INTRODUCING RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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INTRODUCING RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of early childhood research! Whatever your starting point in terms of understanding research, this book will provide you with a firm foundation that you can build on as you continue in your studies.

This chapter will …

- Build your understanding of what is meant by the term 'research'.
- Explore some of the purposes of research in relation to early childhood.
- Consider what research means to those studying early childhood, and why it is important for children, families and communities that research is carried out.
- Reflect upon the role that research plays in informing policy and the ways in which it may support you in identifying and developing quality practice within early childhood.
- Highlight the breadth of ways in which research is conducted in early childhood, which we will build upon in later chapters.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

This book aims to introduce you to the concept of research in relation to early childhood. It focuses specifically on children aged from birth to eight years old and will encourage you to debate, discuss and analyse the process of research and how other people choose to conduct it.

The book starts by considering research in relation to early childhood quite broadly. We will discuss how it is important to make sure that you do not take

sources of information and pieces of research on face value, but instead think critically about them. It then explores the ideas of knowledge and truth in research, and how our beliefs about these concepts shape how we know and what we know about children and their childhoods. Next, you will consider 'the language of research' and think about why it is important to build an understanding of specific research terminology. This terminology might be the same words that you come across in your everyday life but with a different meaning in an academic sense.

After that, we will compare and contrast research 'about' children and research 'with' children, by exploring what is meant by each of these ideas, and how they link to research designs like longitudinal studies and cross-national research. Following that, we begin to think about some of the specific aspects that researchers must bear in mind before carrying out a study, such as how to act ethically and how to choose the design of a piece of research, whether that is through using numbers, words or a more creative approach. Finally, we will ask you as the reader to begin to think about becoming a researcher yourself, and invite you to reflect upon how your knowledge about research in relation to early childhood has developed through reading and reflecting on this book.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RESEARCH?

The first question that we need to ask ourselves when considering research in early childhood is what we actually mean by the term 'research'. Think about the times you carry out 'research' in your everyday life: for instance, you may consider that using a search engine like Google to find out which bus you need to take to get into town is 'research', or what time films are showing at your local cinema. In your university studies, you may say that you are using a library search engine to 'research' a particular topic on which you need to write an assignment. We use the term 'research' to mean that which we want to find out about, explore or discover – something that we did not know before. We will build upon other research terms in Chapter 4 (The language of research), when we will consider how other familiar words may change their meaning within a research context.

We can also think about the idea of 'research' in an academic sense, which is what this book will focus on. We consider research in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) to be related to investigations, studies and experiments that contribute to new information about young children, their lives, their families and their communities. In this sense, research is about creating new knowledge, rather than learning knowledge that has already been acquired or provided by someone else. For example, let's say a researcher wants to conduct research on what parents think about using health visitor services. They carry out a study by interviewing new parents and analysing the conversations they have with those parents. This helps them to come up with new knowledge, which researchers call 'findings', about common parental opinions of health visitors. This information

might support and agree with what other researchers have found. Alternatively, it might contradict existing research-informed practice, and lead to changes in what health visitors do.

In this book, we define research in early childhood as being about asking questions that we have about children and their lives, and attempting to answer those questions by discovering new knowledge, opinions, perspectives and understanding. This fits with other definitions, including that by a charity called the National Children's Bureau (2015) who say that research is 'not just about exploring a subject, it is about creating new knowledge and understanding'. Others liken research to discovery, for instance Fraser (2004: 16) says conducting research is like discovery 'either because "no one has been there before" or because someone predicts what it is like there even though no one has been there'. Other authors note the importance of the role of enquiry within research, such as Lobe et al. (2007: 6), who explain 'research is designed to answer questions'. Although these definitions are all slightly different, you can see commonalities between them. Research is about generating knowledge and answers to questions – sometimes questions that have been asked before and sometimes questions that haven't. With regard to young children, this might relate to questions about what children's experiences are, why they have those experiences and what the impact of those experiences might be.

