Final Report

Understanding practitioners' curriculum decision-making to support complexity in children's play in a multi-diverse pre-school setting

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Aneni's dinosaurs

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Summary

This collaborative research aimed to investigate how practitioners understood complexity in play to inform their curriculum decision-making and pedagogical approaches in two multi-diverse early years settings in England. Drawing upon Froebelian principles and the concepts of funds of knowledge, children's interests and working theories, we explored the connectedness of young children's lives at home and in two early years settings. The concept of 'Funds of knowledge' (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005) recognises the diverse everyday knowledge and experiences that children bring from their participation in family and community activities. Working theories (Hedges, 2021) encapsulate the many ways in which children draw upon personal and social experiences and make connections with new experiences to make sense of the world. Combining these concepts provided a conceptual framework that has enabled us to reflect deeply upon children's interests and to recognise complexity in children's play and interactions. Through focused observations of play and reflective dialogues with parents and practitioners, we have identified examples of funds of knowledge and interests that children amass from their diverse home practices and life contexts. The findings exemplify how everyday experiences were central to the interests and inquiries that children explored and expressed in their play repertoires. Children's interests and inquiries offer rich potential for co-constructing a dynamic curriculum that is built upon Froebelian principles of belonging and unity. However, the project identified some challenges for developing a curriculum that has relevance for children's diverse interests and experiences within a national policy context that is driven by predetermined learning goals.

Key findings

1. **Recognising and valuing complexity in play.** Sensitive observation of play required adults to become attuned to children's multiple forms of expression. Children expressed their interests and ideas through engagement with materials, gestures, movement, talk, mime, markmaking, rhythm, music and digital technologies.

2. **Reflecting on complexity in play.** Reflection and dialogue between practitioners and families were key to understanding how the interests and ideas that children explored in their play connected with their everyday lives at home. We found that children's interests were frequently generated from an interweaving of children's participation in:

   - **Multi-generational family practices**, including food preparation, caring for siblings, hobbies, and religious practices.
   - **Multilingual communicative practices** in home, community and religious contexts.
   - **Popular culture**, including television, film and related digital media.

Responding to complexity in play within curriculum decision-making. The findings indicate that practitioners were committed to recognising and valuing children's interests to enable them to co-construct a dynamic and responsive curriculum. However, curriculum decision-making was informed by a linear model of learning that required practitioners to foreground children's progress towards the statutory Early Learning Goals (DfE, 2017) within the English Early Years Foundation Stage framework. This posed challenges for practitioners' capacity to recognise and respond to the complex ideas, inquiries and interests that children explored in their play. Given the global emphasis upon predetermined learning outcomes and linear notions of progress, these findings have relevance for curriculum policy and practice in England and beyond.

Introduction

We locate this research in Froebelian principles and contemporary sociocultural perspectives of play as the leading activity of the period of early childhood. We extend the concept of play as a leading activity by exploring what constitutes complexity and diversity in children's play, focusing on practitioners, children and families in two multi-diverse early years settings in England.

The project aimed to identify the complexity of children's language, communicative and cultural resources, how these are used in play, how practitioners' use this knowledge to inform their curriculum, and how they conceptualise curriculum content and coherence. A review of UK-based research on play (Wood and Chesworth, 2017) noted a focus on pedagogical approaches in ECE, but with less attention to how practitioners plan and make decisions about the curriculum, specifically how curriculum is conceived and understood in settings, what sources of knowledge practitioners draw upon, and how they connect their curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches. The focus of this project is significant because there is consistent evidence of tensions between the instrumental approaches that the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework promotes, the child-centred approaches that practitioners value and Froebel's principles. Wood (2010) characterises these two approaches as the cultural transmission/directive approach that reflects adults' plans and purposes, and the emergent/responsive approach that focuses on children's purposes and meanings. The EYFS guidance claims to value child-initiated and adult-led play, but veers towards a cultural transmission/directive approach in terms of ensuring that play is 'planned and purposeful'. The curriculum is conceived as goals or outcomes that must be 'delivered' by practitioners through planning activities that will enable children to achieve the Early Learning Goals and demonstrate 'school readiness'. Children's freely chosen play is less likely to produce the 'evidence' required to demonstrate progress towards universal learning goals (Chesworth, 2019). This may contribute to practitioners leaning towards a cultural transmission/directive approach that reflects 'planned and purposeful' play, with less attention to children's freely chosen play. Children's, and practitioners' potentially complex and diverse sources of knowledge, understanding and ways of knowing do not become part of everyday planning and enactment of curriculum. Thus, the EYFS, and its associated assessment demands, run counter to Froebel's principles about the holistic nature of development.

