Leveraging lived experience for transformative pedagogy in daycare settings

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Abstract:
This practice paper explores the critical role of evolving pedagogy in day care settings in efforts to build sustainable early learning practices which are tailored to contemporary childhood needs. This paper will do so through highlighting the importance of leveraging Early Childhood practitioners' lived experiences. As a result of exploring the challenges and implications of utilising the lived experiences of practitioners, what is established is the potential role lived experiences have in enhancing professional development, uncovering hidden aspects of practitioner's practices, and adjusting their practices to meet modern childhood needs.

Keywords: Children's cultural capital, early childhood practitioner, lived experience, reflective practice, action research.

Introduction
Through reflective practice and action research, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners are provided with the framework that serves to examine their own lived experiences, allowing them to in turn fully embrace their roles as researchers. Thus, this reflective practice paper advocates for leveraging ECEC practitioners' lived experiences by fostering transformative pedagogy within daycare settings. It does this through emphasising the importance of enabling practitioners to lead their practice, and to allow their voices to be heard in broader educational discourses while ultimately cultivating children's cultural capital.

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Cultivating Children's Cultural Capital

It's crucial to recognise that our actions within daycare settings aim to cultivate children's cultural capital, because it is the essential personal knowledge that children will need to prepare them for future success (Ofsted, 2024). Therefore, because an ECEC practitioner's duty is to provide children with the optimal foundation for their early education, there is an intrinsic requirement for effective learning to also include how an ECEC practitioner will support each child to effectively construct their cultural capital.

One effective approach is treating a child's learning journey as a case study. A "case" involves an in-depth study concentrating on a particular child's learning and development (Mukherji& Albon, 2018). This approach can mean using targeted tools such as Action Research and Reflective Practice with the goal of concentrating on the uniqueness of each child's development. The important key here is as ECEC practitioners are already immersed within the childcare environment, they are already positioned as ethnographers: ethnographic research is conducted in 'naturalistic' settings which makes it particularly suitable for early childhood research (Aubrey et al., 2000). Buchbinder et al (2006) describes naturalistic settings as places where children feel comfortable. This ethnographic approach aligns with the Department of Education advocating that the "depth in early learning is much more important than covering lots of things in a superficial way" (DfE 2023). Thus, there is an opportunity for more tailored educational programs, where ECEC practitioners act as ethnographers.

Navigating cultural transitions: Reflecting on lived experience in daycare settings

My professional journey began over two decades ago when I first encountered ECEC while settling in England. This encounter proved to be an incredibly enriching lived experience as the difference in cultures meant that I was foreign to the robust systems of ECEC in England. What was 'normal' for those born here, was something I had to actively learn rather than passively understand and apply within my practice. This learning made me naturally inquisitive; and I felt compelled to ask what, why, and how. This curiosity extended not only to practices, but also to the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). There followed a period of self-inquiry, during which I reflected on my personal and professional struggles, questioning the why and how of daily practices. As a newly qualified ECEC practitioner, my initial challenge was to comprehend the cultural nuances and professional norms of ECEC in England.

A key example of this was my first experience with an Ofsted inspection early in my career. During the inspection, the inspector observed and complimented my practices, indicating that I was aligning with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidelines. However, when asked to explain the reasons behind my actions, I found it difficult to articulate my rationale. This inability highlighted a gap between my professional training and its practical application. Here, I realised that like many other practitioners, I was acting based on general observations and assumptions, rather than understanding the deeper meaning and purpose behind each individual practice.

Consequently, I embarked on a dual path of professional practice and academic study. During my early days as a qualified ECEC practitioner, my primary concern was to derive meaning and purpose from my daily practice, while comprehending the culture and protocol of practice within the realm of ECEC in England. By successfully integrating academic studies with real-world childcare responsibilities, I was able to scrutinise my daily practices through a critical and reflective lens, thereby allowing me to uncover the subtle nuances of "invisible practice" that can only become apparent through close examination of day-to-day experiences within daycare settings.

The importance of uncovering "Invisible Practices"

Through my personal and professional journey, I can affirm that ECEC practitioners critically reflecting on their personal experiences within daycare settings, is a key to uncovering the subtle nuances of "invisible practices". Argyris and Schon (1974) were interested in the contradictions that could be observed within professional practices, and subsequently viewed these contradictions as inconsistencies that could indicate a noticeable gap between what was assumed to happen within daily practice, and what actually happened. Argyris and Schon's (1974) work shines a light on the reality of daycare settings, where practitioners often adhere to routine customary practices that may not be the most effective or efficient. Recognizing that these habitual practices lead to repetitive patterns that hinder critical reflection is essential for embracing the concept of practitioners acting as researchers to uncover and investigate the often-invisible aspects of practice. This approach helps close the gap between what is assumed to happen, and what is actually happening in daycare settings. To achieve this, practitioners must adopt a mindset of continuous learning and become learners once again.