When we think about who conducts research, we might think about an individual who carries out studies on a very small scale or we might think of large organisations who seek to carry out bigger pieces of research with a greater number of participants spanning a large number of countries. For instance, undergraduate university students will typically conduct a small-scale piece of research called a *dissertation* in their final year of studies. They could be interested in exploring what children's views are on wearing a school uniform and give out questionnaires to one school class to help them gather opinions on this. Conversely, one organisation that collects data on a larger scale and which spans different countries is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is an organisation of 35 member countries, including the UK, which monitors events and data in these countries in order to discuss what the implications might be of the findings of the data for those countries. The OECD can then use their data and research to advise governments across the world about what they should do or what policies they should introduce. The OECD's aim is to 'help governments foster prosperity and fight poverty through economic growth and financial stability' (OECD, 2017a).

Therefore, a piece of research can be something that is quite large, or something that is rather small. However, whatever the size of the research, we can relate it to the OECD's definition, which is that research in ECEC refers to 'studies and analyses on any issues related to the early education and development environment of children in ECEC centres' (OECD, 2012a: 1). It is important to remember that, whatever the size and scale of the research and whoever the researcher is, it is possible for the same research topic to be considered. Take as an example the research topic of the enjoyment that boys and girls

derive from reading. Ashcroft (2017) is a student teacher who has written up a piece of research that he conducted as part of his university studies in *The SteP* (Student Teacher Perspectives) *Journal* about his study that explored how boys and girls differed in their attitudes to reading. It was carried out with quite a small sample of participants; his data comprised of 25 questionnaires completed by Year Three children from two classes in the same primary school. He found that boys were less enthusiastic about reading, and spent less time doing it. In contrast to this small study, in 2009 over half a million 15-year-olds from 65 countries took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), including over 4,000 children from England (Bradshaw et al., 2009; OECD, 2009). The PISA study is administered every three years and compares educational systems across the world by assessing 15-year-old children through an internationally-approved test. The 2009 PISA study found that the number of girls reading for enjoyment was much higher than the number of boys (OECD, 2011), matching Ashcroft's (2017) findings. This shows how the same research topic can be considered both on a large and on a small scale, and either in one context or worldwide. We will consider the PISA study more in Chapter 8 (Cross-national research approaches).

TIME TO CONSIDER

Consider any information you already know about early childhood and how you know that information. What would you like to know about children? If you had to carry out some research, what questions would you ask to find out new knowledge about children and their lives?

IN WHAT DIFFERENT WAYS IS RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?

Later in Chapter 5 (Approaches to research about children) and Chapter 6 (Approaches to research with children), we will consider in much more detail how types of research can be categorised and the similarities and differences between different approaches. However, for now we will begin to consider in brief the various ways in which research can be carried out; this will be built upon in the subsequent chapters of this book. For instance, in Chapter 10 (How research is designed), you will become more familiar with the idea that research is typically either *quantitative* or *qualitative*.

In brief, quantitative research is typified by collecting measurable data that can be interpreted in a numerical way (that is, information that can be quantified) to come up with a 'right answer' to a research question. Conversely, qualitative research focuses on collecting data relating to attitudes, views and opinions on a particular topic, which means that rather than propose a 'right answer' to a question, it is instead likely to give one possible answer that would

answer the question. The approach that a researcher chooses depends on the type of answer they want to their question. Sometimes, they will want to answer their question using quantitative ways of collecting information, whilst at other times researchers may use qualitative methods to come to conclusions about the world. There is not a right or wrong way to answer a research question – people have different perspectives about the best way to get new knowledge, which is something else that we will consider in this book in Chapter 3 (Knowledge and truth in research).

As well as distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative research, we can also think about different types of *research design*. The OECD (2012a) say that there are five main ways that research is carried out in relation to ECEC. These are:

- Policy research
- Large-scale programme evaluations
- Longitudinal studies
- Comparative, cross-national research
- Neuroscience and brain research

These five types are good to consider as a starting point to think about the different ways in which organisations and individuals collect information relating to early childhood. They are also useful to consider how different types of research may have an impact on young children and their families. The first four, in particular, we will reflect upon briefly now and will consider in more detail later in this book. The fifth main way of doing research, neuroscience and brain research, is not the focus of this book, but you can find out more in the OECD's (2012a) *Research Brief: Research in ECEC Matters* report, which is suggested as further reading at the end of this chapter.

