanding philosophy of technology can help educators interpret young children's digital experiences and learning needs in terms of practices – or what children and their adults do and say with digital technologies. Workshop participants will have access to purpose-design resources facilitating practices that help children, and their adults use technologies and internet in ways that fun, safe and education.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF LISTENING: CO-CONSTRUCTION AND RESEARCH FOR ADULT LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

With so many demands on Early Years Educators to prove the value of their roles, together with money and time constraints, it can be challenging to effectively support the skills and practice of all individuals in a group. Yet, without meaningful support and ongoing professional development, how can Educators respond meaningfully to children's curiosities, theories and needs and help them to develop the multitude of skills they need to become creative, resilient and strong problem solvers?

This presentation aims to share how developing a culture of co-construction and research, has enabled us, at Little Jungle, to support the learning and development of children and adults together, as part of an everyday system.

MAIN POINTS

The presentation will first look at the systems and framework for research designed to meet the needs of the adults.

We will show how we began the process and how cycles of reflection and research have enabled us to layer and build our knowledge and understanding of the role of the adult in supporting children's learning and development.

We will zoom in on a particular example to showcase how the adults' research is framed in such a way as to allow for children's research to take place to meet their needs, whilst also complimenting our learning, with evidence to make the whole process visible.

We will then offer a deeper insight into how we support the learning processes of children, specifically the processes that cultivate a system of renewal in our provision. Through consciously slowing the pace of our project work and focusing on a culture of reciprocity, we take time to revisit concepts across varied creative media and to discuss as a class. We observe and document the multiple points of view unearthed through the actions, discoveries and queries of the children. Hypotheses are challenged, enriched and shared through the opportunities to dialogue with resources and one another.

Through asking questions pertinent to the research of the child and the adult we aim to get closer to the conditions that cultivate democratic and generative learning. With greater connection to the point of view of the child, the more intentionally we can listen and meaningfully interpret.

CONCLUSION

Through our presentation, we aim to prompt reflection and invite participants to consider the following points:

- The importance of listening, dialogue and reciprocity in the relationship and roles of the adult and the child.
- How might you design an organisational framework that brings together the learning of the adults and children effectively and meaningfully for all?
- What areas of need/ motivations/ improvements can you identify across your adult team or individual practice?
- How can you design a plan for action-based research that allows for and builds on children's explorations and learning?
- How can you make learning visible for all, to support ongoing and future learning?
- How can you ensure that the learning that takes place is always as close to the child's motivations, needs and within the ZPD? How it this made visible through the work that you do?

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



EDUCATORS MUST MAKE NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING PRACTICES A VISIBLE PRIORITY IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS.

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates neurodiversity-affirming practices in early years settings, focusing on the role of early childhood educators in recognising and supporting neurodiverse children. Given the diversity of children's needs and backgrounds, the research explores how varying approaches in early education contribute to inclusive environments. Drawing on research (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Danniels & Pyne, 2022; Hamilton & Petty, 2023), it highlights the significance of early education on long-term outcomes and emphasises the need for educators to tailor their pedagogical approaches to suit each child's unique attributes. Findings underscore the early years educator's critical role in identifying and supporting neurodiverse children, and their commitment to fostering practices that support diverse developmental pathways for positive outcomes.

The study comprehensively explored the neurodiversity approach, focusing on early childhood educators' perspectives on its meaning and inherent complexities. By comparing existing literature with participant insights, the study sought to better understand educators' views and practices related to neurodiversity. Educators are uniquely positioned to recognise developmental challenges early and to implement tailored support; therefore, adopting neurodiversity-affirming practices is crucial to effectively support children with diverse neurological profiles (Heiskanen et al., 2018). The Irish government has initiated significant programs to advance inclusion in early education, including the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (2016), the Leadership for Inclusion Programme (LINC), and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM); these frameworks have been instrumental in promoting disability awareness and enhancing inclusive practices (DCYA, 2016; LINC Consortium, 2016). This study examined the impact of these initiatives and the ways in which educators' knowledge and skills contribute to implementing neurodiversity-affirming practices effectively.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historically, the Catholic Church in Ireland provided segregated care for individuals with disabilities, grounded in a religious model that conceptualised disability as a test of faith, a means to build character, and a manifestation of divine will (Carroll et al., 2013; Retief & Letsosa, 2018). This model, the first of its kind in Ireland, remained prevalent until legislative shifts, such as the 2005 Discrimination Act, introduced the medical model of disability. According to Foucault, this transition began in the 19th century when the medical field sought to classify, regulate, and control the body, leading to the medicalisation framework that aligned with Enlightenment thinking (Lupton, 1997). However, currently, the social model continues to emerge, emphasising a recognition of rights and a capabilities-based approach.

The review also examines Armstrong's (2012) concept of "positive niche construction," which draws an analogy between animals' adaptations to their environments like a bird building a nest or a rabbit creating a burrow—and the need to structure environments that support individual strengths and unique qualities. This approach resonates with neurodiversity-affirming practices in early childhood settings. Armstrong's six elements of positive niche construction provide a foundation for implementing neurodiversity-affirming practices, aligning closely with approaches that support diverse developmental needs in early years education (Moffat et al., 2016; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Garrett, 2022; Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



METHODS

The Interpretivist paradigm approach was selected for its ability to provide multiple perspectives and recognise diverse beliefs and values through an online open-ended questionnaire and focus group. A sequential design was then implemented to analyse themes and refine the questions for the focus group.

RESEARCH DATA FINDINGS

Models of Disability in Ireland

Educators shared their perspectives on models of disability evident in early years. They noted that many educators and parents felt pressured to adopt a medical model, to receive interventions and specialist therapies for challenging behaviours rather than celebrating children's strengths. Nonetheless, educators emphasised their commitment to the social model in their daily pedagogical practices.

Early interventions and initiatives that benefit neurodiverse children

The educator's role in early interventions focuses on internal and external principles to support neurodiversity. Findings emphasise a strengths-based approach with best practices including observations, reflective practices, an emergent curriculum centred on the child's interests, and a slower pedagogical pace that allows for space, time, and patience; supporting literature includes Armstrong (2012). These inclusive environments were aided and sometimes challenged by external interventions and initiatives including the LINC programme, the INCO (Inclusion co-ordinator) role, the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and the Access and Inclusion model (2016) (DCYA, 2016). Some external interventions, like Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language Therapy, were portrayed by educators to be difficult to access. However, role modelling by educators, parents, and stakeholders significantly impacted children's future outcomes, aligning with Armstrong's (2012) positive niche construction and key elements from the literature review.

Barriers to excellence in neurodiversity-affirming practice

It was evident that educators and the focus group were open and honest in their reflections and contributions. The findings revealed that educators' beliefs and biases were major barriers to best practices. Furthermore, low teacher-to-children ratios hindered the adoption of a strengths-based approach, making it difficult to implement a slow, relational pedagogy even with AIM (Access and Inclusion model) support.

CONCLUSION

This study unequivocally underscores the necessity of aligning internal and external initiatives and support systems for educators to facilitate quality practice for children. The findings clearly demonstrate that this alignment is vital for the effective inclusion of all children. While the work of early years educators is crucial for securing positive outcomes, significant action must be taken to achieve seamless integration of services. This integration is essential for supporting each unique child, enhancing their experiences both within the early years setting and beyond, thereby establishing a robust, multi-layered approach to education.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



MONTESSORI'S VISION IN ACTION: ADDRESSING AND OVERCOMING MISPERCEPTIONS

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TOPIC/RELEVANCE

Dr Maria Montessori developed an educational method that places the child at the centre of the learning process. By allowing children to take the lead and providing an environment that addresses their holistic needs, the Montessori approach naturally fosters learning, creativity, independence, and problem-solving. Parents who value child-centred learning often seek out Montessori establishments in order to attain this philosophy in practice. However, any educational choice comes with its considerations, and there are also many expressions of early education located around the globe that continue to 'borrow' from Dr. Maria Montessori's principles. In championing Montessori in practice, we seek to share and discuss many of the common challenges faced by educators and Montessori enthusiasts of today.

KEY POINTS/FINDINGS

The Montessori Method is rich in legacy of over 100 years and favoured by education departments around the world as well as a loyal and devoted following of families and communities who value the development and life chances of every child. Many recognise the Montessori philosophy as a visionary approach, essential for equipping future generations – however, Montessori Global Education champions deep consideration of the Montessori keys to success, seeking to unearth what keeps the method relevant to the needs of the child today as they not only face the challenges of the future, but thrive as they do so.

Our work with a range of varied partners leads us to tackle head-on many misperceptions about the Montessori Approach. We thrive within our partnerships and collaborations, believing that together, we can build a tomorrow inspired by Montessori's dedication and commitment to the future. The Montessori Approach can be applied flexibly, sustainably and with a secure commitment to high-quality educational practice. Myths, misperceptions and inaccurate imagery of an elite and out-of-reach provision can be de-bunked through examples of educational innovation and even life-changing projects, in remote regions of the world. Presenters share examples of a range of applications of Montessori in practice including UpSchool, Gorton Mount Primary and Montessori on Wheels.

These wider sector initiatives, and many others, provide an emerging evidence base for significant positive outcomes for young people when the Montessori Philosophy is applied in practice. As Dr Maria Montessori believed "Teachers should cultivate a staunch belief in their mission. Only then will it be possible to create a new world through education. However, if this highest of aims is to be attained, also educational methods must radically change to become an active aid to the psychic development of the child". So how radical must we be? Early Years Music education, as an example, thrives within a creative application of the foundations of the Montessori Philosophy, and musicians, educators and learners alike can be engaged in Montessori-inspired practices. The established educational framework of Montessori Principles can be used to nurture creative experiences, individualizing each learning moment and securing the creation of learner-led artistry.

SUMMARY/POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS (CTA)

Learn how we encourage myth-busting practices and challenge models of delivery that are largely unsustainable for the requirements of flexible and responsive modern Montessori practice. Let's face our Montessori misperceptions together and share innovative ways of working in the future.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) IN SAUDI ARABIA

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as the foundation for lifelong learning and development. In Saudi Arabia, the evolution of ECE reflects the nation's commitment to improving education and aligning with global standards. Over the decades, the country has seen a remarkable transformation in the policies, infrastructure, and societal perceptions of early childhood education, underpinned by the government's Vision 2030 strategy. This research explores the key milestones, policies, challenges, and future prospects of ECE in Saudi Arabia.

EARLY BEGINNINGS OF ECE IN SAUDI ARABIA

The formal journey of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia began in the late 20th century. Historically, informal education in the form of religious teachings was provided in Quranic schools known as *kuttabs*. These schools focused on basic literacy and numeracy, alongside memorization of the Quran, providing a rudimentary form of early education that laid the foundation for formal schooling.

The 1970s marked the establishment of kindergartens, primarily in urban areas, targeting children aged 3–6. These early initiatives were limited in scope and accessibility, often serving affluent families in major cities. The Ministry of Education began to formally recognize the importance of early learning during this period, but widespread adoption was hindered by cultural norms, a lack of trained professionals, and minimal infrastructure.

GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

By the 1990s, the Saudi government intensified its efforts to expand ECE. The Ministry of Education introduced frameworks to standardize curricula and ensure quality in kindergarten settings. In 1999, a major step forward was taken with the integration of kindergartens into the public education system, allowing for greater accessibility for middle- and low-income families. This move reflected a broader understanding of the importance of early education in cognitive and social development.

Despite these advancements, challenges remained. The ECE sector was largely underfunded compared to primary and secondary education, and teacher training programs were not adequately developed. Recognizing these issues, Saudi Arabia increased its focus on ECE in the early 2000s, aligning its efforts with international recommendations, such as those from UNESCO and the United Nations.

VISION 2030 AND ECE REFORM

The launch of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan in 2016 marked a turning point in the evolution of ECE. This ambitious reform agenda seeks to diversify the economy and invest in human capital development, with education playing a central role. Vision 2030 specifically emphasizes early childhood education as a means of enhancing learning outcomes across all levels of education.

Key initiatives under Vision 2030 have transformed the ECE landscape:

1. **Increased Enrollment Rates:** The Ministry of Education aims to achieve 90% enrollment in preschool education by 2030. To meet this target, significant investments have been made in building kindergartens and increasing public-private partnerships in education.
2. **Quality Assurance:** The Tatweer Education Holding Company, established to oversee education reforms, has implemented quality assurance frameworks for kindergartens. These frameworks align with global standards, focusing on curriculum development, teacher qualifications, and classroom environments.
3. **Teacher Training Programs:** Recognizing the role of educators in ECE, Saudi Arabia has introduced specialized training programs for early childhood teachers. Universities now offer bachelor's degrees in ECE, and workshops have been launched to improve teaching practices.
4. **Technology Integration:** The country has leveraged technology to enhance early learning. Digital tools and interactive platforms are increasingly used in classrooms, providing children with innovative learning experiences.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS

The evolution of ECE in Saudi Arabia is also shaped by changing societal attitudes toward early education. Traditionally, early learning was viewed as supplementary rather than essential. However, increasing awareness of the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of early education has shifted public opinion. Parents now recognize the importance of kindergartens in preparing children for primary school and fostering critical thinking skills.

