

Understanding the World in the Early Years Foundation Stage: practitioners' perspectives of
best practice and effective provision

Gillian Forrester¹, Jim Pugh¹, Ruth Hudson¹ and Jane Rowley²

¹Staffordshire University, UK

²University of Glasgow, UK

WORD COUNT = 7470

Correspondence: gillian.forrester@staffs.ac.uk

Author contact emails:

j.pugh@staffs.ac.uk

r.hudson@staffs.ac.uk

jane.rowley@Glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

This article reports on a research project which investigated early years practitioners' perspectives of best practice and effective provision in relation to the Understanding the World area of learning of the Early Years Foundation Stage. This area of learning focuses on 'People and Communities', 'The World', and 'Technology'. A mixed methods approach utilising an online survey and semi-structured interviews generated data from early years practitioners located in nurseries and primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent, England. Practitioners' views were ascertained along with the identification of perceived obstacles impeding children's learning, social and cognitive development, and attainment.

Key words

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS); Understanding the World; Early Learning Goals; early years practice; effective early years provision; progression and attainment in the early years

Introduction: Understanding the World area of learning

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017a) provides the statutory curricula guidance for early years practitioners to support babies and children's learning from birth to age five and also enables them to track progress and development. The current emphasis is on learning through games and play with activities and experiences which provide an atmosphere where children can freely investigate, explore and comprehend the world independently. Cross-curricula 'areas of learning' feature in the EYFS rather than subjects per se (Barnes and Scoffham, 2017), although each area draws on subject knowledge and provides the foundations for children to comprehend discrete subjects later on as they progress through school (Duffy, 2016). Practitioners are encouraged to plan each of the areas of learning purposefully and to make ongoing judgements in order to ensure a balanced approach is maintained between adult-led and child-initiated activity (DfE, 2017a). The EYFS structure comprises three 'prime areas' namely: Communication and Language, Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development. Four specific 'areas of learning' are associated with these; Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World, and Expressive Arts and Design (Early Education 2012; Nutbrown et al., 2013). The Understanding the World area of learning, which is the focus of this research, 'involves guiding children to make sense of their physical world and their community through opportunities to explore, observe and find out about people, places, technology and the environment' (DfE, 2017a, 8). Marian and Jackson (2017) explain how Understanding the World connects the EYFS to science while Barnes and Scoffham (2017, 300) suggest this area of learning is linked to the humanities. They contend humanities is generally and detrimentally of 'relatively low status' in the primary curriculum for children over five years.

Across the EYFS there are 17 early learning goals (ELGs), of which the following three aspects are attributed to the Understanding the World area of learning:

People and Communities ELG13:

Children talk about past and present events in their own lives and in the lives of family members. They know that other children don't always enjoy the same things and are sensitive to this. They know about similarities and differences between themselves and others, and among families, communities and traditions. (Early Education, 2012, 38)

The World ELG14:

Children know about similarities and differences in relation to places, objects, materials and living things. They talk about the features of their own immediate environment and how environments might vary from one another. They make observations of animals and plants and explain why some things occur, and talk about changes. (Early Education, 2012, 40)

Technology ELG15:

Children recognise that a range of technology is used in places such as homes and schools. They select and use technology for particular purposes. (Early Education, 2012, 42)

These aspects scope the areas which early years practitioners can cover in order to stimulate children's interest, promote learning and contribute to the development of a range of skills in order for children to make sense of the physical world as well as their own community and culture. As Linfield (2013) purports, Understanding the World presents both opportunities and challenges for practitioners. On the one hand, there are opportunities to have child-centred learning as a fundamental facet of the early years. On the other, there are the associated challenges of ensuring 'learning is centred on the child's experience of the everyday world, and not the adult perceptions of what the focus should be' (Linfield, 2013, 105). Boyd (2020, 205), however, suggests children's development of a range of skills is highly dependent upon 'the quality, skills and knowledge of the practitioner' in enabling children to gain an awareness and appreciation of the world and the community in which they live. Thus, to develop and consolidate children's understanding, the role of early years staff is absolutely crucial (Glenton, 2012; Linfield, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford, 2014) for at