Reflective practice: ECEC Practitioners Embracing the Role of Learners

Learning and reflection go "hand in hand" and it is difficult to imagine one without the other (Bassot, 2016:15). Johns (1995) interpreted reflective practice as practitioners' ability to assess, make sense of, and learn through work experience, to achieve more desirable, effective and satisfying work. To do so, ECEC practitioners can become learners by using action research as a tool to investigate and reflect on their practices.

Action Research as an Investigation Tool

The primary aim of involving Action Research in daycare setting, is to evaluate the potential of leveraging practitioners' lived experiences in day-to-day practice to enhance the quality of education. Action research involves a 'living inquiry' that explores how real-life experiences underpin investigations (Wicks et al., 2008), making practitioners central to the process (Robson, 2011). This strategy allows practitioners to understand and reflect on their practice in real-world childcare scenarios. With Action Research, practitioners are engaging in an ongoing process of investigating a child's learning alongside curriculum development and significantly increasing their awareness of their own competencies and abilities. This encourages them to take ownership of their practice and pedagogy, developing it from a perspective of expertise and personal reflection. Therefore, when ECEC practitioners embrace their role as learners, they can reconsider their taken-for-granted values (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998) and use action research to problematise areas of practice that have previously seemed 'common sense' (Brown and Jones, 2001). This process involves three necessary elements: returning to the experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluating the experience (Boud et al., 1985).

In the process of re-evaluating their experiences, ECEC practitioners acting as researchers will rigorously examine their practices and deepen their understanding of children's learning processes. This will be exemplified by clear advancements in children's developmental trajectories that significantly enhance their lives. Consequently, ECEC practitioners acting as researcher will not only be empowered to observe, understand, interpret and reflect on their practices, but also to change it.

Morrison (1995) suggests that critical theory aims to transform and empower. Leveraging practitioner's lived experience for transformative pedagogy aligns with Mertens' (2007) argument that a transformative paradigm should be integrated into every stage of the research process, involving an interrogation of power. Thus, empowering ECEC practitioners as researchers will enable them to integrate research elements into their educational technique to critically assess and potentially transform their current early learning provisions into a more suitable and responsive provision with clear and sustainable impact on children.

Action Research as a Participatory Approach
Action research, particularly in its participatory form, is deeply rooted in the tradition of participatory research as illustrated by Freire (1972) and Giroux (1989). In this framework, community organisations lead in establishing and implementing interventions to bring about change, development, and improvement in their lives, acting collectively rather than individually (Cohen et al, 2018). To leverage their lived experience for transformative pedagogy, ECEC practitioners acting as researcher also have to target transformation. It's among others, a journey of personal and professional development, demonstrating how their lived experiences can develop and refine pedagogy within the daycare context. This approach aligns well with participatory research, which involves people and communities directly in the research process rather than conducting research on or for them (Cohen et al., 2018).

ECEC practitioner acting as researcher
In order to understand the rationale behind their actions, ECEC practitioners can combine research and pedagogic practice. Hewitt (2009) posited that each field of public policy is a research arena in its own right, thus, by leveraging practitioners' lived experiences through transformative pedagogy, we can explore how public policies (EYFS) regarding early years education in England, can impact children's learning and development within daycare settings.

This strategy serves as a pathway for providing effective early learning. For example upon superficial observation, the design and execution of educational programs may appear consistent, especially when a practitioner meticulously presents a well-documented children's learning journey. However, it's only upon deeper scrutiny, that gaps and inconsistencies in these programs become evident and by delving beneath the surface, we can discern irregularities in practice, particularly when assessing how practitioners monitor a child's learning progress.

These inconsistencies often times appear because practitioners can encounter difficulties in measuring a child' learning outcomes, due to their heavy reliance on 'the non-statutory guidance for the EYFS 'Development matters'(DfE,2023). As a result, when comparing children's developmental progress, it appears that practitioners are documenting similar learning journeys with only slight variations. This repetition results in generic information being recorded without consideration for the unique developmental paths of individual children. Even the DfE (2023) acknowledges that 'Development Matters' is not a long list of everything a child needs to know and do. It guides, but does not replace, professional judgement. However, the actual learning and developmental trajectories of young children is not so neat and orderly and for that reason accurate and proportionate assessment is vital to help ECEC practitioners to make informed decisions about what a child needs to learn. This misalignment hampers the efficiency and effectiveness of early learning provision, causing the potential for the neglect of the importance of valuing each child's individuality. Indeed, using action research tools, practitioners are able to critically examine inconsistencies emerging as they trace the logical progression of a child's skill acquisition. Thus, ECEC practitioners acting as researcher can seek the integration of this approach into their daily routine through a re-educational transitioning period.

ECEC practitioners transitioning as researcher
ECEC practitioners transitioning as researchers have to reconsider their interaction with children as it involves a multifaceted exploration of such interactions. Pascal and Bertram (2012) highlighted the critical role of ECEC practitioners as researchers, noting that this transition requires a thorough re-evaluation of how they engage with children, and underscores the challenges and implications of this transition, particularly in terms of rethinking and reflecting their interactions with children.