Moreover, the role of women in education has undergone significant changes. Female educators dominate the ECE sector, reflecting broader efforts to empower women in the workforce. This shift aligns with Vision 2030's emphasis on increasing female participation in the labor market.

CHALLENGES FACING ECE IN SAUDI ARABIA

While significant progress has been made, challenges persist in the Saudi ECE sector:

1. **Geographical Disparities:** Access to ECE remains unequal, with rural and remote areas lacking adequate facilities. Urban centers benefit from better infrastructure and resources, leading to disparities in enrollment and quality.
2. **Workforce Shortages:** Despite improvements in teacher training, there is a shortage of qualified ECE professionals. Recruitment and retention of teachers, especially in rural areas, remain challenging.
3. **Curriculum Development:** While efforts have been made to standardize curricula, ensuring cultural relevance while adopting global best practices requires continuous revision and innovation.
4. **Parental Involvement:** Despite increasing awareness, some parents remain skeptical of the value of ECE, particularly in conservative communities. Encouraging active parental involvement in early learning processes is crucial for long-term success.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The future of ECE in Saudi Arabia looks promising, given the government's strong commitment to reform. Key areas of focus include:

1. **Expanding Access:** Achieving universal access to kindergartens will require sustained investment in infrastructure, particularly in underserved regions. Mobile preschools and community-based initiatives may serve as innovative solutions to address this challenge.
2. **Enhancing Teacher Training:** Continuous professional development programs for ECE teachers will ensure high-quality education. Introducing incentives, such as scholarships and competitive salaries, can attract more individuals to the profession.
3. **Promoting Research and Innovation:** Establishing research centers dedicated to early childhood education can provide data-driven insights into effective teaching methods and policy interventions. Collaboration with international institutions can further enhance research outcomes.
4. **Integrating Cultural Values:** As Saudi Arabia continues to modernize its education system, preserving cultural and religious values in ECE curricula will remain a priority. Striking a balance between tradition and innovation is essential for fostering national identity.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia reflects the nation's broader journey toward modernization and development. From humble beginnings in Quranic schools to ambitious reforms under Vision 2030, the ECE sector has undergone significant transformation. While challenges remain, Saudi Arabia's commitment to improving access, quality, and equity in early education positions it as a model for other countries in the region. By investing in its youngest citizens, the nation is building a foundation for a prosperous and sustainable future.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



CULTIVATING CREATIVITY: EARLY CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENTS THAT INSPIRE SELF-EXPRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

Definitions of creativity generally reference originality and usefulness. Leggett (2017) offers the following early childhood-specific definition:

Creativity for young children involves cognitive processes that develop through social interactions, play and the imagination. Creative thinking is a transformative activity that leads to new ways of thinking and doing that are novel for the child or useful to children's communities (p. 851).

The learning environment and how adults interact with young children within that environment determines whether creative thinking will be stimulated or stifled. Creating an environment that values and nurtures creativity is vital to promoting young children's creative expression (Craft et al., 2007). In early childhood, fostering children's creativity involves opportunities for experiential learning and hands-on experiences (Cachia et al., 2010). Conducive environments, however, are not enough to ensure creative thinking. Adults "must be aware of children's intentions in their play and look for opportunities to provoke their interest, challenge their thinking, and support independent or collaborative problem solving" (Leggett, 2017, p. 851).

MAIN POINTS

Creativity is not solely centered on the arts but also encompasses being creative in thinking and problem solving. Talents Unlimited is one effective model for nurturing children's creative thinking (Newman, 2008). Built upon Calvin Taylor's (1967) multiple-talent approach to teaching, Talents Unlimited engages children in the cognitive processes of productive thinking, decision making, planning, forecasting, and communication to assimilate knowledge or generate unique solutions to problems.

Inspiration for creative thinking can be found in children's literature while visual art activities, dramatic play, and blocks provide endless opportunities for creative self-expression. From classics such as *The Important Book* (1949) by Margaret Wise Brown to the more recent works by Peter H. Reynolds – *The Dot* (2003) and *Ish* (2004), numerous picture books can inspire children's creative thinking, imagining, writing, drawing, making, building, moving, musicking, dancing, and dreaming (Childrenslitlove, 2020). Visual and performing arts are an alternative means of expression for young children. As such, they offer a way to share thoughts, experiences, and emotions in classrooms and outdoor learning environments that involve thinking fluidly, flexibly, and originally. Wooden unit blocks, which are one of the most versatile and long-lasting learning materials for young children, naturally invite children to think, plan, and problem solve as they share space, materials, and ideas while building. The opportunities for imaginative and creative play are enhanced further when props and pictures are thoughtfully integrated into this traditional center to increase inquiry and provoke higher-level thinking. Creativity is a part of intellectual growth that can be developed with practice as teachers intentionally emphasize creative thought during story time, art, and block play.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood environments that cultivate creativity can optimally develop young children's interests and potential, and teachers play a key role in creating such an environment. Teachers must recognize creative thinking as the heart of all learning and prioritize opportunities for children to think and act creatively. Giles (2024) offers the following suggestions for encouraging creativity in early childhood classrooms: emphasize the process; provide a wide variety of materials; provide ample time and space for open-ended exploration; provide many, varied learning opportunities; be flexible; resist redirecting; and invite conversation. For children's creativity to flourish, they must be allowed to think differently, act autonomously, and play freely.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



THE IMAGINATION STATION: EMPOWERING YOUNG LEARNERS TO PLAN AND CREATE MEANINGFUL PROJECTS

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INTRODUCTION:

The Imagination Station empowers young learners to plan and create projects by providing access to a closet filled with art-related materials and recycled items. This hands-on approach encourages creativity, problem-solving, collaborative learning, environmental awareness and confidence building.

During our presentation, we hope to:

- Discuss and provide an overview of High Scope's Plan-Do-Review process, and how it relates to the Imagination Station.
- Share success stories: Learn about the positive impact of the Imagination Station on children's creativity, problem-solving skills, collaborative abilities, environmental awareness and confidence.
- Talk through practical tips: Receive practical tips on implementing and managing an Imagination Station in a preschool setting, including strategies for sourcing materials and fostering a supportive environment.
- Engage in hands-on experience: Exploring the process from project planning to execution, allowing participants to experience the Imagination Station firsthand.
- Engage in a collaborative Q&A discussion on the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing similar initiatives.

MAIN POINTS:

Plan-Do-Review: The Plan-Do-Review process not only enhances the creative output of the Imagination Station but also ensures a cycle of learning and improvement, making it an effective framework for innovation.

Environmental Awareness: By incorporating recycled materials, children learn the importance of sustainability and resourcefulness. This can inspire a sense of responsibility toward the environment and creativity in reusing materials.

Collaboration & Community Engagement: The Imagination Station can serve as a communal space where kids can work together on projects. Collaborative artmaking encourages teamwork, communication, and the sharing of ideas, helping to build social skills and a sense of community. Bringing in recycled items from home connects home and school. Parent body, if available, can help organize and maintain the space.

Creativity: Having a variety of well-organized materials at their fingertips allows children to express themselves in unique ways. They can experiment with different mediums, combine materials, and push the boundaries of traditional artmaking.

Problem-Solving: As children plan and follow through on their projects, they encounter challenges that require critical thinking and resourcefulness. They learn to troubleshoot issues, make decisions about their creations, and adapt their ideas as they work.

Confidence Building: Completing a project can boost a child's confidence. The hands-on nature of the work allows them to take pride in their creations, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment.

Incorporation of academic learning through child inspired projects: Through the use of the Imagination Station, children can learn and reinforce academic based skills such as letters, numbers, measuring, spatial awareness, cause and effect, early physics and engineering skills etc.

CONCLUSIONS:

Overall, the Imagination Station not only nurtures artistic and academic skills but also promotes essential life skills that benefit young learners as they grow. It's a wonderful way to support holistic development.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



LEARNING TOGETHER: BUILDING COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

In early years education, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment is essential for nurturing students' autonomy, creativity, and sense of belonging. In this session, titled Learning Together: Building Collaborative Communities, presenters Ami Hirsch, Sabine Luckhardt and Ghida Jalloul from the American Community School of Abu Dhabi in Abu Dhabi, UAE, will share insights into the creation and impact of collaborative spaces that empower both students and educators. This presentation is designed for the 2024 Bright Start Early Years Conference audience, providing a deeper understanding of how intentional design in collaborative communities can lead to meaningful growth and learning for all participants.

This session will delve into the core elements of our collaborative community framework, focusing on three key components: students, educators, and the physical space. Participants will gain insights into how each of these components contributes to a dynamic and interconnected learning environment that promotes trust, safety, and creativity.

MAIN POINTS OF THE PRESENTATION

Students:

- Explore how students benefit from a collaborative learning environment that encourages self-direction, relationship-building, and problem-solving skills.
- Emphasize the role of collaboration in fostering a sense of community and belonging, empowering students to take ownership of their learning journey.

Space:

- Discuss how learning spaces are purposefully designed to support autonomy, foster creativity, and build a strong community culture.
- Highlight practical strategies for creating flexible, open spaces that adapt to students' needs, encouraging exploration and independence.

Educators:

- Address how educators collaborate within these spaces to build a shared culture of trust and safety, facilitating both individual and collective growth.
- Share experiences of how educators learn from one another through this collaborative model, enhancing their practice and supporting continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

Building a collaborative community in the early years is transformative, allowing students and educators to engage deeply in the learning process while feeling supported and valued. This session invites participants to reimagine their learning environments and to consider how fostering collaboration can create a powerful foundation for lifelong learning, creativity, and resilience. By the end of this presentation, attendees will be inspired with practical ideas to bring collaborative community concepts into their own educational settings, ensuring that students and educators alike thrive in an atmosphere of mutual growth and respect.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



ENGAGING YOUNG MINDS: THE POWER OF HANDS-ON LEARNING IN EARLY EDUCATION

Ms. Amber Jayne

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ABSTRACT

In early childhood education, nothing engages a young mind quite like hands-on learning. This approach—where children interact directly with materials, tools, and experiences—creates a vibrant pathway to learning that books or screens alone can't provide. I'm Amber Jayne, founder of Loving Start Learning Centers and creator of The Loving Start Way, and in this presentation, I'll dive into the tangible benefits of hands-on learning for early education, focusing on the practical and achievable strategies that any educator can adopt.

Drawing from the "Voices of Children" pedagogical approach, we see children as capable participants in their own learning journeys. This approach recognizes that even very young children have meaningful perspectives and interests. By prioritizing hands-on experiences, we provide the kind of learning that respects and amplifies these voices. Through storytelling, small group discussions, and real-world applications, I'll share insights into how hands-on learning fosters curiosity, builds confidence, and strengthens foundational skills in young learners.

WHY HANDS-ON LEARNING MATTERS

Hands-on learning is powerful because it engages multiple senses and allows children to actively explore and experiment. Children are naturally curious, and when they can touch, see, and manipulate objects, they become fully engaged, learning through trial, error, and discovery. This method is also highly effective in reinforcing memory and understanding since children are more likely to retain lessons, they've "lived" rather than just heard about.

BRINGING VOICES OF CHILDREN TO LIFE

The "Voices of Children" approach reminds us that children are eager to share their thoughts and learn through dialogue. Practical applications of this approach in the classroom can transform the environment into a lively, inclusive space where each child feels valued. Simple techniques, such as asking open-ended questions, giving children choices, and listening to their feedback, allow children to feel invested in their learning experience. For example, in a nature study project, rather than presenting information, I'd encourage children to choose their focus—such as plants, animals, or weather—and to tell their own stories based on what they observe.

THREE PRACTICAL STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING HANDS-ON LEARNING WITH THE VOICES OF CHILDREN APPROACH

1. **Set Up Exploration Stations**

Create stations with varied materials that allow children to explore topics hands-on. A "science station," for example, could have magnets, water tables, or rocks to sort. Children should be encouraged to make choices based on their interests, respecting their individual voices and curiosity. Set up specific goals, like "discover how things stick to magnets," but allow them to approach the activity in their own way. Through this, children feel both guided and free to learn.

2. **Use Open-Ended Projects**

Provide open-ended activities that foster exploration. For example, a building project with different-sized blocks lets children experiment with balance, design, and stability. Invite children to describe their structures and what they are imagining; this allows for cognitive growth while enhancing their language skills. These projects also reinforce the importance of the "Voices of Children" approach, as they encourage children to articulate their experiences.

3. **Incorporate Real-Life Problem Solving**

Introduce scenarios that children can relate to, such as planning a garden or setting up a mini store. These projects let children practice counting, measuring, and even negotiation skills in ways that feel relevant to their world. Listening to their voices—such as what they want to plant in the garden or what "products" they would like to "sell" in their store—provides a sense of ownership and engagement. It shows them that their contributions are meaningful, giving them a strong sense of achievement.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

Incorporating the “Voices of Children” approach in hands-on learning doesn’t require elaborate materials or complex planning. It simply requires an open mind, a flexible classroom environment, and a belief in each child’s potential. When children are respected as active participants, they learn more effectively and feel a sense of belonging. This approach creates a powerful foundation for children, instilling a love of learning and confidence in their abilities.