Policy research

Baldock et al. (2005: 3) suggest that policies are 'an attempt by those working inside an organisation to think in a coherent way about what it is trying to achieve (either in general or in relation to a specific issue) and what it needs to do to achieve it'. In relation to early childhood, early years policies focus on government practices or courses of action that impact on young children's lives. One example of policy research in England is the research that was carried out to investigate the impact of offering free school meals to all primary school pupils (DfE, 2013). In three areas of England, all primary school-aged children were given free school meals, as a trial to see what the effect would be on the children's take-up of free school meals, eating habits, health and well-being, attendance, behaviour and academic performance. Overall, the pilot study found that universal free school meals led to 'a significant positive impact on attainment for primary school pupils at Key Stages 1 and 2' (DfE, 2013: 8) and suggested that 'outcomes are improved only through the universal provision of

free school meals' (DfE, 2013: 115). Following this piece of research, in September 2014 the Coalition government (2010–15) announced that universal free school meals would be introduced for all children in Reception and Key Stage 1 in England and Wales. It would be easy to assume from this that recommendations from research are always taken on board by governments and others who commission it to inform policy, but this is not always the case. This is because there may be financial barriers to implementing the suggestions, as well as new research being published that may offer alterative solutions. Despite the fact that the pilot study also found positive benefits for Key Stage 2 children, the Coalition government did not decide to provide free school meals to children above Key Stage 1. Also, at the time of writing (shortly after the 2017 UK General Election), it is uncertain whether the offer for free school meals to all Key Stage 1 children will continue. Instead, it has been proposed that free school dinners will return to a means-tested system and free breakfast will be provided to all children in Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 instead. This is in part as a result of a pilot project evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation (2016) that found there were academic, social and behavioural benefits for primary-aged children attending a breakfast club.

Large-scale programme evaluations

These are investigations of a programme that is already in place, which examines how effective that initiative is. The OECD (2012a: 3) state that researchers conduct programme evaluations in order to determine the effectiveness of a programme, to question ways in which a programme may be improved, to examine the ways in which it is accountable, to explore the extent to which it provides value for money and also to investigate how useful facets of the programme are. Within England, one example of a programme evaluation is the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al., 2010). In order to evaluate what makes effective early years education and care, this piece of research used different types of data collection, such as observations, questionnaires and interviews, to investigate what the characteristics are of effective early years provision, and what the lasting effects of preschool may be on children's development. We will consider the EPPE Project in more detail in Chapter 7 (Longitudinal research approaches).

Longitudinal studies

These are studies that carry out data collection on the same participants at intervals over a period of time. These can be really useful for tracking children's learning and development and exploring how the different factors that play a part in a child's life can lead to differences in children's outcomes. Within the UK, several longitudinal studies tracking children's lives have taken place. One of the most recent is the Millennium Cohort Study.

The Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study is an ongoing study that is following approximately 19,000 children born in 2000–2001. It covers a whole range of topics, such as 'parenting; childcare; school choice; child behaviour and cognitive development; child and parental health; parents' employment and education; income and poverty; housing, neighbourhood and residential mobility; and social capital and ethnicity' (Institute of Education, 2015). By collecting information in this way, researchers are able to consider, for instance, the relationship between children's development and their home environments. For example, using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, Sabates and Dex (2012) looked at the links between children's exposure to risks at home (including risk factors such as domestic violence, parental worklessness, parental alcoholism, overcrowding and teenage parenthood) and children's cognitive and behavioural development when aged between three and five. They found that growing up in homes with two or more risk factors was likely to disadvantage children in terms of both their cognitive and behavioural development. Being exposed to two or more risk factors was associated with a smaller vocabulary, and was linked to a greater likelihood of behavioural concerns such as conduct problems and hyperactivity. Having an understanding of these links may lead to greater support or early intervention for children who are in these situations, to minimise the adverse effects of these risk factors. We will consider the Millennium Cohort Study in more detail in Chapter 7 (Longitudinal research approaches).