This research is informed by alternative ways of conceptualising curriculum (Wood and Hedges, 2016) that value diversities, promote inclusion, and reflect the holistic nature of development. This conceptualisation understands curriculum as being developed and enacted through dynamic working practices that involve complex and ethical questions. Reflecting Froebel's principles, we ground this proposal in close observations of children, professional dialogue, and reflective conversations. Theoretically, we have linked Froebel's ideas about play with contemporary theories of learning that utilise funds of knowledge, to understand and value children's interests (Chesworth, 2016). This framework recognises that many people are involved in creating, living and experiencing the curriculum in early

years settings. Hedges and Cooper (2016) have built upon the concept of funds of knowledge (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005) to incorporate children's heritages and languages, and to validate diverse approaches to learning in early childhood. We consider that play is linked to children's identities, agency and sense of their own capabilities (Hedges, 2020), that play offers many perspectives for meaning making, and that play is a resource for diverse cultural approaches to learning.

Project objectives

1. To understand practitioners' current funds of knowledge and how these inform their approaches to curriculum planning and decision-making (Project set-up meeting; collaborative dialogue with practitioners and centre director; review of curriculum planning documents).

2. To show how practitioners identify children's funds of knowledge, working theories and interests in their freely-chosen play activities (Paired observations and dialogue between researcher/s and practitioner/s).

3. To describe how practitioners use this knowledge in their curriculum decision-making and planning (Planning-focused reflective conversations).

4. To conceptualise how complexity and diversities intersect in play in a multi-diverse setting, via multi-vocal and multi-modal forms of communication and interactions (Reflective research conversations with practitioners and families, using images and planning documentation).

5. To propose new ideas and approaches that can inform policy and practice with regard to diverse and complex manifestations of play in multi-cultural communities (Data analysis, reflective conversations in end of project meeting).

6. To disseminate the outcomes of this research for developing inclusive and responsive approaches to curriculum planning, pedagogy and provision (Data analysis, impact and dissemination).

Research questions

1. What are practitioners' current funds of knowledge and how do these inform their approaches to curriculum planning and decision-making?

2. How do practitioners identify children's funds of knowledge, working theories and interests in their freely-chosen play activities?

3. In what ways do practitioners use this knowledge in their curriculum decision-making and planning?

4. How do complexity and diversities intersect in play in a multi-diverse setting, via multi-vocal and multi-modal forms of communication and interactions?

5. What new ideas and approaches emerge that can inform policy and practice with regard to diverse and complex manifestations of play in multi-diverse communities?

6. What are the implications of this research for developing inclusive and responsive approaches to curriculum planning, pedagogy and provision?

Methodology

The research design was informed by 'close-to-practice' research methodologies (Wyse et al., 2018), an approach advocated by the British Education Research Association (BERA) for the scope it affords to address current issues in practice and involve university-based researchers working in collaboration with practitioners. Drawing upon an interpretivist research framing, we understood knowledge as being socially constructed, mediated and situated amongst people, places, events and materials. The project incorporated a range of qualitative data generation methods including reflective dialogues, photographic documentation and shared observations of child-initiated play, fieldnotes, and extracts from curriculum planning documentation. The research design incorporated flexibility in the focus of the reflective dialogues and research conversations as responses evolved over time with practitioners and families/caregivers. Informed by close to practice values, we framed the research as a collaborative project in which early years practitioners were co-researchers who gave their consent for settings to be named in the report and other outputs.

Introduction to the settings
Phase 1 of the project focused upon the preschool room in Ellesmere Children's Centre (ECC), Sheffield. ECC is a multi-diverse setting, with multilingual staff, children and families, with16 languages currently being spoken, and a high percentage of children with SEN. ECC serves a diverse community of established and newcomer families in an area of the city that is classified as economically disadvantaged. The centre places a strong emphasis on community relationships. Ten children, aged 3-4 years, were involved in the project.

Phase 2 focused upon the Early Years Foundation Stage at Wingfield Primary School, Greenwich. The majority of children who attend the school are from minoritised ethnic groups and a large majority of children speak English as an additional language. The EYFS provision comprises two nursery classes and two reception classes. The head teacher is committed to re-addressing deficit constructions of diversity and is keen to build a culture of research throughout the school. Practitioner co-researchers were invited to select up to five children in each class to be involved in the project.