least the following reasons, if not more. Firstly, in their perceptions of what the delivery of Understanding the World area of learning involves and necessitates. Secondly, their own knowledge of the world along with being familiar with a broad range of subjects including geography, science, history as well as having an informed awareness of different religions, peoples, cultures and information and communication technologies. However, as Beauchamp (2016, 426) purports, this does not mean adopting a 'subject-based approach' but rather a 'subject-based methodology or perspective' in order to provide children with a more rounded and holistic education which covers a range of subjects. Thirdly, being significantly acquainted with the children whom they teach through proactively listening to them, through ongoing meaningful observation as well as working in partnership with parents/carers. Fourthly, having discerning investigative skills to guide and support children's explorations appropriately. Finally, to create and establish an integrated learning environment which enables children's development cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically as well as aiding the communicative and linguistic dimensions of learning.

The processes of adaptation, assimilation and accommodation theorised by Piaget have been influential in creating wider understanding of how children make sense of their world (Halfpenny and Pettersen, 2014). Accordingly, children who do not have access to a rich and diverse environment arguably cannot progress like other children who do have those kinds of formative experiences. As Allen and Kambouri-Danos (2017) contend, children's everyday experiences enable them to identify patterns and relationships between everything they see and engage with. These diverse and wide-ranging experiences are reflected in the environment they are raised in, the education they have access to and the family they are raised by. These key elements can enhance or limit the extent to which children comprehend their world and the objects within it. As such, there is the potential for inequality, as noted by Siraj-Blatchford (2014). So, particularly in geographical locations where there is deprivation, children can be immediately disadvantaged due to their backgrounds and the influences of social characteristics such as ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. Parents, from whatever background, undoubtedly have a powerful impact on children's social, emotional and intellectual outcomes. Practitioners working in partnership with parents in a variety of ways and to support children's learning is established in current practice and shown by research to be highly effective and beneficial (Crawley and Wheeler, 2010).

The National and Local Contexts of the Project

In 2016 the Department for Education (DfE) announced a national plan (DfE, 2016) for dealing with social mobility through education and identified six areas in England. A further six areas, including

Stoke-on-Trent a city in the Midlands region of England, were confirmed in January 2017. The Opportunity Area programme includes increased funding and support from the DfE to tackle the greatest challenges identified in each area. The plan sets out 'a framework for action' (DfE, 2017b, 5) in order to generate equitable improvement in education, raise standards and reduce the gaps between the highest and lowest groups of learners. A set of four 'ambitions' are outlined in the plan; these encompass each life phase - the early years, school, post-16 education, and careers (DfE, 2017b, 11-34). These 'ambitions' are designed to 'unlock talent and fulfil potential' (DfE, 2017b, 6,7,24,29,33,36). It is purported the plan will 'transform equality of opportunity' and social mobility is positioned 'at the heart of education policy' (DfE, 2017b,5).