Comparative, cross-national research

This is research that is carried out in more than one country, which allows us to identify what the differences and similarities might be in the experiences of young children and the provision for them. Policymakers can use this information to identify successful strategies employed by other countries, which can inform the decisions that the policymakers might take. It can also be used to identify where international organisations may want to prioritise action or identify what their future international goals might be. For instance, later in this book we will look at the role of Unicef, a charity whose aim is to improve children's lives worldwide by reducing the extent to which children are affected by violence, disease, hunger, conflict and natural disasters. Every year Unicef produces a report called *State of the World's Children*, which looks at global and national statistics of children to show how outcomes and experiences for children change worldwide. In their 2015 report, they found that 'the poorest 20 per cent of the world's children are twice as likely as the richest 20 per cent to be stunted by poor nutrition and to die before their fifth birthday' (Unicef, 2015a: 4). Thus, comparative, cross-national research can help us to identify what strategies are being used in some countries to equip children with good levels of nutrition, and

provide knowledge that might help other countries reduce their child mortality rates. This type of research will be the focus of Chapter 8 (Cross-national research approaches).

Overall, we can see that there are different ways in which information on children and childhoods is being collected, and different ways in which new knowledge is being created. This leads to developments in policy, provision and practices, and hopefully leads to benefits for young children and the experiences that they have.

TIME TO CONSIDER ⚙

Think about the different types of research that the OECD (2012a) outline. Each of them helps us to think about why research may be important for children. In what different ways are they suggesting it might be important to carry out research on the lives of young children and their families?

WHY IS RESEARCH IMPORTANT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES?

Tisdall et al. (2009: 4) give several reasons why they think that research in Early Childhood Studies (ECS) is important. Firstly, they say that 'research might open up new possibilities for children, and society more generally' (2009: 4). Think about this for a moment. By doing research, more about children's lives can be identified so that the experiences that they have can be improved.

RESEARCH IN FOCUS 🔍

Informing staffing in ECEC provision

Recently Save the Children (2015) published a study that said that 'a fifth of all children in England, and close to a third of the poorest children, are unable to read well when they leave primary school' (Save the Children, 2015: iv). As a result of this research, they made a recommendation that the government should 'ensure an early years graduate leads early education in every nursery by 2020, prioritising those serving disadvantaged children' (Save the Children, 2015: 7). This may open up new possibilities and opportunities for children in early years settings; there is the potential that outcomes for children in early years settings may be improved if there is a graduate in every setting. In addition, it may increase employment opportunities for adults who are considering careers within early childhood settings too, if these recommendations are taken on board.

Secondly, through research, questions may be asked about the way that we do things (Tisdall et al., 2009). Carrying out research and reading research enables us to think more critically about the way things are done. For instance, since 1870 and the passing of the Elementary Education Act 1870, it has been compulsory for children in England and Wales to attend school from the age of five. We can consider this to be 'the way things are done', or 'common sense thinking', which we will consider in Chapter 3 (Knowledge and truth in research). But research findings that identify benefits of starting formal schooling at age four or five are non-existent, whilst there is lots of evidence that supports the idea that children need more play-based opportunities to support their learning and development (Whitebread and Jarvis, 2013). Doing research into children's lives helps us to question what happens to children, and whether that is the best thing for them.

Thirdly, Tisdall et al. (2009) say that research can raise issues that might not have otherwise been considered and suggest options that would otherwise not have been conceived. In 2009, Tompsett et al. (2009) carried out research to find out what difficulties or conflicts of interest GPs may face when they have both parents and their children as patients, and have safeguarding or welfare concerns about the children (Tompsett et al., 2009). An unexpected finding was that GPs did not often refer to the views of their child patients. The researchers suggest 'more work is needed to improve communication and their involvement in decisions' (2009: 5) so that GPs are more likely to listen to children's feelings and wishes when making decisions about them.