TAKEAWAY FOR EDUCATORS

By implementing these hands-on, voice-centered practices, educators empower children to become active learners, thinkers, and doers. This not only improves their current learning experience but also sets them up for a lifetime of curiosity and resilience.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A STEAM EDUCATION PROGRAM THROUGH DIVERSE PHYSICAL PLAY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

STEAM education, which fosters cross-curricular and experiential learning, has been shown to be crucial for early childhood well-being. Additionally, physical play in early childhood significantly contributes to the healthy development of both the mind and body through diverse movement experiences. Among the five domains of STEAM, all five domains are important, however the mathematical elements (M) form the foundation of all learning. Along with the learning foundation by mathematics, early childhood is a period for the formation of the concept of numbers, and it leads to primary education. In Japan, the motivation for learning arithmetic and mathematics is particularly low compared to international standards. In surveys on mathematics performance among Japanese children, while their scores are high, a lack of motivation to learn remains a significant issue. The lack of motivation to learn arithmetic and mathematics in the transition from the preschool to elementary school due to differences in the structure of the teaching methods, decline in physical strength and Physical ability due to a decrease in opportunities for exercise and play. To address these issues, our research aims to develop and implement a STEAM education program for young children through diverse physical play. To achieve this, it is essential to design and implement a physical play program that fosters healthy growth, supports development, and lays a foundation for learning. Recognizing diverse backgrounds, our primary goals are to examine the relationship between number concept acquisition and physical fitness and to develop a STEAM program that can be widely implemented. To this end, we will focus on three key areas: data analysis, program development, and field practice. By iterating through this cycle, we aim to create an effective and adaptable system.

MAIN POINTS:

In this proposal, we developed an educational program grounded in assessments of young children's numeracy skills, physical fitness, and motor abilities. As part of our research activities, we conducted a numerical ability survey alongside physical fitness and athletic ability evaluations, followed by a comprehensive analysis. The numerical ability survey included nine components: comparison, set formation, one-to-one correspondence, number chanting, counting, generalization, extraction, serial thinking, and the concept of conservation. For physical fitness and athletic ability assessments, we measured nine activities: shuttle run, standing long jump, ball throw, repetitive horizontal jump, long sitting forward bend, body support duration, grip strength, catching, and consecutive jumping on both feet. Using this data, we performed single correlation and partial correlation analyses, controlling for age, height, and weight, with a significance level set at 5% for all analyses. Results indicated a significant correlation between numeracy skills and consecutive jumping on both feet in boys, and between numeracy skills and body support duration in girls.

CONCLUSION

Numerical ability encompasses cognitive skills essential for assessing situations and reacting appropriately, as well as rhythmic counting abilities. For instance, body support duration relies on muscular strength and endurance, which are linked to cognitive function, while consecutive jumping on both feet requires agility, precise timing, and rhythm. These findings highlight the relationship between physical skills characterized by rhythm and cognitive abilities. Based on these insights, we will develop STEAM education programs that integrate physical play. Early childhood is a critical period for fostering personality traits, sparking interest in numbers through play, and building foundational numerical concepts. This stage is crucial not only for learning about quantities but also for developing sensory awareness and cognitive engagement through playful activities. Play offers diverse benefits, including increased spontaneity and creativity, which align closely with the principles of STEAM education. With a focus on the mathematical elements suited to young children's capabilities, we aim to create a STEAM-based framework that can be implemented in early childhood settings.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



This program has been introduced in community events, daycare centers, and kindergartens, establishing a system that encourages the formation of numerical concepts through physical play. In conclusion, physical activity plays a vital role in supporting healthy physical and mental development and contributes to early concept formation in numeracy. We intend to use these findings to shape a STEAM education framework centered around physical play. Tailoring instruction to foster interest in quantities and enhance sensory awareness is essential for effective STEAM learning in early childhood.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE VISUAL ARTS: NURTURING CHILDREN'S WORKING THEORIES AND EXPRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

The visual arts are valued as ways to enable young children opportunity for independent choice in which they can express their feelings through a range of materials, they can self-select from. I argue that the visual arts are both powerful and transformative languages of learning through which children construct their knowledge of the world, as well as communicate their ideas and working theories at a time in their life when they are developing the verbal vocabulary and skills of spoken languages. It requires intentional and responsive educators able to listen and respond to children, as well as being able to curate spaces and materials with knowledge of the possibilities which those materials offer for developing learning further.

MAIN POINTS

I describe 'arting' as a way of considering 'thinking with the arts' as a process in which young children participate in the world, using languages and materials of the arts to learn about the worlds. In doing so, they build an empathy with all things through the relations they negotiate, encounter and express. Through drawing, or working with clay and loose parts, young children navigate processes of learning to develop understanding and working theories about the changes in seasons; how day and night works; and how snails move. Yet, despite their abilities to use the languages of the visual arts as ways to communicate their knowledge and understanding, the dichotomy of either process-based art or product still exist with the enduring battle played out between the sensorial engagement with materials and freedom/choice versus a defined creative outcome. I instead argue for the coexistence of both process and product in the realisation of children's sustained shared thinking through art-based processes.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I call for all to take action on listening to children through 'arting' by ensuring that educators are present and attuned to sustaining children's thinking and communication with them. I thus argue that the profile of the visual arts from being seen as an expressive choice-based activity of children to being a central language of learning and communication for young children which requires intentional (but not rigid) and responsive educators, with deep knowledge and understanding of how participation in the arts enable learning to happen.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



EMPOWERING PARENTS: TRANSFORMING EARLY AUTISM INTERVENTION THROUGH REMOTE COACHING AND VIDEO INTERVENTION

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As our understanding of autism advances, early intervention is increasingly recognised as essential for supporting the development of young autistic children, especially when introduced early within the home environment. Focusing on the first years of life, early intervention can have a significant positive impact on social engagement, communication skills, and emotional well-being.

However, despite broad consensus on the importance of timely support, providing consistent and accessible early intervention services in the UK remains challenging. Autism services, particularly within CAMHS, face growing demand from neurodiversity-related referrals—constituting up to 70% of new cases in some regions—leading to extended waiting times and increased strain on clinicians.

Compounding these challenges is an evolving perspective on the clinical definition and understanding of autism itself. Moving beyond a strictly behavioural model, a new paradigm conceptualises autism as a dynamic, emergent process shaped partly by interactions between the child and their interpersonal environment.

This paper proposes a framework for early intervention grounded in current research, aiming to better align service delivery with the unique experiences and developmental needs of autistic children and their families. Embracing an evolving view of autism as “emergent and transactional,” this framework seeks to equip practitioners with evidence-based strategies to enhance support for families and autistic children in the earliest stages of development.

Central to this framework is a parent-mediated psychosocial intervention, combining real-time “Bug-in-Ear” coaching through a direct video link with elements of Video Intervention Therapy (VIT) to support families in their home setting. Remote Bug-in-Ear coaching offers parents immediate, in-the-moment guidance via a live audio-video link during interactions with their child, enabling real-time adjustments based on specialist feedback. Additionally, subsequent video analysis allows parents to review recorded sessions with their therapist, thereby refining observational skills, deepening understanding of their child’s unique cues and responses, and fostering synchronisation in dyadic communication and play interactions.

This dual-method approach aims to help parents become more attuned to their child’s communication style, encouraging natural, spontaneous social engagement without seeking to “normalise” autistic behaviours. Aligned with the principles of the neurodiversity movement, this method respects each child’s unique developmental path, creating a responsive interpersonal environment that fosters optimal developmental outcomes—or, as often expressed today, “promotes autistic flourishing.”

This innovative approach offers families, particularly those in geographically remote or underserved areas, timely and personalised support that integrates seamlessly into their daily lives.

Building on landmark studies such as the PACT (Pre-school Autism Communication Trial) programme, which demonstrate the efficacy of parent-led strategies in early autism intervention, this framework shows that enhancing parent-child interactions through targeted support can lead to meaningful social and communicative growth without needing to alter autistic traits. By drawing on these established methodologies, my method offers a flexible, scalable solution prioritising early, home-based support, empowering parents to respond adaptively to their child’s needs.

In conclusion, this paper advocates for reimagining early autism support services as dynamic, family-centred systems that address the neurodevelopmental needs of autistic children while easing the burden on clinical services. By optimising the home environment for young autistic children, the proposed framework offers a promising pathway for empowering parents as true agents of change, strengthening their children’s social engagement, and supporting their unique growth within a more inclusive society.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



THE GIFT OF THE HUMMINGBIRD: INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY WELLNESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this presentation, Dr. Lacerda-Vandenborn shares how she was gifted the hummingbird legend by an international group of children, which set the course of her social justice scholarship and advocacy. She explains how interpretation of the legend guides the community-oriented and -led participatory research program of her research group in mental health education, child welfare, and Indigenous self-determination. Adopting a liberation psychology lens, based on the scholarship of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, Dr. Lacerda-Vandenborn discusses how intergenerational learning in early childhood education serves as a blueprint for epistemic curiosity and respectful engagement with plural systems of knowing and being in the world. She also considers how Freire provides a generative framework for the communal ethic and cultural humility necessary for the lifelong enacting of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Dr. Lacerda-Vandenborn offers examples of projects in Brazil, Canada, and New Zealand to emphasize the central role of intergenerational relationships in child, family, and community wellness and capacity building. Specifically, she reflects on how children's relationships with elders and Knowledge Holders have fostered strength-based and decolonizing approaches to trauma-informed education and mental health interventions. Dr. Lacerda-Vandenborn concludes with reflections on potential challenges and affordances of implementing intergenerational initiatives in early childhood education.

KEYWORDS

intergenerational learning, wellness, communal ethics, social justice

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



WHAT WOULD THEY SAY? EMPOWERING CHILDREN'S VOICES THROUGH THE INTEGRATION OF ART AND LITERATURE.

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ABSTRACT:

This research highlights children's critical thinking and some of their problem-solving skills, through integrating art and literacy. By reading children's books, engaging in artistic activities, and participating in critical discussions about social topics mentioned in the literature, they can express their voice and discuss their practices and ideas. The research was conducted over three visits during which the researcher interacted with a group of children aged four to five. Data collection was through observations, open-ended questions, and audio recordings. The researcher documented the children's responses and comments during and after reading books that discusses social concepts such as diversity, friendship, and self-reliance. This was followed by an open art session, organized by the researchers, where the discussions continued. After the sessions, the researcher asked the children's mothers about their children's responses to those social practices to understand the impact of the readings and discussions them.

The aim of this study was to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How do four young Saudi children demonstrate and articulate their voices during at home literature-infused art sessions focused on sociocultural themes?
2. What was the effect of integrating art in with literature in giving voice to children? How do the children's artistic expressions and verbal reflections during the sessions reveal their critical thinking on the chosen themes?
3. What implications do the study's findings have for daily early childhood education practices in Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of fostering children's self-expression and amplifying their voices?

Through analyzing the responses of both parents and children, as well as through observation, the researcher found that children were open during discussions and engaged, while also expressing their discomfort with certain concepts such as diversity and inclusion and had weak empathy skills. They were also insistence on what they already knew, voicing their discomfort regarding accepting differences. She found out that children were more open to the discussions and expressing their ideas and beliefs when they were creating art. Integrating art and literacy encouraged them to talk more and reveal their thoughts in comfortable settings. The researcher concludes with several community, educational, and research recommendations based on the results presented.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



PLAYING WITH WORDS: SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WITH LANGUAGE DELAYS

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Vocabulary knowledge in preschool is a significant predictor of later language, reading, and academic outcomes (Hjetland et al. 2017). Differences in vocabulary knowledge between children with and without language delays or other risk factors begins early. Therefore, increasing vocabulary for young children at risk is an important area of focus for early educators.

Vocabulary is best learned when it is meaningful to the child and when children have opportunities to engage with vocabulary concepts multiple times across multiple contexts (Harris et al., 2011; Toub et al., 2018). Book reading activities are one of the most prevalent contexts for vocabulary interventions (Wasik et al., 2016; Marulis & Newman, 2010). However, 30% of the preschool day is spent in free play (Early et al., 2010). Exploring opportunities for preschoolers who are at-risk or have language delays to increase vocabulary opportunities is an important area of study. Pairing opportunities to hear and use vocabulary in play with systematic teaching of vocabulary in book reading, provides exposure to and use of vocabulary in multiple contexts. Several researchers have begun developing and studying the effects of supporting vocabulary both in play and during book reading (Han, Moore, Vekelich & Buell, 2010; McLeod et al., 2017; Taub et al, 2018).

Playing with Words is an intervention which pairs book reading with a play session that includes Enhanced Milieu Teaching (EMT) strategies to promote expressive use of target vocabulary words. EMT is a well-researched language intervention used in the context of play which incorporates responsive teaching practices (i.e., following the child's lead, responding to child communication and expanding on child language) and a system of least prompts to promote child target language. EMT has typically been studied in dyadic settings with a parent and child or interventionist and child and has been used to support language skills for children with identified language delays (e.g., children with autism, specific language disorders, Down Syndrome) and children at risk for language delays (e.g., at risk due to delayed language production, socioeconomic status). Prior to each EMT play session, a book which provides visual and contextual examples of target vocabulary as well as possible play routines with the materials that are used in the play session to support vocabulary exposure and use across these two contexts.