Regarding the local context for this research, Stoke-on-Trent is economically deprived and has wards, which are administrative divisions of the city, that are socially and economically disadvantaged. While the city has a rich industrial history, primarily in ceramics, it has been affected detrimentally over many years as the United Kingdom's manufacturing base has declined and subsequent industrial degeneration has led to urban decay. The city's historical socio-economic backdrop is more recently shaped by, arguably, the effects of national economic deficit, where successive government austerity policies have led to cuts in all public services and unemployment. As a consequence, many of the city's children and young people experience and/or are at risk of experiencing poverty and social exclusion at the present time while in compulsory education, and as adults in the future. Statistics from the 2011 census (Nomis, 2018) and more recently from Public Health England (2017) indicate the health of residents in the city is poorer than average in England, the number of residents with either no qualifications or low qualifications is below the national average, and the educational and employment aspirations and social mobility opportunities are relatively low. Stoke-on-Trent exceeds the national average of children eligible for pupil premium, although take-up of free education offered for two-year olds is 2% below the national average (DfE, 2017b). The city's children lag behind the national averages for: three- and four-year olds benefitting for early education; achieving or exceeding the ELGs for speaking and reading; and language acquisition and development (DfE, 2017c). Some wards, however, show improvements between 2015-2017. Indeed, there are settings where good and outstanding results are achieved for the city's disadvantaged children (Watchsted, 2018). Economic and structural inequalities impair children's educational progression and attainment and those residing in the most deprived wards of this city are least likely to achieve the expected standard (DfE, 2017c). This is further evidenced by local government data which shows 71% of children achieving or exceeding the expected standard against the Understanding the World area of learning compared to a national average of 83%. The

Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data available at the time of the project (Stoke-on-Trent Local Authority, 2016 and 2017) show that overall performance marginally increased in each of the ELGs between 2016 and 2017. Pupils attained most successfully within Technology (ELG15), especially in 2017. People and Communities (ELG13) and The World (ELG14) show lower levels of attainment in both 2016 and 2017. The evidence indicates that children identified as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, those entitled to free school meals and those with English as an additional language (EAL) show lower attainment in ELG13 and ELG14, but their attainment in ELG15 was much closer to that of all pupils. The group of pupils with the lower performing data is those identified as having special educational needs (SEN). In each ELG and in both 2016 and 2017 the difference between the SEN pupils and all pupils was over 30%.

The City Council's rationale for funding this research was in relation to the Opportunity Area Programme Priority 1: 'improve Outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage' of the delivery plan (DfE, 2017c). As such, this project was designed to determine features of best practice and effective provision in relation to basic, continuous and enhanced provision and what constitutes a stimulating learning environment. It sought as well to identify any perceived obstacles to children's progression and attainment. The perspectives and practices of early years practitioners working in settings deemed good and outstanding would subsequently be shared with others. The research also sought to ascertain obstacles which impeded children's attainment of the Understanding the World ELGs.

Research Methodology

Approval to conduct this research was granted by Staffordshire University's Ethics Committee and the research adhered to the British Educational Research Association's (2018) ethical guidelines. A mixed-methods approach was deemed the most suitable for this project (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This comprised an online survey and semi-structured interviews with early years practitioners who were working in early years and school-based settings namely, local authority-maintained day nurseries, nurseries in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) group and nursery and reception classes in primary schools. They were settings identified by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) as 'good' and 'outstanding'. Information about the project was distributed to settings, via the local authority's early years and school lead officers. The response rate was 21% (n=24). Seventeen questions were developed for the online survey which contained various types of questions; closed/nominal questions, multiple choice, a Likert scale and some open questions to generate qualitative responses. The questions were designed to investigate respondents' attitudes and professional practice in relation to all three

ELGs within the Understanding the World area of learning. Demographic information was ascertained, and survey respondents were asked about their role, the type of setting, children's age range their demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, SEN and EAL. Questions on the survey included ascertaining: how often children talked about events in their own life; how confident the setting is in helping children understand the differences between places, objects and living things; practitioners' perceptions of best practice; and their confidence in using a range of different technologies. The intention was to establish areas of best practice, features of effective provision and any perceived obstacles impinging upon children's progression and attainment in this area of learning. Simple statistics (frequencies) were calculated from the quantitative data; the qualitative responses from the survey were analysed with the interview data. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with practitioners in eight settings to explore further practitioners' perceptions of best practice and effective provision. Early years lead practitioners were interviewed in four primary school reception classes. Of the four nurseries three are PVIs and one is local authority-maintained (Nursery 4). Two interviews were with managers and two with deputy managers. Each interview was subsequently transcribed, and the data were coded. The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed by three researchers.