Phase One: Ellesmere Children's Centre

Stage 1 March 2018:

Following ethical approval from the University of Sheffield, the Research Assistant (RA), Aderonke Folorunsho, spent two weeks in the preschool room at Ellesmere Children's Centre (ECC), establishing relationships with the children, practitioners and families and becoming familiar with everyday routines, policies and practices. This initial stage of relationship building was pivotal to the research team's commitment to ethical approaches which were underpinned by respectful engagement, negotiation and responsiveness to participants' priorities and concerns. During this relationship-building period, Aderonke liaised with the preschool practitioners to identify ten focus children who reflected the diverse cultural and linguistic heritages within the local community. She organised informal meetings with the ten children's parents to discuss the project and to invite them to give their informed consent to participate in the research. The University of Sheffield (UoS) research team met the practitioners at ECC team and introduced the project's underpinning concepts of funds of knowledge, working theories, children's interests and Froebel's principles. We reviewed current approaches to curriculum planning in the preschool room at ECC.

Stage 2 April-July 2018:

During this period of data generation, 125 episodes of play were observed, focusing upon freely chosen play involving one or more of the ten focus children. The timing and duration of the observations was flexible to capture the flow and momentum of play and spanned between ten and forty five minutes. Building work was ongoing throughout the data generation period and this meant that the children were not able to have access to outdoor play as frequently as usual. As a result, the majority of observations focused upon episodes of indoor play. Each of the observations was transcribed and, when relevant, photographs and samples of the children's drawings, paintings and markmaking were collected to contextualise the observations and to use in reflective conversations with practitioners and parents. We had originally planned for each observation to involve a practitioner and the RA, with Professional Dialogues taking place during the observation to elicit what practitioners are noticing about children in their play. However, practical constraints meant that it was often not possible for dialogues to take place during the observations. Instead, we adopted a flexible approach and often conducted the dialogues later in the day when the practitioners could be released to leave the preschool room. Funding was allocated to ECC for supply cover to enable the practitioners' participation in the project. The Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator participated in a sample of the observations and dialogues to ensure familiarity with the data and the efficacy of the methods.

Stage 3 June-July 2018:

The RA and a member of the preschool team met with the parents of the focus children, using the observations of play and selected photographs/samples of the child's markmaking, to discuss parents' insights into their child's funds of knowledge in relation to family practices. These conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed. The meetings took place at ECC and were organised flexibly to reflect parents' availability, commitments and preferences. One parent was unable to participate due to the family making an extended visit to relatives.

Stage 4 August-November 2018:
In this stage we began by undertaking an initial analysis of the data, drawing upon observations, professional dialogues and conversations with parents to identify the children's funds of knowledge, characteristics of the children's working theories and the sources of children's interests. The findings arising from the initial analysis were documented on posters (one per child) which were used as prompts for reflective dialogues with the practitioners in the preschool room. The original purpose of these meetings was to discuss how the observations were used to inform curriculum decision-making about play and planning for individuals and groups of children. However, it became apparent that there was also a need to reflect upon some of the challenges for responding to children's funds of knowledge and working theories, specifically in relation to the assessment and monitoring requirements of the EYFS. The research team visited ECC for a final meeting to focus upon collective reflective conversations about the data, reflecting on the concepts of working theories, children's interests and funds of knowledge. Practical constraints meant that not all practitioners were able to attend. Nevertheless, the meeting was an opportunity to consider how the team at ECC might build upon the project and draw upon the underpinning concepts and principles within their practice.

Stage 5 December 2018 – February 2019 (with impact/dissemination activities ongoing, as detailed in section 9)
The original proposal was to re-present the data, using visual methods to map practitioners' decision-making in relation to the EYFS goals, to the children, and to wider ECC goals. This element of the project was adapted to focus upon how research conversations with children, parents and practitioners made visible the diverse ways in which the children's home practices connected with the ideas and themes they explored in their freely chosen play.

Phase 2: Wingfield Primary School
Phase two incorporated findings from phase 1 that we used to inform the research design and methods. The overarching objective was to identify inclusive and responsive approaches to curriculum -making, informed by recognition of children's interests and inquiries as signs of complexity in play. This phase took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and dialogues between university- and school-based members of the research team took place online.

Stage 1: April 2021
Introductory meeting. This meeting provided an overview of the project, an introduction to the conceptual framework and agreement of the methods. The project aims, ethics and timeline were discussed and agreed. Drawing upon Boivin et al.'s (2014) points about collaborative research, the aim of this preliminary meeting was to establish an ethos for research relationships that foreground dialogue and reciprocity in order to support:
- *Credibility,* in which all participants' contributions are valued sources of knowledge
- *Legitimacy*: clarity and agreement regarding the terms of participation (for example, teachers will be reassured that their role in the project is to share their personal practice experiences, not to represent all teachers in the EYFS
- *Power*: all participants (school- and university-based) have an entitlement to influence decisions and outcomes within the project, and to know how to do so.