Playing with Words was implemented with two preschoolers at risk for language delays. Both children independently produced all target words. Using the *Playing with Words* intervention, early educators can provide structured exposure to vocabulary in book reading and systematic instruction to support vocabulary use in play contexts to increase vocabulary production.

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AI AS A CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGUE: USING CHATGPT TO CREATE EARLY YEARS LESSON PLANS RESPONSIVE TO CHILDREN'S HOME CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

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INTRODUCTION

Canadian children in early learning and childcare environments are increasingly diverse (Statistics Canada, 2021). As a result, the curriculum and the pedagogical practices need to shift to include intercultural and multilingual perspectives to ensure equitable and inclusive early years' experiences for all children. Ladson Billings (1995) in her work with teachers, especially those working with marginalized students argues for the learning in classrooms to be responsive and relevant to students' own cultural and ethnic identities. Introducing the concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), Ladson-Billings (2021) explained how classroom practices can be pivoted to accepting and affirming students' cultural identity, leading to positive impact in areas of student achievement, motivation, and their cultural competence. It is therefore important for children, especially in the formative years of development to be exposed to pedagogies and curricular plans that celebrate and honour diverse children's home cultures and languages.

ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence model, is designed to respond to request from users and provide up-to-date and relevant data (Agmaz, 2023). Research in the last few years has identified and provided evidence for the potential of ChatGPT to be used in education, ranging from lesson preparation to evaluation, and to implementation of appropriate behavioural and teaching strategies (Rahman & Watanobe, 2023; Agnaz, 2023). One of the advantages of ChatGPT is the ability to personalize educational learning aiding in curriculum development and preparing pedagogies for meeting learning outcomes (Trust et al, .2023). However, ChatGPT also poses challenges, for example, the information provided may be inaccurate.

Given the potential of ChatGPT to create personalized lesson plans and engaging pedagogies, as an early childhood curriculum developer, I leveraged ChatGPT to aid in the creation and development of culturally relevant early childhood lesson plans for a community based early childhood program.

MAIN POINTS

Using a case study approach, my presentation will demonstrate the application of ChatGPT to design culturally relevant lesson plan and pedagogies as a curriculum developer for a community based early childhood program catering to children and families from birth-six years. I will be focusing on the development of two lesson plans on "Food and Nutrition" and "Festivals and Celebrations" to provide details on the prompts provided, the results generated and discuss the strengths and limitations of using ChatGPT for early years culturally relevant lesson development. The presentation will also discuss some of the feedback and issues highlighted by the educators and the families following the implementation of the lessons.

CONCLUSION

With the increasing accessibility and popularity of ChatGPT among teachers, including early childhood educators, and the recent research on its educational potential on creating innovative and personalised lesson plans, makes this area worthy of exploration. Based on some of the lessons from the field, ChatGPT can be a good starting point for creating culturally relevant lesson plans, but it requires feedback mechanisms from students and families to minimize error and avoid creating stereotypes.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



INNOVATIVE APPROACHES FOR TEACHING YOUNG MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

Early years educators and carers across the globe face challenges when working with young children who speak diverse languages. Recent research has provided some guidance about effective approaches to teaching young multilingual learners. The recommended strategies include supporting both the home language (mother tongue) and the new language through interactive play and activities that spark rich conversations (Nemeth, 2021). Research also tells us that continued support of the home language is needed during the early years to enhance comprehension and learning of vocabulary, content, and skills (Nemeth, 2021). Without support of their home language, children may fall behind in learning (Serafini, Rozell, & Winsler, 2022, Nemeth, 2023, Banse, 2021). The pursuit of equitable early years experiences depends on ensuring that all children have access to foundational knowledge, beneficial relationships, a sense of belonging and the experience of agency.

MAIN POINTS

The goal of recommended approaches to teaching young multilingual learners is to address the four pillars of equity:

Access to content	Sense of agency
Access to relationships	Sense of belonging

These are components of early development and learning that form the foundation of success in education and in life. Welcoming young children to an early years care or education setting is an important first step that sets the tone for how the child will be engaged and supported throughout their time. When young children begin in a setting that does not use or understand their language, they may feel lost, anxious, or scared. Preparing to welcome each child with their own language and familiar items is a valuable technique to start on a positive note. Young children can be taught how to interact effectively with friends who speak different languages, as portrayed in the book, *New Words, New Friends* (Nemeth, 2015).

It is important to use the child's mother tongue and the new language in ways that

- Help them understand stories, instructions, and activities
- Help them practice the languages and use them to communicate thoughts and feelings
- Help them learn and retain information by making connections between the familiar and the new.

These objectives are best achieved with attention to each child's needs, interests, and progress. Choosing materials that have intrinsic meaning and that are meaningful to each individual child will be an important aspect of this approach (Nemeth, 2023).

Research has shown that it is helpful to explain the meanings of words to young multilingual learners by showing the connection between the familiar words in their home language and the new words in the new language (Nemeth, 2021). Using the home language to support comprehension and expression requires the use of nouns, verbs, and modifiers (Serafini, Rozell, & Winsler, 2022). Too often, we observe classroom displays, books, and teacher talk that focus on labeling things. To experience an adequate language and literacy environment, children need the full range of words that reinforce all aspects of communication (Brillante & Nemeth, 2022).

Early care and education practices that facilitate learning and literacy with multilingual children include:

- Focus on small group and individual conversations to enhance high quality, two-way instructional interactions that encourage children to use oral language.
- Emphasize play-based approaches that give each child opportunities to explore and learn at their own pace.
- Include materials, displays, and stories that build a sense of belonging for each child.
- Provide children with multiple ways to communicate and show what they have learned and what they want to learn.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



- Examples include picture communication boards, gestures, drawing, and 3-dimensional play materials as well as verbal responses.
- Partner with families so they can confidently extend home language learning at home (Koralek, Nemeth, & Ramsey, 2019).
- Use classroom labels as conversation starters (Nemeth, 2023).
- Set the environment to offer multiple times to encounter and use new vocabulary in multiple contexts according to the LanguageCASTLE strategies (Nemeth, 2023)

Choose key words	Adapt all areas of the classroom	Search for and make relevant materials
Time to explore themes and topics	Links to real life – real and familiar items	Emote, express, and engage with children.

CONCLUSION

The practical strategies outlined in this abstract allow families, carers, and educators to empower young children for successful learning across all languages. This information must also inform systemic changes in policy, funding, and administration of early years programs. The best results occur when all aspects of the early years system work together, informed by research and effective practices, to provide the resources, professional learning for staff, and the support each child needs in an equitable way.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



MULTI-MODAL MUSICAL INTERVENTION INFLUENCES COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY YEARS.

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This pilot study aims to explore how a multi-modal musical intervention influences communication and social interaction development for children under 3s and if practitioners' and parents' understanding of music as a contributor to early years development changes because of the intervention.

The research was conducted in a private nursery setting with 30 children aged 7 to 32 months over four weeks. An embedded sequential mixed method research design was used to collect data from field notes, video recording and questionnaires with 29 parents and 12 practitioners. 10 children have special educational needs (SEN) or learning English as an additional language (EAL).

The findings indicated that the multi-modal nursery rhyme intervention, involving joint attention, imitation and object play, showed a significant improvement in the children's communication and social interaction skills. It also highlighted a change in the understanding of the practitioners and parents that the multi-modal musical intervention, if implemented effectively, could make a big difference to other aspects of early years development. However, the most significant and unexpected outcome of the pilot was the development of a new simple low-cost multi-modal musical pedagogy model that is applicable to all children, including children with SEN or EAL, which any novice practitioner and parents could use without any formal musical training.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



SUCSESSES AND INNOVATIONS - HOW MONTESSORIANS' VARIED CAREERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Montessori Global Education believes that Montessori is for everyone. We're a global education organisation championing equitable access to the empowering opportunities of future-focused sustainable education. Our mission is to make Montessori available wherever it is needed, anywhere in the world.

This workshop session will illustrate how students of Montessori use their pedagogical knowledge and understanding as the springboard to varied careers spanning education, community building, tackling inequalities and more. Attendees will be invited to think differently about education careers and engage in conversation with our speakers.

MAIN POINTS

Montessori provides a firm footing for those with a vision to start education-providing businesses.

By adopting Maria Montessori's belief that children are self-constructing and naturally seek new ideas through curiosity, Otkrivatel (Discover Montessori), creates a learning environment that nourishes the unique potential of every child from 18 months to 18 years. Equipping students to navigate current and future challenges. Community projects for elementary and adolescent students include collaborating with peers from diverse backgrounds to tackle Global challenges and understanding human civilization through their work on the farmland – chopping wood, feeding and milking the animals, digging and preparing the land for future developments.

A Montessori approach can be applied organisation-wide, even in non-traditional settings, to build a shared mindset and holistic approach to making a difference for learners. The NGO Udruga IKS¹ in Croatia provides a diverse blend of vital community and learning programs, in a community still rebuilding after war and natural disasters. The Montessori approach is applied by the whole staff team there, giving them a consistent person-centred approach to work with groups of all ages.

The Montessori pedagogy can be critical to the development of the whole organisation. For example, Cities for Children² in Pakistan was founded by Madeeha Ansari, a graduate of MCI³, the organisation uses the Montessori philosophy as a basis for all of its work with children in urban poverty. Their delivery blends the development of children's wellbeing with education, with the belief that all children – no matter their circumstances and even those living in slums – have the right to learn, play, and reach their full potential. One example of their pioneering work – supported directly by Montessori Global Education – is Partners in Learning (or Seekho Sikhao Saathi), a peer-to-peer learning project directly inspired by Montessori's vertical grouping ethos – for children with little access to quality pre-school and digital learning.

Montessori's message of giving children 'freedom within limits' is front and centre in the Montessori on Wheels project, in Bengaluru in India. Co-founded by MCI graduate Sandy Phillips, and established by the Freethinking Foundation and in collaboration with local government, Montessori on Wheels⁴ takes early learning to the doorstep of marginalised young children living in slums in Bengaluru. Buses are repurposed into mobile Montessori classrooms, transforming how public spaces can play a role in early education. This is an example of how Montessori is weaved throughout planning and delivery.

CONCLUSION

Montessori is not only a pedagogy – it's a philosophy which provides its students with a problem-solving mindset and collaborative approach to learning and doing throughout their careers.

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²Cities for Children - <https://www.citiesforchildren.co/>

³Overview of MCI courses <https://montessori-globaleducation.org/what-we-do/our-courses/>

⁴Montessori on Wheels <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-mY-qNPFnA>

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



“YOU CAN DO IT: BOOSTING INDEPENDENCE AND DISCOVERY WITH CREATIVE ARTS THROUGH STEAM STATIONS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM”

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INTRODUCTION

Educational research across the world has increasingly recognized the need for immediate integration of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) in the classroom (DeJarnette, 2018; Johnston, et al., 2022). Much of the current research focuses on K-12 classrooms and curriculum, while minimal literature and strategies have been implemented for early childhood students (Johnston, et al., 2022). With early childhood educators understanding the importance of building these skills at a young age, relevant professional development, resources, and research needs to be implemented to promote STEAM within early childhood classrooms. As young children are naturally curious and exploratory, STEAM stations are a unique strategy to begin STEAM integration and implementation (Wahyuningsih, et al., 2020). The benefits of integrating STEAM into early childhood curriculum create opportunities for students to be socially and culturally relevant, practice advocacy and increase engagement (Johnston, et al., 2022).

MAIN POINTS

There are many benefits of integrating and implementing STEAM education into the early childhood curriculum. STEAM lessons and stations create increased engagement in the classroom for students. Children are able to explore, discover, and create by using their senses with fine motor and gross motor skills. STEAM also promotes learning experiences that allow young children to question, research, discover and innovate. As early childhood educators provide guidance and feedback during these stages, it increases achievement and mastery in many different skills. STEAM education also enhances skills that are beneficial for future learning in the 21st century. Students are able to practice problem solving and critical thinking which are essential skills to be successful in the next years of schooling. Young children are also able to use social skills such as communication, collaboration, and awareness with others.

When implementing STEAM education into the classroom, early childhood educators need to integrate strategies through three different formats: STEAMing with Play, STEAMing with Problems, and STEAMing with Projects. As planning occurs, educators should prioritize and organize their space for successful implementation. Plan to create two to three different STEAM stations at one time rather than five or six. Creating small intimate spaces that are differentiated will enhance the experience for students rather than having many different areas with less individualized instruction. Educators should plan a calculated time frame of twenty to thirty minutes to rotate and allow students to engage with these materials. Teaching young students the procedure and routines on how to rotate stations, handle materials, ask questions, collaborate with others, and innovate will enhance the overall mastery and solidify these 21st century skills.

STEAMing with play is an entry level implementation strategy to introduce STEAM into the early childhood classroom. Providing stations that are independently self directed by the student provides the freedom of choice and directive learning. Students have the flexibility to spontaneously explore and use their imagination when unstructured play is instituted. STEAMing with play allows for the process of STEAM to be the goal rather than the results to be assessed. Valuing the process with young children promotes experimentation, innovation, and imagination without the fear of not meeting the expectation.

