

# Northumbria Research Link

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(This article brings together the Early Years Educator foci on intergenerational activity, outdoor play and early years pedagogy)

**Title: Early Years' Educators and University Researchers working as co-researchers, investigating an aspect of practice (1700 words)**

### ***Practitioner Research and development***

The notion of Early Years Practitioners engaging in their own professional development through research is well documented and is gaining in popularity (Pascal and Bertram, 2012; Leggett and Newman, 2019). However, there is room for further improvement in developing 'authentic participatory methodology' (Newman and Leggett, 2019, p.121) across the sector which can critique practice, engage with new knowledge, and create sustainable change.

Through engagement in research, practitioners do not only evaluate practice and improve their provision, but they can also gain personal and professional satisfaction. Of course, while practitioners may have a desire to engage in research and improve practice, some do not know where to start. Many begin their research journey while studying at university, yet others have not had that experience. In addition, some graduates seek further learning. It is vital that such opportunities are created and explored.

The example shared in this article features one nursery in the north of England which regularly searches for unique professional development to extend the learning for children, and for practitioners. Building upon the professional relationship between management and university lecturer, initial exploratory discussions led to engagement in a participatory action research project (Kemmis et al., 2014) which aimed to evaluate current practice and support professional development. This became an opportunity for appraising current literature and research and embarking upon authentic practitioner-led research.

The ethos of the participating nursery is one of development for all, in line with their Reggio-inspired philosophy (Malaguzzi, 1993) and co-operative nature. Practitioners are encouraged to view themselves as professionals specialising in Early Years while opportunities for development are sought which mirror the pedagogy, and are research-informed, rather than experimenting with fads (Webster, 2019). Six educators chose to become co-researchers in the research project. This does not mean that others were excluded, but that their interests lay elsewhere.

The six practitioner co-researchers were qualified to work with young children, ranging from level 3 to degree level, and had a range of experience in the sector. All demonstrated an eagerness to provide the best learning opportunities for the children and families in their care.

### ***Making the Research Happen - Implementation of a Research Circle***

A Research Circle, inspired by Persson (2009), was formed for co-researchers to investigate both areas of strength and those for development within the nursery. This Research Circle created an arena for planning, development of the research questions, recruitment of participants, critical reflection, and later analysis of the data. It ran for six months prior to the research commencing, weekly through the six-week research phase and sporadically thereafter until the analysis was complete.

Investment in the research was required by the setting to enable participation. Time was allocated for regular meetings, although these motivated practitioners also used their own time on occasions. Between meetings the practitioners shared reading material on the subject to maintain momentum. Time is valuable, and the investment by co-researchers should not be underestimated, yet the impact of the research far outweighed the initial investment.

Practitioner co-researchers engaged in each stage of the research to varying degrees. Participation built upon their strengths, challenged their thinking, and motivated them to plan for and critique new ways of working. It was important to adhere to the setting's philosophy, and to plan activity which was within the best interests and developmental needs of the children. Consideration was given to child-led play, freedom of choice and outdoor natural environments, all benefits discussed by Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) in their Forest School research.

Within the Research Circle a decision was made to focus upon the evaluation and development of the setting's outdoor activity which had recently extended to an offsite Forest School provision (Doyle and Milchem, 2012). This discussion space afforded the group time to problem solve and to engage in wider reading, and critique articles (such as Burke, 2019; Yasunaga et al., 2016, Vanderven, 2011), leading to a particular interest in intergenerational

activity within outdoor learning. Co-researchers agreed that the aim of the research would be to investigate the inclusion of older adults in the lives of young children within the urban Forest School environment, focusing upon interactions, knowledge exchange and benefits. Not only did this take recent research and good practice into consideration, but it was also a feasible project, one which utilised current practice and extended thinking and practice.

### ***Intergenerational activity in the informal outdoor environment***

Leading an intergenerational research project was a novel focus as much intergenerational activity read about until then, save Place-Based Education (Mannion et al., 2010; Mannion, 2012), had been of sedentary and indoor activity, possibly reflecting the perceived limitations of older adults and ease of organisation.

It was at this point, and despite an initial enthusiasm to participate, that the actual embarkation into the world of research became scary for the practitioners. They were excited to be involved yet had many fears. Unsupported, this could have led to them dropping out of the process. They feared recruitment may not occur, or that older adults may not engage with the children, among other worries. These aspects are also familiar to university researchers as deciding to undertake research does not necessarily mean success. Yet, the barriers were perceived rather than actual and were lowered by continued engagement in research and practice.