Findings

The context of the research

In the EYFS there is an acknowledgment that every child is unique, and practitioners should understand each child as an individual with specific needs and interests. As such, children ought to be provided with opportunities to enable them to explore the world, people and communities, and to have hands-on experiences of encountering and using a range of technologies such as computers, electronic toys and mobile devices. Our investigation required practitioners to reflect on the curriculum, the materials and resources utilised in their setting and the children's learning experiences. In terms of the subject knowledge in relation to the three ELGs, practitioners consider they have greatest expertise in People the Communities and the least in Technology. It is known from the EYFSP results (Stoke-on-Trent, 2016/2017) that generally children perform better in the Technology ELG. Practitioners consider Technology is where children have the greater understanding (also confirmed in the local authority's results) in that it is the least hard to understand and yet this is the ELG where practitioners believe they have less subject knowledge and which they consider is the costliest ELG to resource. Some nursery practitioners were of the view that children have access to a range of digital technologies in their home environment for example,

mobile phones, ipads, tablets, TV etc. As such, they did not necessarily feel the need to 'teach' children about digital technology. Regarding resourcing the ELGs there is the feeling the "setting can't keep up with technology demands" (online survey), "the ELG is behind what the children coming in are able to do" (School 3), and "technology moves so much quicker than the ELG; work needs to be done to regularly update it" (School 4).

Practitioners in two of the schools (1 and 4) and Nursery 4 perceived a causal relationship between parenting and language acquisition. Language acquisition was regarded as a particular issue in School 1 where, on entry to the nursery, children have a level which has fallen to 8-20 months for language acquisition over the last three years. School 4 also cited delayed language through home access to digital technology as impacting on their ability to assess baselines for children with low level speech:

It is so important to gain a secure baseline. Capturing evidence for Understanding the World through discussion is reliant on language acquisition, this is negatively impacted by low level language. (School 4)

Practitioners in nurseries and primary schools spoke about parents/carers who use mobile phones and other devices to keep their children quiet and occupied at home. One practitioner (Nursery 1) used the term 'digital pacifiers' to explain how technology was impeding conversational talk at home. Similarly, practitioners commented on how they find many parents/carers engrossed in their own mobile devices, which they believe is having a detrimental impact on their children's language development. Examples included when parents/carers collect their child from the setting and barely acknowledge the child or verbally communicate with them. Practitioners are of the view that many parents do not talk enough with their children at home and this is a significant factor hindering language development.

It is against this backdrop, the views of early years practitioners regarding what constitutes best practice and effective provision in the Understanding the World area of learning are now presented.

People and communities: conceptions of best practice and effective provision

In relation to People and Communities (ELG, 13), the research identified that best practice aids progression and attainment through: participation of family members in the setting through sharing professional and cultural practices; secure and consistent links with community organisations and

instilling a sense of community through connections with others and how to be part of a responsible and valued social network that promotes positive behaviours. Each of these findings will now be examined in turn.

The People and Communities ELG13, specifies children 'talk about past and present events in their own lives and in the lives of family members' (Early Education, 2012, 38). It was found from the survey that 94% of practitioners talk about the children's own life events with them at least half of the time to always. Regarding parents sharing events from home, 29% of practitioners perceived this was half of the time to always. However, 100% of practitioners considered they share information with parents about events at least half of the time to always. Communication between children and practitioners and parents and practitioners through the reciprocal sharing of information about homelife and life in the early years setting is seemingly very important and practitioners proactively promote home links with children's families. One practitioner stated in interview the importance of 'knowing your children, knowing what their interests are'. She explained:

It is about understanding the children that I work with and making sure that I understand what their interests and preferences are when they come to play at nursery, and to put into place practice that is incorporative of their interests in understanding the world to support their existing knowledge and to extend upon that as well. (Nursery 1)