STEAMing with problems is a middle level implementation strategy to introduce STEAM into the early childhood classroom. STEAM stations with simple problem based critical thinking exercises allows students to have authentic real world relevance. Students are able to collaborate with their peers to brainstorm, listen, share while using social skills that transcend all subject areas. STEAMing with problems also allows educators to use interdisciplinary connections with other subjects, themes, and topics. This promotes cross-curricular initiatives which enhances memory, practice, and connective learning.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



STEAMing with projects is the highest level implementation strategy to introduce STEAM into the early childhood classroom. STEAM stations that are project oriented must be teacher directed using explicit STEAM language and vocabulary. Through guidance, students have the opportunity to enrich their background knowledge over time through direct instruction. Collaboration is still apparent with the opportunity to use multiple social skills while completing the task. STEAMing with projects connects different sensory engagements for young children in order to culminate a final product.

CONCLUSION

Implementation of STEAM education in the early childhood classroom is at the emergence stage within the current research literature. Potential next steps would include increased research of STEAM strategies within the early childhood curriculum, implementation in classrooms, and assessment of skills post early childhood schooling. Early childhood educators need to have professional development and training in STEAM education to better meet their students needs and prepare them to be 21st century learners. The benefits of STEAM education with young students far outweigh the barriers that are currently presented. Increasing awareness and providing funding for research, learning, and training to be effective is critical to expanding this topic into all areas of early childhood education.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



FROM BUDS TO BLOSSOM – THE BLOSSOM ROOM

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INTRODUCTION

In a world where personal growth and self-reflection are highly valued, the Japanese concepts of Oubaitori and Ikigai offer profound insights into how individuals develop in their own time and find their unique purpose. These concepts became the guiding principles for a research project conducted at an inner-city nursery in the UK, where practitioners, children, and families explored their Ikigai, or "reason for being." The project's creative methodologies, such as journaling and the adaptation of the Ikigai framework, led to the creation of the "Blossom Room," a space dedicated to reflective for young children, their parents and the early years practitioners.

MAIN POINTS

1. Creative Reflective Journaling and Ikigai

The first key element of the research focused on how early years practitioners used creative methods of reflective journaling. This process began with exploring their Ikigai and delved into the seven needs associated with it: a fulfilling existence, change and growth, future perspectives, receiving feedback, freedom, self-actualisation, and significance. Through this reflective practice, practitioners were encouraged to explore their sense of purpose and growth in their roles. Journaling provided a platform for deep self-reflection, helping practitioners connect with their personal motivations and the impact of their work on children's development.

2. Exploring Creativity through Object-Oriented Ontology

A significant part of the research explored creativity using object-oriented ontology (OOO). This philosophical approach focuses on the relationships between objects and their interactions. By using this framework, practitioners were able to reflect on how everyday objects and materials influenced their creativity and teaching methods. The reflective process led to the creation of the "Blossom Room," a dedicated space within the nursery where children and practitioners could engage in creative and reflective activities. The Blossom Room became a symbol of growth, reflection and witnessed young children developing from buds to blossoms.

3. Adapting Ikigai for Young Children

Another important aspect of the research was adapting the Ikigai concept for use with young children. This adaptation allowed the nursery to create a child-friendly version of the Ikigai framework, enabling children to reflect on their own feelings, interests, and sense of purpose. Practitioners observed emerging themes such as children's growing sense of being, belonging and thriving.

CONCLUSION

The research at the inner-city nursery highlighted the transformative impact of integrating Japanese concepts like Oubaitori and Ikigai into early childhood education. The use of creative research methodologies, such as reflective journaling and object-oriented ontology, provided practitioners with a deeper understanding of their own personal growth and professional development. Meanwhile, the adaptation of the Ikigai framework for young children allowed them to explore their sense of purpose and foster self-awareness. Overall, the research has positively influenced the professional practice of the practitioners, created reflective children.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



MONTESSORI'S VISION IN ACTION. THE VALUE OF OPPORTUNITY: SEEING POTENTIAL IN EVERY MONTESSORI MOMENT

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TOPIC/RELEVANCE

Montessori Global Education envisions a future world where the power of Montessori education is available to everyone, and so we champion equitable access to the empowering opportunities of future-focused sustainable education. Experience shows that presenting vast and varied opportunities to young people, prepared sensitively within a framework of Montessori principles, delivers some astounding and significant outcomes. Such beneficial results can be attributed to a recognition of the value in each and every learning experience, or in this case, in every "Montessori Moment".

KEY POINTS/FINDINGS

Every learning experience, seen through a Montessori lens, can present challenge and inspiration - opportunities for future growth. Montessori surmised that "in the first years of life we have great potential and powers, which are not given the opportunity to develop and are therefore lost." (Montessori, The 1946 London Lectures, p. 1). It is our belief that we have the capacity to recognise the value in each and every learning moment when one truly follows the individual journey of each learner, directing and accommodating next steps in educational activity and assessment accordingly. In order to do this, significant attention needs to be directed towards observation and insight in order to inform and support. As Montessori suggested, "Those whom nature has fitted to care for children see a change in them every day, almost every hour. They see these small changes as admirable. This is an art, which cannot be acquired without effort" (The 1946 London Lectures, p. 131). Through this approach, particular focus and guidance to aid the act of observation is beneficial for educators and our presenters will explore methods of enhancing professional observation techniques and models of recording and evaluation.

SUMMARY/POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS (CTA)

It is our belief that educators have the opportunity to influence children's lives and by giving the best of themselves to the children, our future can flourish. The value of educational opportunities, moment by moment, as learners explore, analyze, investigate and discover, cannot be underestimated – and through a Montessori Approach educators are encouraged to prepare and facilitate these experiences again and again. Join us to learn more about the joy of #MontessoriMoments

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



INCORPORATING SENSORY STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

Sensory processing is an internal neurological mechanism that influences behaviors (Cheung & Lau, 2020). According to the literature, 40 to 88 % of children with developmental delays or challenges including autism spectrum disorders are reported to have various degree of sensory processing challenges (Cheung & Siu, 2009; Fernández-Andrés, Pastor-Cerezuela, Sanz-Cervera, & Tárraga-Mínguez, 2015) which will impact children's self-regulation and attention and lead to behavioural issues.

MAIN POINTS:

Occupational therapists are one of the early childhood team members in working collaboratively with the children, parents, and educators to adapt the child's learning environment in ways that facilitate their full participation. Sensory strategies can be utilised to help calm, organise or alert the children's nervous system. Sensory soothing or calming experiences can help any child who is anxious, but are particularly useful for children who are overresponsive to sensory stimulation. Examples are firm pressure and skin to skin contact (squeezes to head, trunk, shoulders, hands). Organising experiences can help a child who is either over or under active become focused and attentive. They help to relax the nervous system and can reduce exaggerated responses to sensory input. Teachers can engage the children in heavy work and proprioceptive activities, especially hanging, pushing, pulling or lifting heavy objects to help their nervous system in sync. Alerting experiences can help a student who is under-reactive to sensory input, passive or lethargic become more focused and attentive. For instance, putting the child to sit on a ball chair, water mat or air pillow. Furthermore, sensory-based practical programs including sensory stories, zone of regulation can be used to support children's learning and behaviour. Classroom management will be illustrated with case studies.

CONCLUSION

It is suggested that various sensory strategies to enhance self-regulation skills in children aged 0-6 years on the autism spectrum and with other developmental conditions.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



SOJOURNER CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ETHNIC IDENTITIES THROUGH DRAWINGS

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INTRODUCTION

When individuals leave their country of origin and sojourn or immigrate to another countries, they need to "acculturate" to the hosting country; that is to understand the culture and traits of people of those countries and adjust to them (Zeng, 2024). However, this does not imply that they should detach from their original ethnic identities. It is mandatory that individuals maintain a positive attitude towards their ethnic identities, because it is connected to positive mental health (Moore, et al., 2024); especially for sojourners because unlike immigrants, they usually choose to live temporarily in other countries for work or study purposes, then return to settle in their countries. Therefore, it is crucial for sojourner families and their children to maintain positive attitudes towards their original ethnicities. This study explored the ethnic identity of Saudi children who sojourned temporarily with their families in the United States of America for educational purposes.

This session emphasized the importance of enabling "**voices of children**". It presented a research study on sojourner children's ethnic identities not only from the mothers' perspective, but also from the children's perspective themselves. It was important to include children in this study to voice their own perception of their ethnic identities while living in the United States of America. In order to have a clear understanding of children's perception, parts of the data were collected through children's drawing of themselves in their country of origin and country of residence.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative research study was a multiple-case-study that looked in depth at the lives of 6 Saudi mothers and 11 Saudi children at the age of 6 -12 years of age, who have lived for at least five years in the United States of America. Portfolios on each child were made to get an in-depth understanding of the participants' perception of their ethnic identities.

Three types of data were collected. First, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with Saudi mothers. Then one-to-one interviews were conducted with the children. In addition, two drawings were collected from each child portraying their lives in the United States of America and their lives in Saudi Arabia. Drawings were used to gather detailed thoughts of the young ones that could not be explicitly explained through their words. Triangulation in data collection was followed to raise the trustworthiness of the study.

As for data analysis: Both mothers' and children's interviews were transcribed then analyzed following qualitative methods, including cross-case analysis in two cycles of coding. The first cycle included: A priori coding, descriptive coding, In vivo coding, value coding and emotion coding; all through color coding. The second cycle of coding included: axial and pattern coding to identify major themes that were identified from both mothers and children's insights. Additionally, descriptive content analysis was used to analyze children's drawings.

FINDINGS

The main findings of this study were as follows:

First, Both Saudi sojourner mothers and children expressed desires of maintaining a Saudi ethnic identity whilst living in the United States of America. Mothers worked on maintaining their children's ethnic identities by cooking Saudi dishes, teaching their children Saudi traits, speaking Arabic at home, connecting with Saudi families, celebrating Saudi national occasions and Islamic holidays, and maintaining strong connections with their extended families in Saudi Arabia by contacting them on a regular basis and visiting Saudi Arabia annually.

Secondly, while mothers were proud their children could speak English fluently with an American accent, which in their opinion could support getting a higher status and better jobs later on; they were adamant that their children learn their mother tongue "Arabic", keeping in mind that their children would eventually return to their home country Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, children formed what is known as "multicultural identities", where they felt that they belonged to both the United States of America and Saudi Arabia at the same time. While some children showed preferences towards one of the two countries, they still had strong connections to both countries. This was voiced clearly through the interviews and shown through their drawings as well.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



In fact, children's drawings came to emphasize findings gathered from interviews, and also to give additional details on the children's perception of their ethnic identities. The drawings showed what children enjoyed the most in both countries. Drawings "in America" showed children in their schools and other fun places, with friends and Saudi communities. While "in Saudi Arabia" drawings showed their strong connections to their extended families and celebrations. Cultural details included in the drawings such as clothing, food, religious temples, and other icons demonstrated children's awareness of differences of both cultures. Aspects shown in the drawings in both countries were very meaningful to these children, which supports the idea of their attachment to both countries at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The research in hand demonstrated the importance of enabling "**voices of children**"; which can be achieved through the following: Firstly, including the children themselves in research studies about children, to enhance the actual voices of children. Secondly, allowing children to express themselves in ways other than spoken words. This study provides a steppingstone of how children's drawings could be used as a data collection tool in research for children. Children's drawing as a data collection tool provides a deeper understating on children's perceptions on topics and their ideologies through analyzing the details included in drawings; details that sometimes cannot be spoken by children.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



MONTESSORI'S VISION IN ACTION: ONGOING SCHOOL EVOLUTION TO RAISE AMBITIONS

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TOPIC/RELEVANCE

Reflection is a core focus for many schools and settings globally. The application of reflective practice, embedding as a collegiate process specifically for school evolution, however, may be something less familiar. As John Dewey asserted: "we do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience" and leaders, managers and school administration may often vary in their approach to encouraging and facilitating reflective evaluation from their teams.

KEY POINTS/FINDINGS

Through a reflexive approach to any school-wide development, educators and school leaders can enhance their work with young people to raise ambition and set new targets for their communities. But how can time and resources be allocated sufficiently to this area of development? How can school leaders identify seeds of innovation or devise creative solutions for future-proofing their educational offer when constantly faced with the everyday? How can individuals be supported to embrace significant, impactful, "out of the box" thinking, to the benefit of whole-school strategies?

Montessori Global Education actively seeks out exemplars of innovation, team-working and collaboration that embody the Montessori Approach in action. As an organisation focused on community, we fundamentally believe that Montessori is for everyone; and in order for this to be realised, a future-focused, self-reflective lens becomes a necessity. A commitment to a Montessori Approach positions each learning opportunity as a chance to reflect, wonder and consider the impact of any changes, challenges or next steps that educational settings seek to make. In this session, we will explore ways in which schools can prepare and sustain wider community buy-in for such changes, considering top-down and bottom-up team engagement initiatives as we build a vision of educator involvement. Presenters will discuss models of reflective practice including Jasper (2013) "The ERA cycle"; Driscoll/ Terry Borton; Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle; Gibb's Reflective Cycle and re-affirm the educator's role in recognizing and promoting the impact of any changes on children and their capacity to fulfill their potential.