Stage 2: May – June 2021
Practitioners were invited to identify a set of research questions that incorporated the overarching project aims and reflected the current priorities and foci within each of the class bases. Following this, practitioners documented their day-to-day experiences of observing and responding to children's interests in their curriculum decision-making.

Stage 3: May – June 2021
Running alongside the classroom documentation, Chesworth and Wood used Google Meet for reflective dialogues with practitioners, focusing on curriculum decision-making and guided by teachers' documentation. Reflective memos (Blumenreich, 2016) were used to facilitate reflection and dialogue.

Stage 4: July 2021
Members of the research team (school- and university-based) met online to share, review and agree provisional analysis to address the research aims and guiding questions.

Ethical considerations

The project was submitted to the University of Sheffield Ethical review procedures and was informed by UoS and BERA principles for ethical research. Ethical approval was agreed before commencing any fieldwork. All data has been anonymised and pseudonyms have been used for all children. Participants were able to withdraw consent at any time and ask for all their data to be removed from the project. Photos produced in practitioners' documentation did not include any images in which children can be identified. The practitioners who participated in the project were co-researchers and therefore have the right to be identified as such within any research outputs. However, all participants had the right to remain anonymous if they preferred to do so.

We do not see ethics as a 'point in time' approval, but as an ongoing process of critical reflection and negotiation throughout the project. As such, our decisions were informed by respect for children's rights to privacy and sensitivity to the network of relationships that were already established between families and practitioners. For example, we noticed that 3-year old Mohammed often pretended to be a princess and chose to wear a sparkly dress from the nursery dressing up box. Mohammed's father had previously expressed disapproval of this interest and practitioners were engaged in conversations with the family to raise awareness of gender, identity and equality in relation to children's play choices. In such instances we were sensitive in selecting which observations we shared with parents, prioritising children's privacy and participatory rights to be themselves in the safe space that constituted their experiences in the nursery. Examples such as this raise complex ethical issues. The purpose of this research was to recognise, value and be responsive to the diverse interests and identities that children expressed in their play at nursery. However, in cases such as Mohammed's we were concerned that sharing observations with parents could become an act of surveillance, imposing upon children's privacy and undermining practitioners' ongoing actions to challenge prejudice. Such actions arose from a long history

of building trust and collaboration between families and practitioners and we were mindful that our intervention as outsiders, however well intentioned, could unravel these relationships and cause more harm than good.

Phase two took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and our adjustments to the research design were informed by the University of Sheffield policy for safe and ethical online research. For example, we set up a secure, password protected university-managed file store for sharing documentation of practitioners' classroom observations. Reflective dialogues with practitioners took place on Google Meet, selected in line with university policy for its security features and accessibility. An updated ethics application was submitted to gain institutional approval for these necessary changes before fieldwork began.

Analysis

Data analysis was cumulative, with each stage building on initial findings and lines of inquiry. Reflective dialogues in phases one and two were recorded and transcribed and combined with our fieldnotes, reflective memos, photographic documentation of children's play and extracts from curriculum planning. The process of analysis involved combining these multiple sources of data, identifying key findings by moving iteratively between the initial research questions and the insights that evolved through our research discussions and dialogues. In addition to the findings that are summarised below, we worked with an animator and a graphic designer to present the findings using visual images (Appendix 1) to enhance accessibility and promote engagement with the research insights. The findings are presented in relation to the two distinct phases of the project.

Phase 1 findings

1. Understanding practitioners' current funds of knowledge and how these inform their approaches to curriculum planning and decision-making
The project methodology enabled us to gain in-depth understanding of practitioners' funds of knowledge and to identify how their knowledge facilitated the development of respectful relationships with children and families. At the time of the research, the ECC staff team spoke a total of thirteen languages and reflected the diverse cultural heritages of the local community. This enabled the practitioners to bring insight of family cultures, values and understandings to their daily practice. Funds of knowledge were therefore shared more readily through the created environments that prioritized positive representation and relevance for the children and families who attended the setting. We found less explicit evidence to indicate how this knowledge was utilised in curriculum planning and we argue that this can be explained by the powerful influence of the EYFS Early Years Outcomes, as discussed below. However, the data offers exemplification of the significance of practitioners' funds of knowledge in facilitating culturally sensitive interpretations of the children's freely chosen play. For example, the team reflected on how one practitioner's familiarity with the process of making chapatti enabled her to recognise the significance of a child playing with playdough and slapping thin discs of dough between the palms of her hands. Furthermore, our reflective dialogues with practitioners also drew attention to the

importance of practitioners' familiarity with popular culture. For example, Sarah, a practitioner in the preschool room, noticed that Aderonke's (RA) knowledge of the film 'Black Panther' enabled her to recognize the character that Elian was pretending to be in his imaginative play. This insight enabled Aderonke to tune into Elian's play and prompted a conversation in which Elian explored a working theory about fighting, survival and death.