Best practice was also described as 'it is all about the relationships with them [parents]...so they are involved in all of that learning too' (Nursery 2). This practitioner explained the importance of developing relationships from the outset:

As soon as a child joins us we have got the initial weeks of visits, so straight away we are assessing, we are observing, we are sharing all of this information with parents from day one so they know exactly what we are doing and the purpose behind it....We do say to them, if you are choosing [name of Nursery] you are choosing to be on board from the get go, and they are more than happy to be on board. (Nursery 2)

Some settings revealed they used a particular toy to send home with children which can also help children better comprehend 'similarities and differences between themselves and others'; a feature of ELG 13. For example, the practitioner from Nursery 2 explained:

We have got [name of soft toy], he goes home with parents and we take it home too, so we want them to bring him back in with the information, photographs and we can share that with the children. It is displayed in the room at their [children's] level so that they can be obviously using that as a resource with their friends. They are very vocal by this stage, so they are very happy to share that information. We do spend a lot of time really promoting that with families [...] so it is just bridging that gap between nursery and home.

The participation of family members in the setting through sharing professional and cultural practices was evident in the data. Parent and grandparent contributions included adults who came into the setting and, in a short presentation session to the children, impart a range of professional skills, for example:

Some of our parents are professionals, so they are going to be coming in and doing little presentations for the children, and just teaching them about all of the skills they have got. (Nursery 2)

Some parents assisted with reading, for example listening to children read in the setting. Sharing home traditions was reported as a key part of this ELG with parent volunteers sharing traditional foods and practices, 'all the lovely traditions that you do at home' with the children so they can learn about different 'lifestyles' (Nursery 2). Practitioners also focused on building a sense of what it is to be a 'good person' (Nursery 2) in the community and towards each other.

Questions relating to the setting's links with the local community featured in both the survey and interviews and corresponds to the aspect of ELG13 whereby children know about similarities and differences 'among families, communities and traditions' (Early Education, 2012, 38). The amount of time taken up to create links and maintain these relationships to aid future visits from local organisations was highlighted by all interviewees. Practitioners were involved in securing links with community organisations as well as endeavouring to instil a sense of community through those connections. However, practitioners disclosed there was limited time available to build relationships

with members of the community. Nonetheless, the various organisations that settings consistently work with include the fire service, dentists, police community support officer (PCSO) and local institutions such as a church and mosque. This included inviting community members into the setting, for example:

We're a Church of England school so our vicar often comes in and talks to the children [...] We normally get a yearly visit from the fireman. The children love it and they get to have a go with the hose and get to sit in the truck and put the hat on. (School 1)

Children are also taken out of the setting to visit places in the community:

The visits that we go on really give those opportunities to see it in action and talk to people that are involved. Last week we went to the church which is just down the road and we had a talk with the vicar and he played the organ...it was really nice and they got an understanding of Christianity...our school is mainly Muslim, we have got like 90% EAL rate...we do take them to the mosque as well and different places for them to get insight of the different religions. (School 2)

For them [children], it is knowing what's around them in their community, knowing that there's a Tesco, there's a park...that there's all of the different bits for the community. (School 1)

The fire service visits are so much fun and aid language. (School 3)

Practitioners spoke about being 'proactive' in arranging learning experiences and being 'very passionate about the role' in ensuring children had the best opportunities available for them to 'thrive' in nursery and school. It was considered important by practitioners to convey to the children how to be part of a responsible and valued social network that promotes positive behaviours. For example:

We have got a good relationship with the PCSOs in the area, anyway a parent came in, there had been some trouble in the family and the little boy was very uptight about the police and the role of the police. So, we rang the PCSO and

asked him to come in and read a story because some of the children are very young and their understanding isn't so great...so he came in and did a story and spent time and then played with them in the classroom, and it was absolutely wonderful, and they are still talking about that; that was really meaningful for them to do and get them talking. (Nursery 4)