Research can also offer the opportunity for representation, so that 'children's views and experiences are not only listened to but heard by other groups' (Tisdall et al., 2009: 5). Feeding their perspectives forward, through dissemination, can help bring about changes in both policy and society. Linked to this, Smith (2011: 17) suggests that research that aims to improve children's well-being needs to be given priority. She cites Dobbs et al. (2006), who conducted research to explore what 80 children in New Zealand thought about family discipline, including their experiences of physical punishment and what they thought was appropriate. One of the findings of the study was that the majority of participants (all aged between four and 15) did not think it was appropriate to use physical punishment as a form of discipline. Dobbs et al. (2006) argue it is important that notice is paid to children's perspectives on matters that concern them. We could argue in addition that the publication of their research allows their views to be heard by a wider number of people; this could change attitudes in relation to sensitive areas like using corporal punishment on children. Research that aims to consider children's perspectives is something that you will consider more in Chapter 6 (Approaches to research with children).

Many others, in addition to Tisdall et al. (2009), confirm the importance of research in early childhood education and care. The OECD (2012a) also give three main reasons why it is important this type of research takes place. Firstly, they suggest that if we evaluate ECEC programmes, then this may lead to improvements in provision, and also a greater degree of accountability of the

programmes that are being delivered. They also believe that if more pieces of research are carried out then there would be more evidence to suggest the value of positive early childhood experiences. This could mean ECEC programmes attract a greater amount of investment from governments and justify why financial support is necessary. Finally, they believe that through research, the practices that take place within early years settings may improve, as they become based on what the evidence suggests gives the best outcomes for young children.

TIME TO CONSIDER

Think about the reasons given by Tisdall et al. (2009) and by the OECD (2012a) about why it is important that research on and with children and their families takes place. What links can you make between these? Which reasons do you think are the most important? Why else do you personally think that research in early childhood is important?

CASE STUDY

Rebecca: an early years practitioner in a baby room

Rebecca works in a baby room in a nursery. She is also currently working towards her Foundation Degree in Early Childhood Education and Care. She is not the room leader but she is a key person for some of the babies; she uses the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017a) to ensure that she is providing the babies with an enabling environment and forming positive relationships with them. She is curious to know how research has had an impact on what happens in practice in the setting. She thinks about what happens on a day-to-day basis in the nursery, what is considered to be 'good quality' and what rules and regulations are in place. She considers how they might have been based on research that has been carried out.

Firstly, she considers her role as a key person. The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017a) states that every child must be assigned a key person – a person for that child to build a firm bond with, who ensures that the child has their individual needs met and works with the child's family to promote their learning and development at home. She looks at where the thinking has come from that children need a key person. The key person system was coined by Goldschmied and Jackson (2004: 25) as a way of acknowledging that children need to form special relationships with individuals, just as most adults would like 'a special relationship with some person on whom we can rely, a relationship which is significant and precious to us'. In 2001, the key person approach became a statutory part of 14 national standards for full day care for under-eights (DfES, 2001) and has remained a statutory part of early years provision ever since. Rebecca looks at the evidence provided by Tickell (2011a) to support her review of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (Tickell, 2011b), in which it states that the key person approach is beneficial for building positive relationships between practitioners and parents. To justify the importance of using the key person approach in early years

settings, Tickell (2011a) says that evidence around attachment theory shows why having a key person approach is important to ensure young children's security, and cites research that states that practitioners recognise how a child's key person can be a valuable support for their key children. Rebecca uses this information to develop her understanding of why the key person approach is a part of the EYFS, and reflects upon how her role as a key person has been informed by research.