The university researcher and co-researcher practitioners worked in partnership to recruit, interview and welcome older adult participants (aged over 70) who were not related to the children. Forest School activity was managed as part of the practitioner's usual practice. They also took responsibility for preparing twelve children aged 3 and 4 years for research and supported them to participate in the research and to make sense of their experiences. Further details of this preparatory phase are found in the reference list (Heslop, 2019) and discussed by Atkins and Duckworth (2019).



*Young children, practitioners and older adult working alongside each other in the urban Forest School*

### ***Implementation of the research project***

This newly formed group of adventurers; co-researchers, young children, and non-related older adults, set off to explore the woods. To determine how the older adults and young children interacted, what knowledge they exchanged and what the benefits were for the participants, a raft of authentic data collection methods, were used.

While the university researcher recorded her own observations, practitioners also kept observations which were shared in Research Circles and aided confirmation of events. The recruited older adults had 'forest notebooks' which informed their later interviews. In addition, children developed floorbooks (Warden, 2015) with their educators at nursery and re-enacted their learning through play while a blog was established by practitioners and children to share experiences with their families.



Floorbook reflection: *'This is Emily. She's happy. These are her shoes. I like Emily, she's nice'*

An iterative cycle of critical reflection took place within and beyond the Research Circle which enabled understanding and growth for all participants. Had the university researcher been working alone, they would have missed out on valuable data as interpretations and learning often occurred away from the field.

Data were analysed thematically by the co-researchers, resulting in four main findings, relating to the different forms of participation which emerged and their value for those involved: affective participation, collaborative participation, learning through intergenerational participation and challenging participation (Heslop, 2019). The research indicates that investment in well-planned intergenerational relationships, where older adults and young children *choose* to engage with each other, is key to subsequent learning for both age groups. Furthermore, non-formal places afford a relaxed atmosphere, and it is there where trust, essential for reciprocity in opportunities for challenge, can grow.

In addition, the middle generation, the practitioner co-researchers, can benefit by learning new perspectives, developing their reflective practice, and enhancing their professionalism.

### ***In reflection***

Time to reflect post fieldwork is essential, yet in day-to-day practice there is rarely enough time to share in professional dialogue. Once again, the structure of the Research Circle provided a flexible, safe, dialogical space, and time, for the reflections to take place. To the co-researchers the Research Circle was at the heart of the research.

It is important to expect the unexpected as engaging in research may challenge thinking, beliefs, or practice. This can result in adapting or creating policies or may even cause discomfort, and through Research Circles these concerns can be explored. Despite the challenges encountered, the co-researchers identified the value of engaging in research. Jane recognised how Research Circles helped her to 'try out new ideas and not be afraid to ask questions or get involved in discussions' while Diane highlighted how 'involvement in projects like this with a researcher could be the way forward for Early Years Practitioners'. Lisa informed of a subsequent intergenerational allotment project that the setting spontaneously developed following this research.

The potential benefits of intergenerational practice for all (Burke, 2019; Kernan and Cortellesi, 2020; Heslop, 2021) are known, and this research suggests that opportunities should be sought to involve older adults in the lives of young children within early childhood education, particularly within informal outdoor places such as Forest School.

In these times of COVID, our children have been removed from their grandparents and older friends for extended periods and those relationships may need to be rebuilt. As the outdoors is a marginally safer COVID environment (UNICEF, 2020), as well as an age-friendly environment (Steels, 2015), perhaps this is where we can undertake some of our intergenerational activity as we begin to rebuild.

Overall, this project was robust, ethical, empirical research which has contributed to knowledge in outdoor learning, intergenerational learning and Early Years practice... but it also had all characteristics of effective CPD for the practitioners including an 'explicit focus on practice... linking theory to practice...active learning and collective participation' (Mathers, 2020, p.4). This highlights that opportunities should be sought for practitioners and researchers to work together and to do this, the implementation of a Research Circle (Persson, 2009) can be a useful space for the implementation of practitioner research.

## Key Points

1. Seek opportunities to engage in practitioner research, beginning with your own practice and perhaps engage with a university researcher. Research Circles could support this process.
2. Engaging in practitioner research is also an opportunity for continuing professional development.
3. Early Years Provision and Education in general, should consider how they can embrace all-age learning within informal outdoor contexts as there can be mutual benefits for all.

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**Extra photos – with permission**

*Child and older adult working together*