SUMMARY/POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS (CTA)

Join us for some timely reminders and suggestions to encourage daily reflection from colleagues; learn the challenges that can be associated with school evolution in practice and build confidence in supporting your teams to enhance their can-do mindset, establishing your pathway to a sustainable future-focused landscape, lifting ambition for learning and outcomes for all.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



REALISING A PEDAGOGY OF VOICE AND A PEDAGOGY OF LISTENING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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INTRODUCTION

Believing that children have a right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected in decision making that affects them (United Nations, 1989), the authors have been committed to adopting a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening that employs a playful participatory approach in their extensive research with young children aged 3–6 (O'Sullivan and Ring 2024). The presentation will focus on six large scale research projects in Ireland focused on school readiness; universal design and inclusion (Ring et al. 2016; Grey et al. 2019; Ring et al. 2019; Lynch et al. 2020; Leadership for INCLUSION in the Early Years Consortium (LINC) 2024; Ring 2024). Drawing on findings from the research, the authors will present concrete examples of creative-arts approaches designed to support young children's voices being audible in the acoustic of early childhood policy and practice spaces. Practical insights from the research, resources and links to the research will be shared with participants to support them in amplifying children's voices within their daily routines in early childhood settings.

MAIN POINTS

Research continues to confirm that providing opportunities for children to meaningfully contribute to their experiences yields significant benefits in terms of children's overall development, independence, autonomy, social competence, self-esteem, and resilience (Lansdown 2005; Ring et al. 2018). In this context, the quality of pedagogical interactions has been highlighted as pivotal in supporting children's development and enabling them to thrive and achieve their potential (Melhuish et al. 2015; Ryan 2021). The concept of the child as agentic, competent and capable of sharing power with adults reflects the evolving rights-based approach to childhood and a growing corpus of research on how best children learn and develop (Ring et al. 2021). A playful participatory approach that took cognisance of this research and provided children with multiple means of action and expression was employed to elicit children's beliefs and experiences of school readiness, universal design and inclusion (CAST 2024; O'Sullivan and Ring 2025). Multiple means of action and expression were facilitated through a range of child-led approaches that facilitated a creative-arts approach to augment the articulation of authentic voice.

CONCLUSION

Supporting children to authentically articulate their views places a responsibility on the adult to 'tune in'; dispense with preconceptions; embrace a reflective stance; relate to the child's world and consciously direct attention to following the child's story. The findings from the six research projects indicate that when children are supported to express their views and opinions, they are capable of positively contributing to complex concepts and ultimately have the potential to effect transformative change for early childhood education at macro, meso and micro policy and practice levels.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



METAPHORICAL THINKING, HOW TO ENCOURAGE AND STIMULATE MEANING MAKING

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INTRODUCTION

What does metaphorical thinking look like in the early years? How can it be used as a tool for thinking and research by the children and what is our role to support and stimulate this process of meaning making?

This presentation will explore how children construct knowledge, develop elastic thinking and more specifically how metaphor and in particular visual metaphor can support this process.

Using examples from the 2-3-year old group of children in a private nursery setting in London, this presentation highlights the thinking of the children as they employ this creative and generative strategy.

This case study highlights the learning processes of the children and how they construct knowledge. It demonstrates how we can work together with the children to try to understand and interrogate what they don't yet know through their creative response to an object of knowledge using a wide variety of materials and media.

MAIN POINTS

This presentation will offer examples that will help to explain the thinking involved when a child creates a visual metaphor and place this in the context of metaphorical thinking as a learning process of children.

We will share why this process of thinking is important, explaining what it offers to the children and how we as adults can support and extend the ideas through the resources, environment and questions that we ask.

Encouraging multiple meaning making and re-interpretations between the children, enables richer and more varied thinking. This process is a constant combination of thinking and doing, allowing the children to create, adapt and transform materials. We enable the children to construct and test their ideas against the representations they create and to continuously adapt, build on and re-imagine them over time. Through this process the children can actively research an object of knowledge as a group, constantly moving between knowledge and imagination in order to find new meanings.

An environment that supports multiple languages can nurture multiple perspectives which in turn can stretch the possibilities and encourage elastic thinking. Metaphorical thinking is a key part of this process.

This way of thinking is a muscle that needs practice and the right environment, in order to grow.

CONCLUSION

This presentation illustrates a process of working and offers ideas on how to move knowledge and thinking between different media and spaces. It highlights how the children investigate and begin to understand something through active meaning making using a variety of media and resources.

Metaphorical thinking is a highly creative, generative thinking process that can be amplified and planned for with intention by curious and attentive adults.

Applying a new metaphorical lens with which to approach the learning with your children, can you think of visual metaphors that you have observed?

In what ways could your environment support and stimulate metaphorical thinking?

Are there multiple ways for children to make meaning in your setting which allows for a flexible and reflective responses?

What systems could be put in place to enable sharing, reflection and multiple meaning making with your children?

How could the questions that you ask children promote and support metaphorical thinking? What skills and attitudes could be promoted to support this way of thinking?

What imagery and source material can be used to enable children to actively research something in this way?

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



USING MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT IN A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM TO INCLUDE ALL CHILDREN

Dr. Nicol Russell

Chief Academic Officer, Teaching Strategies

Donna Fowler, Senior Director

Learning Solutions Implementation, Teaching Strategies, USA

INTRODUCTION

Creating inclusive, high-quality learning environments is a cornerstone of effective early childhood education. This session explores how Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) can serve as a framework for providing systematic, data-driven strategies to meet the diverse needs of all children. By integrating universal, targeted, and intensive supports, MTSS empowers educators to assess children's strengths and provide developmentally appropriate interventions in inclusive settings.

MAIN POINTS

Participants will delve into the core components of MTSS, including universal screening, progress monitoring, evidence-based interventions, and data-based decision-making. Key discussions will focus on how to identify children's strengths, implement tiered supports, and utilize data to inform instructional strategies. Practical examples, including a case study of MTSS in action, will illustrate how educators can adapt this framework to real-world scenarios.

CONCLUSION

This session equips educators with actionable strategies to enhance inclusive practices through MTSS. Participants will leave with an *Advancing Inclusion Action Plan*, enabling immediate implementation of MTSS in their classrooms. By leveraging this framework, educators can foster equitable learning opportunities, ensuring all children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



TRÓCAIRE INSIGHTS ON HOW DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION MAY BE UNDERSTOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF AISTEAR - THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO 6 YEARS IN IRELAND.

Colette Saunders

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INTRODUCTION

In 1973 Trócaire was established by the Catholic Bishops of Ireland to respond to injustice and poverty in the developing world. Trócaire, which is the Irish language word for 'compassion', works in partnership with a range of organisations and communities, both nationally and internationally, to help bring about change (Trócaire, n.d.)¹. Trócaire's dual mandate guides the focus of its work which is to respond to injustice and poverty abroad, offering support in a spirit of solidarity regardless of race, gender, religion or politics. In Ireland, Trócaire's community engagement and outreach unit seek to raise awareness among people of the root causes of poverty and inequality, and to empower people to act for a more just and sustainable world at home and abroad (Trócaire, n.d.)¹.

Trócaire's Development Education Team, which is part of the Community Engagement and Outreach Unit, work with educators within the formal and non-formal education sectors in Ireland. The team develop free resources to support educators in exploring global justice issues with their class or youth group. (Trócaire, n.d.)². In my role as the Early Years Development Education Officer for Trócaire, I work with in-service Early Childhood Educators by supporting them to engage with young children in learning about the lives of children and families from around the world. Part of my role also involves delivering interactive workshops to pre-service Early Childhood Educators in Higher Education and Further Education Colleges (Trócaire, n.d.)³

It is this aspect of my role that the abstract for Bright Start International and the accompanying presentation relate to. An important feature of my workshops is creating connections between Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in the Republic of Ireland, and Development Education, with sustainability serving as a key lens. My workshops emphasise the leadership potential of early years professionals and explores how young children may be supported to develop attitudes towards Global Citizenship within early education settings.

MAIN POINTS: HOW DO I DO IT?

When delivering the part of my workshops which explores how development education may be understood in the context of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), I discuss links between the current principles and thematic areas which underpin the curriculum framework. In the current 2009 version of Aistear which is soon to be updated (Fallon, Farrell, Grant and Daly, 2021; NCCA, 2023, p12), there are 3 groups of principles. The group referred to as 'children and their lives in early childhood' which considers the child's uniqueness, equality & diversity in the context of early childhood, and children as citizens, resonates most clearly with the focus of development education. Development Education is an educational process which seeks to increase awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live. It seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection, action and participation for local and global citizenship; and increases awareness and understanding of the five development education concepts which are inequality, human rights, everyday realities for those experiencing injustice and poverty, diverse perspectives on development education and unique identities (IDEA, 2017). Encouraging early childhood educators to reflect on their professional practice during my Trócaire workshops and providing opportunities for them to explore the overlaps between development education and the Aistear principles is key to supporting their leadership potential in this area.

Reflection (Lindon and Trodd, 2016) in the early childhood context is significant when building awareness of development education, because it is understood to support critical thinking which involves active engagement with 'big ideas' (Roche, 2015, p.15). Giving children time to reflect and equipping them with skills to do so is hugely important. When they are provided with opportunities to engage with society as active citizens (Roche, 2015, p.14) in a way which is meaningful to them, it supports their developing sense of who they are and their place in the world. In the early years setting, this may be achieved when skilful early childhood educators recognise opportunities for sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002) and teachable moments with young children (Ephgrave, 2018) to introduce and develop awareness of the development education concepts.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



An important question for me is how early childhood educators can realise their capacity for sustainable leadership (Hargreaves, 2007) related to development education (IDEA, 2017) which:

'preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future' (Hargreaves, 2007, p224)

The answer for me will always be through education. It is in everyday interactions with children that early childhood educators may support them in their role to 'address issues relating to the active role of citizens ...' (Bamber, 2020, p. xxiv). This may be achieved by, for example, drawing on perceptive teaching skills as described by Dolan (2014) when identifying opportunities to introduce ideas related to social justice, such as sharing, listening to each other and ensuring every voice is heard. By drawing on these perceptive teaching skills and recognising opportunities as described above, a strong foundation is laid down, which will underpin learning related to the development education concepts later on.

CONCLUSION

My background in Early Childhood Care and Education is very much to the foreground when I am introducing Development Education concepts during my Trócaire workshops. I feel strongly that recognising opportunities to engage children in learning about development education is and will continue to be a key skill going forward for early childhood educators, because, as described by Maria Montessori "...children have an absorbent mind. They absorb knowledge from the environment without fatigue [...]. This is the moment in the life of man when we can do something for the betterment of humanity and further brotherhood ..." (Montessori 150, 2024).

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



PUSH PAST IT! A POSITIVE APPROACH TO CHALLENGING CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS.

Dr. Angela Searcy

Simple Solutions Educational Services Frankfort, IL USA

Our brains have a natural “negativity bias,” when children exhibit challenging classroom behaviors. This can result adults can struggle to properly express their own emotions and empathize with those of others. Since many of us were not allowed to process our own negative feelings as children, it can trigger uncomfortable emotions in us when we see children exhibit those same feelings. As a result, instead of displaying advanced emotional control when children demonstrate challenging behaviors, we are perpetually experiencing the same fear and lack of control we had as young children. PUSH PAST It is an acronym for a cognitive process that moves your brain from your initial emotional reaction to a higher level of thinking so you can problem solve. This workshop will outline a guide to effective behavior planning for intense challenging classroom behaviors using the evidence-based PUSH PAST It framework. It will outline effective but practical functional assessment tools designed for educators BY educators. This workshop will also outline each phase of the process, what to expect, as well as, tools that support a continuous cycle of each step (1). Self-reflection and identification of implicit bias, (2) context analysis, and (3), identification of prevention strategies, (4) replacement skills, (5) new responses, as well as (6) reviewing the results. This workshop also explains the structure that supports good behavior planning from all adults including parents and staff members.

- Participants will use self-reflection and Push Past it tool to identify any implicit bias
- Participants will analyze the context of challenging behaviors using functional assessment
- Participants will identify prevention, replacement skills and new responses to challenging behaviors Participants will analyze and review behavior planning results
- Participants will be able to describe structural tools that support behavior planning

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



NEW HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Bede Sheppard

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—the most widely ratified international human rights treaty—makes no explicit reference to early childhood education. Although the treaty requires governments to make primary education free and compulsory for all children, it does not explicitly obligate governments to provide either free pre-primary education or free secondary education to all children. But for children to achieve their full potential and thrive in today's world, free primary education simply isn't enough.

An initiative is currently away at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva to change this situation, and begin drafting a narrowly focused treaty—known as an “optional protocol”—to update and upgrade the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The aim of the optional protocol would be to recognize that the right to education under international law includes a right to early childhood care and education, to free public pre-primary education (beginning with at least one year), and to free public secondary education.