Then, she considers the staff–child ratio within the baby room. Her setting, like all early years providers, follows the Department for Education's Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, which says that for every three children aged under two there must be at least one member of staff (DfE, 2017a). If Rebecca was working with two-year-olds, this ratio would increase to one member of staff for every four children, and (as a Level 3 practitioner) if Rebecca was working with children aged three or above, she could be responsible for eight children. She looks for research that justifies the adult–child ratio for children under two. Melhuish et al. (2015) suggest that although there is some evidence to link ratios and group sizes with children's outcomes, not all studies find that there is a link between a higher adult–child ratio and better outcomes for children. In contrast to this, the OECD (2012b) suggest that high staff–child ratios, alongside small group sizes, typically lead to better outcomes in children's learning and development, as well as promoting better working conditions for early years practitioners. However, Melhuish et al. (2015) do state that a ratio of 1:3 for under twos is recommended relatively consistently by researchers. This could explain why this is the ratio that is currently statutory in early years settings in England.

Finally, Rebecca considers the Foundation Degree she is currently studying, towards which her Local Authority is contributing funding. She looks at some of the findings from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al., 2010). This piece of research found that there was a link between the quality of early years settings and the level of qualification that staff in those settings had. Where early years practitioners had higher levels of qualifications, children had better outcomes because staff in those settings took more opportunities to engage children in 'intellectual challenges' and were most effective in how they communicated and interacted with children to develop their thinking skills (Sylva et al., 2003). As a result, Taggart et al. (2015) argue that since 2006 EPPE has been cited to justify developing the skill level of people working with young children. For instance it was referred to within the Nutbrown Review (2012), where Nutbrown highlights findings from the EPPE Project to show the importance of qualifications in the early years. The study was also used within the DfE's (2011: 11) Early Years Evidence Pack to illustrate that 'qualifications are a driver of quality', due to findings that when early years settings had trained teachers, by the age of five the children in those settings made better progress in their pre-reading and in their social development.

TIME TO CONSIDER

Think about what you know about early years provision for toddlers and young children. In what ways do you think that practice has been shaped by research that has been carried out in toddler and preschool rooms in early years settings?

FINAL REFLECTION

There are many different ways that research can be defined and many different ways that research can be carried out in relation to young children. In this chapter we have started to think about what these different ways may be. We have also begun to consider the reasons why it is important to conduct research in early childhood, and through Rebecca's case study, we have thought about how research impacts on the day-to-day lives of young children who attend early childhood settings, as well as those who work in them.

KEY POINTS

- Research in relation to early childhood is about how we ask questions about children and their lives and then answer those questions by collecting and making sense of data. This leads us to discover new knowledge, opinions, perspectives and understanding.
- Research is carried out in a variety of ways, using a variety of different methods of data collection. Some of these focus on collecting data that can be quantified and presented in a numerical way (*quantitative* data). Some of these focus on data that can't be quantified and instead are more likely to present information that can be described using words, that often relates to attitudes, views and opinions (*qualitative* data). Some pieces of research combine both types, using a mixed-methods approach.
- Some of the most common ways that research is carried out in relation to early childhood is through policy research, large-scale programme evaluations, longitudinal studies, comparative, cross-national research and neuroscience and brain research (OECD, 2012a).
- Research is important for a variety of different reasons, including because it allows us to think critically and question decisions that are currently made. It can lead us towards important information that we might not have considered and (perhaps most importantly) it may bring about new possibilities and thus better outcomes and life chances for children and their families.

FURTHER READING

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) *Research Brief: Research in ECEC Matters*. Available at: www.oecd.org/education/school/49322250.pdf (accessed 2 January 2018).
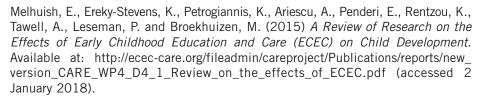
This short report from OECD is a brilliant document that introduces the role that research plays in relation to early childhood education and care. It includes information about neuroscientific research in relation to young children.

Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K., Tawell, A., Leseman, P. and Broekhuizen, M. (2015) *A Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on Child Development*. Available at: http://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/new_version_CARE_WP4_D4_1_Review_on_the_effects_of_ECEC.pdf (accessed 2 January 2018).

This very comprehensive report reviews pieces of research that have looked at the impact of early years provision on children's development. You will find this report a useful introduction to the breadth of research that focuses on links between children's development and their early childhood settings.