Providing practitioners with the skills and competence to become researchers means practitioners will possess competences enabling them to scrutinise internal 'maps' they are holding in their mind. The goal is to encourage practitioners to critically evaluate and reflect on their actual mental models, thus refining their practical decision-making processes and actions. Argyris and Schon (1974) explains people hold 'maps' in their head: however, the internal mental maps that people *actually* use to make practical decisions and take action, are not necessarily the same maps, that they *claim to use* in order to guide their actions. Thus, the suggestion is for practitioners to re-evaluate how the internal mental maps they are actually using to make practical decisions, are actually the same mental maps they are claiming to use in order to guide their actions. To do so, practitioners have to embark on a journey of self-re-education and introspection.   This journey will enable them to delve into their professional experiences through research, providing them the opportunity to foster a fresh perspective on ECEC. It will also encourage them to venture beyond their comfort zones, to explore novel avenues that are original, thought provoking, and capable of reshaping the discourse in the present changing world.

As a result of such re-education, ECEC practitioners as researchers have the potential to elevate their profession and make significant contributions to the field of Early Childhood Education. Elevating the role of ECEC practitioners to a professional level is necessary in today's rapidly changing world, where extensive research is conducted on Early Childhood Education, particularly regarding children's experiences in the digital age. For example, Livingstone (2014) explored how digital technologies shape children's learning, while Sutton-Smith (1997) examined the evolving nature of play and its impact on children's development. Given their close relationships with children in naturalistic settings, ECEC practitioners could actively engage in researching such topics. This kind of practitioner-led research, as emphasised by Miller and Cameron (2013), is vital for enhancing professional development and improving the quality of Early Childhood Education.

Reinventing continuous professional development

Reinventing continuous professional development is important for maintaining effectiveness and ensuring ongoing skill enhancement by serving as a catalyst for sector-wide improvement. It is imperative to not move away from traditional approaches of professional development without first evaluating their effectiveness for ECEC practitioners. For example, the provision of high-quality CPD facilitated by the Department for Education (DfE) through the development of an online training resource portal named 'EY upskill' represents a positive advancement. However, its effectiveness in addressing sector needs remains uncertain, and its adoption has been limited (Sajr and Bonetti 2023). One potential explanation could be that this CPD approach may not sufficiently empower ECEC practitioners, and the knowledge acquired from these trainings may not always align with the needs and perspectives in their real-world childcare setting. Therefore, before exploring potential solutions of CPD, it is essential to invest time in thoroughly understanding the challenges associated with continuous professional development.

Empowering Practitioners to lead their learning

Spillane and Clarkin-Phillips (2009) advocate for a distributed leadership approach to professional development: enabling practitioners to lead their own learning and providing space to engage in discourse that could significantly improve provision. Distributed leadership will bring about the formation of discourses which in turn allows for ECEC practitioners to influence and contribute authentically to the growing discourses surrounding Early Childhood Education. Distributed leadership can serve as a key driver in building a new model that promotes discourses that go on to generate not just a practitioner's reflection of their practices, but also a powerful tool for developing new pedagogical approaches.

Foucault (1972) examined discourse as a system of representation, focusing on the rules and practices that create meaningful statements and shape knowledge. Drawing from Foucault's perspective, ECEC practitioners who embrace their roles as researchers can generate insights that reflect their understanding of early learning, thereby playing an important role in reshaping the discourse surrounding Early Childhood Education. Similarly, Smith's (1998) viewed discourse as a product of how individuals generate meaning through activities like talking and writing within specific contexts.

The formation of discourse around early learning in naturalistic settings, such as daycare, offers a valuable pathway for ECEC practitioners to develop structured knowledge. Inspired by Smith's (1998) perspective, ECEC practitioners can cultivate structured knowledge through activities such as talking, writing, and reflecting, supported by action research and reflective practice within naturalistic environments. This process not only empowers ECEC practitioners, but also fosters the development of transformative pedagogies.

Empowering ECEC practitioners to lead their own practice-based research enables them to create and engage with discourses that emerge from their lived experiences. These reflections, when well-structured, can give rise to discourses that inform and inspire contemporary ideas in early learning. Because these practitioners develop these ideas in collaboration with children in naturalistic environments, the resulting knowledge is likely to be more accurate and relevant than that generated by individuals removed from practical, everyday experiences with children.

This practice-based research approach fosters a deeper professional understanding, transforming practitioners from mere technicians into reflective professionals capable of influencing and shaping the field. By embracing their role as researchers and drawing on their lived experiences, ECEC practitioners not only enhance their professional development but also become better equipped to cultivate children's cultural capital, ensuring that professional development is continuous and grounded in real-world practice.

Conclusion
Empowering practitioners to lead their own professional development through action research and reflective practice encourages the generation of new, transformative pedagogic knowledge. By deeply engaging with their lived experiences, practitioners become researchers who critically evaluate and innovate daily practice within their settings. This dual role enables them to conduct "living enquiries" and continuously reflect on improving their practices. Ultimately, they can better understand and support each child's unique developmental path, moving beyond generic documentation to more individualised and meaningful learning journeys.

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