The upcoming process will be explained, along with the negotiating position adopted to date by the United Kingdom and other governments, and options for attendees to support the advocacy effort around the new treaty.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



MONTESSORI'S VISION IN ACTION: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF SHAPING, SUSTAINING, AND PROMOTING YOUR EARLY YEARS BRAND, ETHOS, AND VISION

Geeta Sidhu-Robb

Chair of Montessori St Nicholas and Founder & CEO WCorp and Nosh Detox, Montessori Global Education, United Kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

Right now, Early Years Educators face a time of change, challenge and constant pressure. Recruitment and retention issues across the education sector worldwide are significant and trainees may often question whether they have made the right choices for their chosen career. The expectations of employers, and working conditions for educators may feel limiting and narrow in focus at this time due to statutory obligations, management challenges and financial pressures on early education businesses globally. Traditional models of education and schools or settings have walls and boundaries, this can feel difficult to accept as those entering the sector are trying to navigate the job market or their career choices. This scenario may feel bleak; however, it brings with it opportunity. It is an ideal time to reflect on your training, reflect on your preparation as an educator and identify your transferable skills to future proof your capacity to work in the education sector.

KEY POINTS

Barriers to development for individuals working in the education sector can feel insurmountable. A lack of funding, low job satisfaction, poor working conditions and a lack of flexibility. This feels like a picture of traditional educational environments but we encourage you to thinking more broadly. How can flexibility be recognised for staff in settings? What other roles are essential in settings and the wider sector that require the skills of educators? Are their needs in your community that can be met by educators? Do you have projects and ideas that can help support extra curricular activity or educational support systems?

Join this session to explore effective approaches for tackling the challenge of establishing, sustaining, and promoting an ethos, brand, or vision in the fast-paced world of early years education.

CALL TO ACTION

Join us as we discuss overcoming your perceptions, sector barriers and the potential rewards of perseverance. Consider how you envisage your future in education.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



EMBEDDING THE RIGHTS OF BABIES, TODDLERS AND YOUNG CHILDREN AS FOUNDATIONAL IN THE UPDATED AISTEAR: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK IN IRELAND.

Dr Sharon Skehill

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Ireland

Lorraine Farrell

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Ireland

INTRODUCTION

This presentation provides an overview of the updated *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in Ireland (Government of Ireland, in press) and draws specific attention to how the rights of babies, toddlers and young children are embedded in the Framework. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) was originally developed as a child-led, play-based curriculum framework but has been necessarily updated to reflect the contemporary social world of babies, toddlers and young children, as well as responding to sectoral and policy developments in early childhood. *Aistear* is underpinned by 9 Principles which are foundational in supporting learning and development. By coming to understand these Principles, educators can build a curriculum for their specific group of babies, toddlers and young children in their particular context. The Principles of *Aistear* are Agentic Global Citizen; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Relationships and interactions; Family and community; Agentic educators; Transitions; Holistic learning and development; Play and hands-on experiences; and Learning Environments. By understanding and embedding these Principles in practice, educators support learning through the Aims and Learning Goals of the four Themes: Wellbeing; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking.

MAIN POINTS

This presentation presents an image of the child as agentic, competent and confident and crucially draws attention to the respectful interactions that underpin learning and development in early childhood.

It will outline how *Aistear* can provide meaningful opportunities for babies, toddlers and young children to learn about their rights and to experience how these rights are realised through the early childhood curriculum. It guides the development of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum in which *súgradh* (play) and relationships are foundational.

Being agentic is explained in how babies, toddlers and young children have voice and influence over their own learning (Lundy, 2007; Government of Ireland, 2015). There is consideration of the multimodality of child voice and draws attention to the different ways that babies, toddlers and young children communicate.

There is also an emphasis on education for sustainability in *Aistear* and how babies, toddlers and young children are supported to learn to care for themselves, to care for others and to care for the environment.

The presentation will conceptualise the role of the early childhood educator as a gatekeeper for children's rights and provide guidance on how these rights can be realised in daily practice through *Aistear*. It highlights how the educator's view of the baby, toddler and young child is central in helping them reach their individual potential.

CONCLUSION

An overview of the policy and sectoral context will conclude the presentation in consideration of how educators and other stakeholders will be supported to engage with and understand the key messages in the updated *Aistear*.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD: INTERPROFESSIONAL SCREENING FOR HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN RESOURCE-LIMITED SETTINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development (ECD) is fundamental to sustainable development, a priority highlighted in global frameworks such as the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and Africa's Agenda 2063, both of which emphasise the importance of quality ECD services. South Africa's National Development Plan also recognises ECD as essential for promoting inclusive growth and ensuring that all children can reach their full developmental potential. However, significant challenges remain in delivering quality ECD services across South Africa.

Among the 5.8 million children under five years, many live in conditions that do not support their development, with 60% living in multidimensional poverty, 21.4% experiencing stunting, and fewer than 37% attending early learning centres. Limited access to education and low caregiver engagement in early learning activities leave fewer than one-third of preschool children developmentally on track. Developmental delays, as well as vision and hearing impairments, frequently go undetected until formal school entry. Additionally, a third of mothers face mental health challenges, negatively impacting parenting practices and child development.

Early identification and intervention are critical to improving ECD outcomes. However, in low-resource settings like South Africa, substantial barriers exist, including a shortage of healthcare professionals, limited funding, and inadequate infrastructure. These challenges highlight the urgent need for innovative, scalable, and accessible screening and intervention approaches.

MAIN POINTS

Project overview

This project, located in the Mangaung Municipality (an urban/peri-urban area) and Trompsburg (a rural area) in South Africa's Free State province, focuses on the health and development of 4- and 5-year-old children attending ECD centres, along with the health and well-being of their caregivers.

Interprofessional collaboration

We implemented a collaborative, interprofessional approach to ECD screening, with a team of healthcare professionals—physiotherapists, occupational therapists, optometrists, dietitians, and biokineticists—conducting comprehensive assessments at ECD centres. Undergraduate students in these fields are trained as fieldworkers to support screenings, enhancing both reach and efficiency. This model allows for a holistic assessment of children's health and development while also addressing caregiver well-being. By involving undergraduate healthcare students, we extend our reach and provide meaningful, community-based learning experiences. This investment in early community engagement fosters a sustainable, effective screening model and helps develop healthcare professionals who are deeply connected to their communities.

Interpreters facilitate inclusive and culturally sensitive communication with children and caregivers who may not be proficient in English. This collaborative model also strengthens ties between healthcare and education sectors, promoting a more holistic and coordinated approach to ECD.

Innovation and cost-effectiveness

Children undergo comprehensive screening, including measurements of anthropometry and blood pressure, as well as assessments of their development, hearing, and vision health. Vision screenings evaluate visual acuity, ocular health, colour vision, motility, visual analysis skills, and near-point convergence. We use affordable, evidence-based tools, such as Brigance Screens III for developmental assessments, and smartphone applications like Hear Screen and Vula Vision for hearing and vision tests. Our streamlined circuit model enables the simultaneous screening of multiple participants during a single visit, reducing logistical and financial burdens for families while maximising resource utilisation.

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Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



Caregiver involvement and impact

Recognising the key role of caregivers in child development, we include screenings for caregiver health risks, physical markers (e.g., hypertension, obesity), and mental health. Caregiver well-being is linked to child developmental outcomes; early intervention promotes more supportive home environments, facilitating positive parenting practices and improving outcomes for families and communities. Involving caregivers also optimises resource utilisation by reducing the need for separate healthcare appointments.

Scalability and sustainability

Our project's scalability is one of its core strengths. Leveraging accessible digital technology, such as smartphones, the model can be adapted to other low-resource settings. In collaboration with health communication experts, data collected from screenings informs targeted health campaigns that address the specific needs of local communities.

The project aims to leverage low-cost, accessible digital platforms to share health information, interventions, and educational content with caregivers and ECD educators. By actively engaging with community partners, we can assess the feasibility, acceptability, accessibility, and cultural relevance of these interventions to ensure effective ECD support. This cost-effective strategy fosters long-term sustainability and broad outreach, promoting lasting changes in caregiving practices that support child development.

Data utilisation for referral and early intervention

Data collected during screenings are analysed by healthcare professionals, who provide referrals to public healthcare services when further evaluation or treatment is needed. Early identification of developmental delays, sensory impairments, and caregiver health challenges addresses a critical service gap, enabling timely interventions.

Screening data is also used to design context-specific interventions that support caregivers and ECD educators in creating enriching environments for children. By addressing health and developmental risks identified during screenings, limited available resources can be allocated effectively, enhancing both impact and sustainability.

Long-term benefits and public health implications

Addressing both child and caregiver health in ECD settings provides long-term benefits for families and communities. As children progress into formal schooling, improved developmental outcomes contribute to greater academic success, ultimately enhancing societal outcomes.

Collaborative efforts between the healthcare and education sectors support integrated public health strategies. ECD centres can become community hubs for health promotion, especially in resource-limited settings, contributing to child development and broader public health objectives, including health education, early detection and intervention, and mental health support. This model also promotes health equity by bridging gaps in health disparities and providing accessible services to underserved populations. Its scalability and sustainability offer a framework for improving public health outcomes in other low-resource areas.

CONCLUSION

This project introduces an innovative, interprofessional screening model within ECD centres, integrating comprehensive health assessments for both children and caregivers to address critical developmental needs in resource-limited settings. By leveraging affordable, evidence-based tools and digital applications, our circuit-based approach enhances both scalability and cost-effectiveness, allowing for efficient, culturally sensitive screenings conducted by trained healthcare students and professionals. Strengthening ties between health and education sectors, this model supports early interventions, fostering long-term improvements in public health and education. It provides a sustainable, adaptable solution that promotes health equity, strengthens early childhood outcomes, and supports underserved communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Co-author on the paper Prof Corlia Janse van Vuuren. School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of the Free and CBE project screening team.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



CREATIVE CLASSROOMS

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INTRODUCTION

Participants will acquire new musical resources and learn how music, songs, movement, and playing instruments can improve a child's behavior, teach social skills, and help children grow emotionally, physically, creatively, cognitively, and language processing.

MAIN POINTS

How creativity with music impacts child development? How to inspire young children to participate and contribute creatively in circle times? How to create open-ended songs to maximize their creativity, fun and engagement? How to use music to de-escalate inappropriate behaviors? How to help exceptional children express themselves through singing and playing an instrument? How to incorporate sounds and instruments to enhance a child's socio-dramatic play?

CONCLUSION

Keep running records of what works and what did not and for your students' behavior and development in all the domains. Watch for musical aptitude amongst your students and help them develop their skills. If students respond well, use songs during the day to help them focus on their tasks

Keep making up songs based on what your students are experiencing. Create more socio-dramatic and musical experiences with costumes, props, and instruments. Laugh and Play, Music is Fun! Resources include songs on audio files, lyrics, and instructions.

"Music training can bring about structural and functional changes in the brain, and studies have shown its positive effects on social bonding, cognitive abilities and language processing." National Library of Medicine <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10765015/>

- *"There is ample evidence that music helps students develop the attitudes, characteristics and intellectual skills required to participate effectively in today's society and economy. The arts teach self-discipline, reinforce self-esteem and foster the thinking skills and creativity so valued in the workplace such as teamwork and cooperation".* (Schirrmacher 1991)
- *"Encouraging creativity in all forms and nourishing innovative, young minds can have a direct impact on multiple aspects of a child's psychological development".* <https://bit.ly/3YvedrR> Maryville University Online
- *"Studies have found that children, who engage in socio-dramatic play, regularly are more friendly, popular, cooperative, verbal and creative, usually less impulsive and aggressive and more likely to take the perspective of others".* (Fein & Kinney, 1994)

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



ADVANTAGING THE DISADVANTAGED: BREAKING BARRIERS; STRIVING FOR SUCCESS IN THE EARLY YEARS.

Rebecca Tarplett

Director TickHub, Primary and Early Years Consultant, Chelmsford, England

As we continue to read the research and feedback from those working in Early Education; we know that the situation is dire. We have the highest levels of speech and language concerns entering settings and schools and we have less children starting school with the skills to begin their educational journey – from toilet training to personal and social skills and SEND. Reports, such as National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), show that Covid-19 has caused a sharp increase in the number of families in poverty. Between 2020-2021, the number of pupils now eligible for free school-meals increased by 300,000. The number of pupils in receipt of FSM is a key measure of disadvantage in schools. As educationalists it is our **duty** to make sure that **every** child reaches their potential and that we see them into the wider world with the skills and knowledge to enable success.

Like schools we know that pre school education varies from setting to setting. The Sutton Trust's five-year analysis highlights how much inconsistency there is between academy trusts; and this is the same in pre-school education too. Each year small groups do well for disadvantaged pupils, yet others fail to support our most vulnerable children and families. It is important that we all recognise the hurdles that some children face, in doing so this it will help us to target our teaching and play to improve outcomes in the prime areas and the specific areas of learning. Today we will look at some of the key groups affected by deprivation and explore how we can support children in these groups to break down barriers and be successful learners. Using research and practical ideas we hope to support you in developing a provision that is language rich and supports children in their individual journeys– because we are the only second chance some children will have to experience rich language and without this the barriers are already in place from a young age.