2. Identifying children's funds of knowledge, working theories and interests in their freely-chosen play activities

The paired observations and reflective conversations with practitioners enabled the ECC team to notice the multimodality of children's expressions of knowledge and the embodied characteristics of their interests and inquiries. This aspect of the children's playful meaning-making is discussed below in relation to objective four. Extended time for engaging in reflection and dialogue enabled practitioners to shift their gaze away from the Early Years Outcomes and to adopt new lenses for interpreting the children's play and interactions. During a research conversation towards the end of the project, Dana reflected that,

> 'it isn't just about verbal communication. The children express themselves in so many countless different ways… There's children who have such complex ideas, can't articulate them whether that be because they can't speak English, or whether that be because they're dual language…But through their play or their artistic expression you can see the ideas that they're kind of putting out there.'

Dialogue with parents was key to understanding the significance of the children's non-verbal modes of expression. Sharing observations of play with parents prompted conversations about family practices and enabled the practitioners and the research team to identify the funds of knowledge that children brought to their play. We acknowledge that what we chose to share with parents was subjective and that sharing different observations could have generated different insights. However, dialogue with the practitioners enabled our decisions regarding what to share to be grounded in a holistic and relational knowledge of the children. Whilst practitioners engaged with the concept of funds of knowledge, we found that the concept of working theories was less accessible. This indicates that practitioners would benefit from further CPD opportunities focusing upon working theories and how they can be used to inform responsive modes of curriculum planning.

3. Responsive curriculum decision-making

There was some variation in the extent to which practitioners used children's funds of knowledge, working theories and interests in their decision-making and planning. Some interests were readily incorporated into the preschool room's curriculum plans. For example, Aneni had developed a strong interest in dinosaurs through watching the National Geographic channel at home with his dad. He was particularly interested in naming the dinosaurs and comparing their strengths and features. This interest was made visible in his play, markmaking and conversations at nursery. In response, the practitioners planned a range of adult-led and playful experiences to extend Aneni's interest in dinosaurs. In another example, the practitioners' observed that Mohammed was keen to wear the recently introduced princess dressing up clothes. The team noticed some children's negative reactions, exemplified by one child's comment that 'you can't wear that dress, that dress is

for girls, are you not a girl'. In response, Sarah used a selection of storybooks as a stimulus for talking about diverse gender roles, identities, and preferences.

Whilst practitioners used their knowledge of Aneni and Mohammed in their planning, Elian's sustained interest in (play) fighting was accepted in preschool but was not used to inform curriculum decision-making. The reflective conversation with Elian's mother demonstrated that Elian's interest was associated with his dad being a boxer. Elian and his dad enjoyed play fighting at home and this constituted an important aspect of their relationship. Children explore a spectrum of emotions, relationships and experiences in their play, prompting the need for further reflection upon how practitioners can value and respond to interests that might not align with practitioners' funds of knowledge or national curriculum priorities.

Furthermore, we are mindful that funds of knowledge are not restricted to positive experiences. The reflective dialogues with practitioners highlighted that some children also brought 'dark' funds of knowledge (Zipin, 2009) from difficult lived experiences into the nursery. For example, dark funds of knowledge could be associated with bereavement, or the direct and indirect effects of families seeking asylum from violence, persecution or conflict. The setting was attuned and sensitive to these aspects of children's lives and has recently developed a transcultural play and emotional therapy centre which builds upon this aspect of its work with children and families.

The research findings draw attention to the significance of the national policy context for the Early Years Foundation Stage and the influences it had upon practitioners' approaches to assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. In particular, the findings highlight the external pressures associated with the requirement to monitor progress towards the ELGs. The children in the preschool room had daily opportunities for play, and practitioners indicated that the availability of flexible resources enabled them to explore a range of interests and inquiries in their play. At the same time, practitioners' curriculum decision-making was, by necessity, informed by the linear model of learning associated with progression towards the EYFS Early Learning Goals. This sometimes limited practitioners' capacity to realise the potential and complexity of play that was illuminated by the project's lenses of funds of knowledge, interests and working theories. As such, we conclude that the assessment and monitoring practices in the EYFS constitute a reductionist construction of play which does not align with Froebelian concepts of wholeness and unity. As one practitioner commented:

