

Abstract of Contribution 243

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Early Childhood Network

Individual Paper

Orientation of proposal: This contribution is mainly an academic research contribution.

Early Childhood Education and Care Network Sub-themes: Crossing boundaries in the field of early years and childhood.: What are the opportunities and challenges to effective learning posed by COVID-19? How has the situation in ECEC during different stages of lockdown been evaluated, and what lessons can be learned from the evaluations?, How can equitable learning environments be provided for all children in ECEC during the pandemic?

Measuring The Impact Of COVID-19 On Early Education And Care In The UK: Perspectives Of Teachers and Practitioners

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COVID-19 has impacted all aspects of society, and especially education. However, families and children are often hardest hit "Lockdown has been a seismic shock for every family" (Saunders and Hogg, 2020), particularly for vulnerable families (Conti, 2020). Related research suggests that childcare providers will have been financially impacted during the lockdown period (Blanden et al., 2020). There is thus much to be concerned in terms of the access and quality of young children's education and care; however, little evidence is available to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on early years settings, practitioners and children. Much of the media focus has been on school-age learners or higher education (Watermeyer et al., 2020); measuring this impact on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is vital to better understand this essential societal provision for supporting the education of our youngest learners. This paper reports on a project which explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on UK ECEC provision.

Policy and guidance documents abound across the four UK nations, providing ECEC settings with detailed information about current regulations. The voluntary sector has also been key to providing operational advice (NDNA, 2020). However, little empirical research exists to date that captures and analyses the experiences of ECEC settings in their efforts to translate this emerging policy into practice, as well as the impact this is having on practitioners' workplace, themselves and the children in their care.

This research aims to explore the perspectives of the UK's ECEC workforce using a realistic epistemological position to gather quantitative and qualitative data from an anonymous online survey. The online survey has been completed by over 400 practitioners, childcare workers, setting managers, and teachers working with children aged 0-8 years old across the UK. The survey explored the impact of any changes that had been made within settings as a result of the pandemic, especially new ways of working. The survey also examined practitioner perceptions of these changes; focusing on the impact of coronavirus on early years pedagogy, practitioners and children. Initial analysis suggests some of the following findings; the impact of COVID-19 has negatively impacted on the health and wellbeing of ECEC staff and children, with management facing challenges in adhering to the evolving regulations. Parents have expressed their concerns about the changes in available childcare hours, and to not being able to enter premises and meaningfully engage with staff and children. A number of respondents were concerned about the financial sustainability of the sector, potentially requiring government support to ensure that services remain available and accessible to all.

The findings from this research provide vital insight into UK ECEC settings, acknowledging the crisis response to the pandemic and the short, medium and longer-term impact of COVID-19 on learners and practitioners, as well as the potential for reimagining learning if/when we revert to a post-COVID normal. We aim to inform emerging policy and practice across the four nations of the UK, to better support settings in dealing with current and future scenarios of this kind.

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