The implications are clear to us all – that if we do not close the gaps for children early on then the barriers they need to break down are higher. Our provision must ensure equity, with opportunities for all children irrespective of their previous experiences, we must recognise that every child has a different starting point. We should also ensure that from the youngest age children have the opportunity to see what they can be through role models and mentors, through enriching experiences and trips.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



LET'S EXPLORE THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

In early childhood, learning through play is essential and natural way. However, in today's world, where children are more aware and curious, it's crucial to go beyond traditional play and provide rich, purposeful materials. This approach nurtures their curiosity, encourages exploration, and helps them develop critical skills needed in the 21st century, such as problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration.

Integrating educational tools like sensory bins, manipulatives, technology-supported games, and story-based activities can create a balanced, stimulating environment. This combination of purposeful play and thoughtfully designed materials can make early childhood education much more effective and enjoyable.

MAIN POINTS

This theme-based game's goal is to support children across nine developmental sub-stages, simply through play. By designing play-based activities for these stages, we enable children to build essential skills. We choose a thema and create a miracle!

These skills are; Understanding Different Types of Vehicles, Imaginative and Creative Thinking, Time Management and Basic Math Skills, Imaginative and Creative Thinking, Seasonal Awareness and Decision-Making, Spatial Perception Development, Collaboration and Verbal Expression, Cultural and Geographical Awareness, Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking

Understanding Different Types of Vehicles:

- Students will be able to identify and categorize vehicles into land, air, and sea groups.
- They will understand how different vehicles are used based on the destination and travel conditions.

Imaginative and Creative Thinking:

- Students will engage in imaginative play by designing their own travel journeys and deciding on destinations, vehicles, and other trip details.
- They will create scenarios and make decisions based on their imagination and preferences.

Time Management and Basic Math Skills:

- Students will practice addition by calculating journey times and determining departure and arrival times.
- They will improve their ability to plan and manage time by creating realistic travel itineraries.

Seasonal Awareness and Decision-Making:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of the four seasons and how they affect travel preparations, such as the choice of clothing.
- They will make decisions based on the climate of the countries they are "traveling" to, showing adaptability in their planning.

Spatial Perception Development:

- Students will improve their spatial awareness by positioning objects in relation to vehicles, based on specific instructions.
- Advanced spatial thinking will be developed through multi-step directions that require precise placement of objects.

Collaboration and Verbal Expression:

- Students will collaborate by sharing and discussing their travel cards with the class, fostering verbal communication and presentation skills.
- They will reflect on their decisions and compare their choices with others, identifying similarities and differences.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



Cultural and Geographical Awareness:

- Through imaginary journeys, students will gain basic exposure to different countries and cultures, considering how geography impacts travel.
- They will explore diverse environments and destinations, fostering curiosity about the world around them.

Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking:

- By creating various routes and adjusting their plans for different travel conditions, students will enhance their problem-solving skills.
- They will critically assess how different factors, such as vehicle type and season, influence their travel experience.

CONCLUSION

This theme-based game approach nurtures the children's curiosity, encourages exploration, and helps develop key 21st-century skills like problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration. It allows children to practice various skills in one setting and helps recall the information and recalling is the one of the fastest way to learn in early childhood.

For further more as an actionable strategies:

- Teachers can give reinforcement activities for families to generalize knowledge. Provide families with conversation prompts related to the theme.
- Sequential theme calendars can be used for upcoming themes. Therefore families can plan related activities or routines reinforcing learning outside the classroom.
- Theme based technology game can be used as an education tools for the future. This supports faster learning and helps children see the interconnection of ideas.
- For the smooth transaction, teachers arrange the learning areas in the classroom according to the theme of the game.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



STEM EARLY YEARS: A MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO EARLY YEARS STEM INSTRUCTION

Simone Wellington

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the International Curriculum Team at Discovery Education was tasked with designing a transformative, multi-modal, STEM-centered, early childhood program to support a countrywide education initiative in Egypt. The early childhood program would serve an entry point to a nationwide shift in learning practices, known as Education 2.0. Collaborating with local and international experts and informed by OECD research, our methodology aims to enhance early literacy skills, foster cooperative learning environments, and promote authentic teacher-student engagement across diverse early childhood settings.

MAIN POINTS

The presentation will delve into the implementation of Oral Language Development Prompts and Together Practices, which shift the focus from adult-centered classrooms to child-focused learning environments. We will discuss theoretical foundations and practical applications of these approaches, illustrating how they empower early learners and their caregivers.

CONCLUSION

Attendees will gain insights into facilitating effective teaching practices and participate in hand-on activities easily replicable in their classrooms. The session will feature videos showcasing literacy routines for early learners and provide sample lesson ideas and materials for participants to take away and share with their communities. Join us in exploring innovative strategies to elevate early childhood education and support the next generation of learners.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



STOP! CRADLE TO PRISON PIPELINE FOR BLACK PRESCHOOLERS: STRATEGIES TOWARDS ERADICATING SUSPENSIONS, EXPULSIONS, AND EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

Black preschool age children (3 to 5 years old) enrolled in childcare settings tend to be the highest number of children expelled, suspended, or exclusionary practices are used based upon cited challenging behaviors where this is the best means of resolution. Smith and Fox (2003) define challenging behaviors as "any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, which interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in prosocial interaction with peers and adults," (p. 7). Black children quickly learn the trigger behaviors to demonstrate where one of three actions above will be incorporated. This qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of Black culture and related strategies that could be incorporated in the daily schedule (e.g., arrival, circle time, free play, mealtime) of Black preschool age children being suspended (e.g., unable to come back to school for 1 to 3 days, sent to another educator's classroom) or expelled (e.g., this is not a good fit for your child so they cannot return) due to behaviors that have been deemed challenging and/or unacceptable (e.g., hitting, throwing objects, kicking). The message transmitted to Black children is adultification being seen as an adult and not a child as their white age peers for behavior infractions.

The U.S. Education Department, Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection (2017–2018) cited (a) Black pre-school students accounted for 18.2% of total preschool enrollment but received 43.3% of one or more out of school suspensions, (b) Pre-school boys were suspended and expelled much more often than pre-school girls. Black pre-school boys received both suspensions (34.2%) and expulsions (30.4%) at rates that were more than three times their share of total pre-school enrollment (9.6%), and (c) Black pre-school girls were the only group across all races and ethnicities for girls where a disparity was observed. Black pre-school girls accounted for 8.6% of total pre-school enrollment but received 9.1% of one or more out-of-school suspensions, (pg. 9 of 24).

Three focus groups were conducted with nineteen participants (behavioral specialists, childcare administrators, early childhood educators, family specialists, college/university faculty, students enrolled in education programs, technical assistance specialists, state partnership executive director) representing Durham, Orange, and Wake counties of North Carolina. Participants served to strengthen trustworthiness from their observed experiences in the role represented from this ethnic representation Black (n=12) White (n=5), Asian (n=1), and Hispanic (=1). The Framework Method Theory (Richie and Spencer, 1980) of thematic analysis was applied for identifying key patterns. The study highlights the critical need for early childhood educators and education programs at institutions of higher education (IHE's) to embed these strategies as early intervention to address emotional and social development well-being of Black preschoolers towards productive lives into adulthood. The focus group data were coded and analyzed using a modified, grounded theory approach.

MAIN POINTS

Respondents identified elements of behaviors and strategies for implementation towards reducing or eliminating the suspension, expulsion, or exclusionary practices of Black preschool age children aligned into eight dimensions: (1) Black culture, (2) educator preparation, (3) daily schedule, (4) early intervention, (5) building parental family members strength-based community approaches, (6) early childhood specialist, (7) progressive educational systemic changes, and (8) federal policies on preschool suspension, expulsion, and exclusionary practices.

1. Educators lack a knowledge of Black culture and preconceived perspectives of Black children (adultification) based on their implicit and explicit bias.
2. Institutions of higher education teacher preparation programs need to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy reiterate Black culture and teaching methodologies of a plethora of learning experiences.
3. Supportive childcare administrators seek out professional development based on the breath, depth, and application on Black culture of age-appropriate practices to stay enrolled in a facility and not suspended, expelled, or use exclusionary practices.

Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



4. Learning environment represents primarily a white dominant setting and representation reflection of Black children is miniscule.
5. Parental/family members partnerships have negative perspectives reflective of parents/family members own firsthand experiences of school to reinforce the concept of building a keen sense of community.
6. Lack of early intervention services due to long wait times for services.
7. Employment of early childhood mental health specialists and mentor/coaches to demonstrate firsthand implementation with educators and parents/family members.
8. Federal policy outlining guidelines and procedures prior to actions of suspension, expulsion, and exclusionary practices be implemented with all children, but Black children particularly.

Three sub-themes emerged from the data: (1) ethnic-racial socialization messages, (2) core educators' values of cultural age-appropriate practices, and (3) ties to administrators and systematic policies.

CONCLUSION

Educators who seek to eradicate the suspension, expulsion, and exclusionary practices of Black preschoolers as a means of promoting bright futures if this interdependence is acknowledged and collaborative effectiveness to embed strategies are addressed across all eight dimensions. It is critical to provide different learning modalities and opportunities for children [Black] to better meet their needs" (Iruka, Curenton, Durden, & Escayg, 202, p. 17) to lessen and/or eliminate the result of suspension, expulsion, or exclusionary practices for Black children from childcare facilities. Results have implications for early childhood educators, administrators, families, technical assistants, early intervention specialists, policy makers, and universities to create Black culturally inclusive age practices towards the elimination of suspension, expulsion, and exclusionary practices.

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Proceedings of the 2024 Bright Start International Conference: Early Years Excellence in Practice

Empowering Change for a Sustainable Future in Early Childhood Care and Education



BRINGING A COMMUNITY TOGETHER: STORIES FROM PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH GRANDPARENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation we consider how we can make a difference when undertaking intergenerational research. The presentation takes the form of narratives from the research team members and stakeholders who worked together on a participatory project exploring the role of grandparents in the 21st Century. The project was developed in response to demand for new studies that include grandparents as co-researchers when exploring grandparenting (Weil and Mendoza, 2019). It is underpinned by publications about the research design (Mangione et al, 2023) and reviews of literature about the roles of grandparents (Luff et al, 2023; Kanyal et al., 2024).

MAIN POINTS

We report on a participatory research project undertaken in Corato, (a town in the South of Italy), with grandparents, which is opening up a co-constructive dialogue among researchers, participant co-researchers, stakeholders, and the local community.

With an emphasis upon research as a meaningful process of intergenerational learning through co-construction, our presentation portrays different perspectives from a project involving 4 researchers, 30 grandparent co-researchers, 2 key stakeholders (Casillo Foundation and the Municipality of Corato), various associations for older adults, and 2 educational settings.

The researchers take different perspectives as: an educator across the life course; a pedagogist and teacher; a participatory researcher; and an educational researcher who is also a grandparent.

Grandparent co-researchers ("nonni ricercatori") were involved in the redefinition of the aims, the choice of research methods, data collection and analysis. Emerging themes from their working groups include: grandparents from the past and today; intergenerational conflicts and family boundaries; grandparents' roles in the family team; grandparents as playmates, keepers of memories and givers of hugs. They also created a 'vademezum' of dos and don'ts for grandparents, as a key research outcome that has been widely shared.

The "nonni ricercatori" were involved in project dissemination through a conference hosted by Fondazione Casillo, as well as the project's gala dinner attended by the local community. They also contributed as co-authors of a book from the project (Mangione et al, 2024) and shared their insights at community events for social associations and local schools.

The pedagogist and teacher in Corato played a crucial role in facilitating collaboration between the English researchers, the Municipality of Corato, the Casillo Foundation, and the local community. She was vital in supporting the research team from England in developing the empirical aspect of the project within the local context and in the identification of the social associations and local schools.

The President of Casillo Foundation reports on how the project aligns with their commitment to creating an inclusive society, contributing to fostering connections between generations and local areas that are often distant. The key value that the Foundation sees in the participatory research project lies on the pedagogical and social content, conveyed during the workshops and meetings, and on the relationships promoted between people and life experiences that, due to generational gaps, rarely interact in ordinary social contexts. These contexts are often segmented by class, age groups

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and generational compartments. This project thus represents the point of departure that promotes an active involvement of older adults within communities, encourages intergenerational exchanges, and supports pathways for engagement, interaction, and social cooperation that empower individuals, organizations and institutions.

Local politician, Councillor for Social Policies with responsibility for senior citizens in the Municipality of Corato, reaffirms the importance of grandparents and the older generation in the Third Age taking an active part in the life of the community, to contribute in addressing social, environmental, economic and cultural challenges. He acknowledges the significance of being part of the participatory research project as an opportunity to reflect, from a political perspective, and take into account findings that potentially can influence policies for families and older people.

CONCLUSION

This project offers a good example of inter-generational and trans-disciplinary participatory research in a local community. Academics, local stakeholders, grandparents, local associations and schools have all been actively involved in an intergenerational dialogue. The project highlights the value of the Third Age for the younger generations and also the support that the community and the younger generations can offer people reaching the Third Age.

The participatory processes offer valuable insights into the role of grandparents in supporting grandchildren and families, highlighting the Third Age as a stage of life filled with inspiration, knowledge, and rich experiences that benefit the entire community

We share how the active involvement of this group of “nonni ricercatori” has generated interest and engagement, throughout the community of Corato, and created an opportunity to reinforce local networks among institutions, associations, foundations, schools and citizens. Next steps are considered, as this project moves to different national and international contexts.

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