> 'I think a lot of practitioners kind of always have in the back of their head about children's development [the Early Years Outcomes] and children's next steps and what statements have they met, what statements haven't they met, and is that, like it's a question, is that affecting the activities you plan? And then additionally, like when you think about Ofsted and the regulations in your data tracking and cohort and things like that'

The practitioners identified that their participation in the research had enabled them to reflect upon the influence of the EYFS progress monitoring requirements and identified some instances in which this linear framework had limited the lens through which they observed and responded to children's play. One member of the team reflected on a child's

working theory about hair colour and commented 'there's quite a lot of knowledge in there of what they actually look at, what they pick up, what they're identifying. But do we dismiss all that, concentrating on the 'to do' list?' Another practitioner added to the conversation, highlighting that children's funds of knowledge, working theories and interests might go unnoticed if they did not relate directly to a 'statement on the EYFS'.

4. Conceptualising how complexity and diversities intersect in play in a multi-diverse setting, via multi-vocal and multi-modal forms of communication and interactions.

The research findings indicate that complexity in play was characterised by a bricolage of experiences and interests that children brought into the nursery, including their participation in family practices, their multi-lingual repertoires and their engagement with popular culture. Our observations indicate that the children did not always use spoken language in their peer-to-peer interactions. Because competence in spoken English was not a shared characteristic of the preschool play culture, children expressed their ideas through their engagement with materials, through body language and movement. However, the plurality of experiences and languages did not act as a barrier to togetherness in play. Instead, children used non-verbal modes of communication to connect with peers and to make visible their intentions. For example, we noticed that the children frequently used malleable materials, sand and soil to engage in food preparation and that the sharing of pretend food was used as a means of connecting with peers:

> 'When they 'cook', they like to share with each other, like a family, by announcing *who would like to eat*? Whoever is interested is automatically invited to their play. Sometimes some of the children would serve what they have prepared in plates and take it round the classroom and the other children would pretend to have a taste.' (RA field notes).

The reflective dialogues with parents identified that this element of play reflected the social importance of food in many of the children's families. Therefore, the sharing of food could be seen as a source of common or similar funds of knowledge which could be reconstructed in play. The ECC team has identified this as a significant finding and they intend to use this as a basis for future curriculum development and planning.

The research findings indicate that the play culture in the preschool room was simultaneously connected with, and distinct from, the adult world. Many of our observations show how the children's play reconstructed familiar family practices associated with food preparation, caring for siblings, shared hobbies, and religious practices. At the same time, play also provided a space for children to 'disconnect' with family practices by taking on different roles, disrupting traditional values or by drawing upon alternative sources of knowledge, including popular culture. Consequently, our findings indicate that children are actively constructing culture and that sociocultural practices, beliefs and values are complex, dynamic and fluid. Theoretically, the research therefore makes an original contribution to understanding play as a site not only for making meaning of funds of knowledge, but also for enacting and making sense of funds of identity (Estaban-Guitart and Moll, 2014).

Phase 1 summary

Phase 1 of the project highlighted the importance of investigating the complexities and nuances of children's everyday lives, and their significance for the development of curriculum models which embrace Froebelian principles of wholeness and unity in contemporary childhoods. Our commitment to following a flexible, negotiated research design has been key to the successful completion of this project, as has the RA's ability and willingness to embrace nursery life and become a fully-fledged, temporary member of the preschool team. The Ellesmere team was proactive in introducing the RA to children and families and this was pivotal to how quickly and easily she gained the trust of parents and bonded with the children in the group.

ECC is a busy setting and the research project has run alongside the practitioners' ongoing commitments associated with day-to-day practice. The university- and centre-based members of the research team share a conviction that children's immediate needs and well-being must always take priority over the research schedule. This meant that it was sometimes challenging to get the relevant people involved in order to embed the emerging research findings into everyday curriculum making practice. For example, we had initially hoped that practitioners would consider adapting their curriculum plans to incorporate funds of knowledge and working theories alongside their mapping of the Early Years Outcomes. In reality, planning continued as usual with the research dialogues running alongside familiar and embedded practices. The practitioners in the preschool room were working within a tight timescale to complete transition reports for the children moving to school and, understandably, their accountability for children's progress towards statutory learning goals was given priority. At the same time, the reflective dialogues revealed practitioners' deep knowledge of, and respect for, the everyday lives of children and families who attended the centre. This signals potential for what Aoki (1993) refers to as curriculum making 'in the middle' in which the statutory curriculum is interwoven with the 'lived' curriculum to inform learning that has meaning and relevance for children's lives.

Phase 2 findings

Insights from the first phase of the project have enabled us to adjust the research design for phase 2. Whilst maintaining the initial research objectives as an overarching framework, we collaborated with practitioners to devise bespoke research questions that reflected the distinct priorities and characteristics of each class base. These questions informed a cyclical process of action research in which practitioners planned and introduced small changes to practice with regular opportunities for shared reflection and dialogue with members of the research team. These meetings also enabled us to identify key themes across the dataset (recorded reflective dialogues, reflective memos and practitioners' documentation of changes to practice). These themes are discussed below.

Planning for change

Reflective dialogues with practitioners highlighted the influence of Covid-19 upon their curriculum making practices. The practitioners talked about the ways in which periods of

lockdown and social distancing restrictions had impacted upon opportunities to establish reciprocal relationships with children's families. As one practitioner noted,

> 'Normally we visit new children before they join, do home visits and meet families at the start of the school year. It gives you a glimpse into life at home and a chance to get to know children and their parents. Obviously we've missed out on that this year'

These restrictions have resulted in fewer opportunities to build a curriculum with relevance for children's diverse interests and experiences. In response, practitioners in each class base worked with Chesworth and Wood to identify a series of questions to inform the action research cycle. Practitioners decided to focus initially upon those children's whose interests might be less visible, including children who were less likely to verbalise their ideas and experiences in school. The agreed questions were:

> How will we recognise these children's interests?
> Where are these interests coming from?
> What do we already know about that child and their family?
> How will the children's interests influence our approach to planning?
> How do we turn children's interests into a focus for learning?

Pomeranians and Pokémon: Valuing connectedness and experiences beyond school

The project has provided opportunities to pause, reflect upon and discuss different ways in which curriculum can be defined and enacted. Practitioners have been able to recentre practice in ways that acknowledge that many people are involved in creating, living and experiencing the curriculum. Central to this shift has been a renewed focus upon valuing and making connections with adults' and children's experiences beyond the classroom. For example, the team introduced planned and spontaneous opportunities to share aspects of their own lives with children. As one practitioner said, 'We've been showing children that we have interests and a life beyond the classroom'. Another practitioner reflected on her conversation with a child in her class: 'He was really surprised I knew about Pikachu'.

The team have used Tapestry©, an online learning journal, to build a two-way dialogue with parents and caregivers and to enquire about the interests that children explore at home. This has enabled practitioners to learn about and respond to children's interests, experiences and family practices of which they were previously unaware. These include:

> Yao's skill in creating origami objects
> Ummi's interest in the flower shop she passes on her way to school
> Clara's expertise in dinosaur facts
> Sofia's ballet classes
> Wenjing's knowledge and love of Pomeranian dogs
> Alina's interest in Pokémon

However, practitioners noted that online modes have not enabled them to connect with every family. Some parents have not responded, highlighting the importance of sensitivity around digital poverty and recognition of multilingual communication practices. Other

families expressed uncertainty about the sorts of information that practitioners were inviting them to share. This signals the need to listen to parents' perspectives and address potential opportunities and barriers for using online modes of communication to foster reciprocal relationships with all families.

Responding to children's authentic interests and questions

Practitioners noted that their involvement in the project has 'made us more aware' of the diversity of experiences that children bring from home. As a result, curriculum decision-making is becoming more dynamic and responsive to the authentic interests and enquiries that children explore in their play. For example, one practitioner said that this shift has 'sparked interesting conversations' in which her interactions with children have been more attuned to their interests. Teams in the nursery and reception classes have started to incorporate their insights about children's interests into their planning.

Reflective dialogues have enabled the research team to appreciate the complexity of children's interests. We have encountered 'knotty issues' that highlight the need to be tentative in how adults interpret what is important to children in their play. For example, practitioners in the nursery reflected on their observations of Huang, who seldom interacted with his peers but was excited to participate in a game, 'The floor is lava'. This is a game in which children pretend that the ground is made of lava and must avoid touching the floor. In our final meeting we discussed how adults could respond by offering provocations to extend the game by watching video footage of lava flows and volcanoes, for example. However, it is quite possible that Huang's interest in the game revolves around the opportunity for shared activity with his peers in a context that does not require verbal communication. Examples such as this highlight the ways in which curriculum decision-making can be flexible, dynamic and responsive to children's shifting individual and collective priorities.

Conclusion

This is an intentionally small scale, qualitative study that aimed to generate in-depth understanding of curriculum making in two multi-diverse early years settings. Nevertheless, the study offers important insights that warrant attention, particularly in terms of potential implications for curriculum making with young children. This project is both timely and significant in light of social and demographic changes associated with increasing mobility and diversity in England. These changes create new configurations of community in which established and newcomer families negotiate multiple languages, cultures, and identities. Developing a 'funds of knowledge' perspective aims to provide practitioners with ways of understanding children's play repertoires to support their home cultures and languages, and to see these not as deficits but as shared social, cultural and cognitive resources. This understanding, in turn, can inform practitioners' decision-making to construct inclusive and responsive approaches to curriculum planning and implementation.

This project has highlighted the potential value of collaborative research which brings together university- and practice-based teams to work on a shared endeavour. The project has framed early childhood settings as spaces for critical thinking, reflection and dialogue

between children, practitioners and parents. This has created time and space to think differently about play, curriculum and pedagogy. We have found that funds of knowledge, working theories and interests are important concepts for noticing and responding to the multiple meanings that children explore in their play. These concepts reflect a Froebelian approach to developing curricula that are respectful and responsive to children's diverse lifeworlds. Nevertheless, the research findings highlight the challenges for enacting a responsive, inclusive approach to curriculum in a policy climate in which practitioners' accountability is monitored in relation to externally prescribed learning goals.

Future plans

Chesworth and Wood have successfully applied for funding from the University of Sheffield's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) to build upon this research through a programme of knowledge exchange and impact activities. This will enable us to sustain and build our collaboration with Wingfield Primary in order to:

- co-produce digital resources that exemplify how practitioners recognise complexity in play and respond to children's interests to build an inclusive and dynamic curriculum;

- use the resources to design professional development sessions for schools within a charitable academy trust that includes Wingfield Primary;

- in collaboration with Early Education, disseminate the resources to primary schools and early years settings via a national online conference, a website, and social media.

The project will demonstrate how equity and responsiveness can be integrated into a dynamic process of curriculum making that values play, playfulness and diversity. The project activities will be used to advocate that all children have access to and time for freely chosen play to build complexity in their learning and social relationships.

Project outputs

Invited Keynotes and Seminars/Webinars:
Chesworth, L*., Contemporary Curriculum Debates in ECE* (April 2021) Webinar: BERA ECE Special Interest Group event .
Chesworth, L., *Curriculum Making with Children* (February 2021)., Webinar: University of Northampton.
Chesworth, L., *Curriculum Making with Children* (September 2020). Webinar: Early Education South Yorks Branch.
Chesworth, L. *Curriculum-making in a multi-diverse early years setting*, (March, 2019): The Froebel Trust – stories from research and practice, University of Roehampton.
Chesworth, L**.** *Noticing and responding to young children's interests and inquiries,* (January, 2019): Early Childhood Development Association of Malta, Malta.

Conference presentations:
Chesworth, L. and Folorunsho, A. *What counts as valid knowledge in the English Early Years Foundation Stage?* August 2019: EECERA 29th International Conference, Thessaloniki.
Chesworth, L. and Wood, E. *Whose interests matter in the Early Years Foundation Stage? Dissonance, diversity and contradictions in the relationship between curriculum and interests,* September 2019: BERA Annual Conference, University of Manchester.
Kay, L. and Chesworth, L. *The reductionist nature of 'school readiness' as a transitional concept,* August 2019: EECERA 29th International Conference, Thessaloniki.
Chesworth, L. and Folorunsho, A. *How do children's play interests emerge from home cultures in a multi-diverse early years setting?* 19th February, 2019: British Early Childhood Education Research Association Annual Conference, Birmingham.

Seminars and lectures:
Chesworth, L., Folorunsho, A. and Wood, E. *Funds of knowledge, working theories and curriculum decision-making*, 14th November 2018, Ellesmere Children's Centre.
Chesworth, L. and Folorunsho, A. **What is curriculum?** 28th November 2018: The University of Sheffield.
Chesworth, L., Folorunsho, A. and Wood, E. *Young children living and learning in a super-diverse city*, 29th January 2019: iHuman/Early Childhood Research Cluster Seminar: The University of Sheffield.

Publications in preparation:
Chesworth, L., Folorunsho, A., Wood, E. and Curtis, S. (in preparation) Observing young children's interests in multi-diverse play cultures, Journal of Early Childhood Research.
Folorunsho, A., Chesworth, L., Wood, E. and Curtis, S. (in preparation) Whose knowledge matters in early childhood education? The Curriculum Journal.
Wood, E., Chesworth, L., Folorunsho, A. and Curtis, S. (in preparation) Contemporary conceptualisations of Froebelian principles for children living in multi-diverse communities, Education 3-13.

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Appendix 1: Screenshots from animation (phase 1)