In relation to the People and Communities ELG, effective provision thus comprises consistent engagement with the local community and offering realistic learning experiences and activities which develop language. Practitioners expound resourcefulness and creativity in developing relationships with parents, their families and people living and working in their community, who can contribute in various ways to enhancing children's learning experiences. While building such relationship is inevitably time-consuming, nevertheless practitioners regarded this investment advantageously and as a significant aspect of effective provision. Opportunities were created for children's learning especially with regards to the sharing of experiences and difference. Visits to local landmarks and community facilities constituted best practice enabling children to become more aware of their immediate physical and social environment. These concrete sensory experiences help very young children actively make sense of the world around which enables them to better understand the complex, abstract world in later childhood (Halfpenny and Pettersen, 2014).

The World: conceptions of best practice and effective provision

With regards to The World (ELG14) children learn about 'similarities and differences in relation to places, objects, materials and living things' (Early Education, 2012, 40). One of survey questions sought to investigate practitioners' confidence in delivering this particular ELG. The findings indicate 68% of practitioners were moderately or very confident that children understand similarities and differences in relation to places and features of their own environments and others. However, almost one third are less confident that they can support a child's comprehension in this way. Practitioners show greater confidence in relation to, objects, materials and living things which are the other components of this ELG. With regards to children understanding similarities and differences in relation to objects and materials 68% were moderately or very confident, with a further 13% being extremely confident in this. In relation to living things, at least 57% of practitioners are moderately or very confident, with 31% being extremely confident. When asked during interview about best practice for 'The World' however there was typically some hesitancy. Practitioners commented, for example, "...I would say that we just covered some of that..." (Nursery

3), and “Erm well again yes just need to build on what I have already said...” (Nursery 2). This a marked difference compared to ‘People and Communities’ where practitioners were confident in the range of best practice responses (as is illustrated in the section above), and where they offered a range of examples to demonstrate this. This uncertainty coupled with some lack of confidence in being able to support children raises questions about how these two ELGs are determined in practice and the extent to which practitioners distinguish between them. This lack of confidence and uncertainty could have implications in relation to how assessment judgements are made. Nevertheless, with regards to The World (ELG14), there is some evidence in the data which identified best practice aiding progression and attainment through: provider capacity to create time and professional resource skills to enhance the quality of experiences children have access to and access to onsite and external facilities that are low cost financially. Such practices could assist in broadening the experiences children have access to by building on limited life experiences in readiness for later life. These findings will now be considered.

It was generally felt by practitioners that the People and Community ELG was ‘easier’ because, as one practitioner stated, ‘in a global sense, it is very hard for some children because they don’t get out in the community, so to get them to see there is a whole world out there is really difficult’ (Nursery 4). A common solution, already mentioned above, was to encourage the parents of children going away on holiday to take the class soft toy and take photographs of that soft toy’s adventures while on holiday. Those pictures and accompanying stories could then be brought back and shared with the whole class and, in that sense, practitioners believe children would have a greater opportunity to learn about different places beyond their own immediate environment. While an interesting perspective, this does not necessarily sit with the Piagetian view of learning where children first need concrete experiences to construct knowledge and before moving on to more abstract ideas (Halfpenny and Pettersen, 2014). Practitioners sought creative ways of introducing children to living things. For example, having chickens in the classroom (School 3) and ‘watching them hatch and understanding the care and concern for living things’ (Nursery 4); taking children to a local veterinary practice where vets have talked about ‘how to care for animals and the things animal do’ (Nursery 4). Practitioners from two schools explained they had access to outdoor spaces which enabled them, for example, to have hands-on experience with living things and a changing environment all of which provided opportunities for communication and language development:

Earlier this week they went out and planted different vegetables, so obviously we watch them grow. They get to pick them when they're ready. A lot of communication and vocabulary. We always have bits and bobs so they can go over and investigate so it might be a kind of messy play where they get their fingers in telling you how things feel. If it's autumn leaves and acorns and the pinecones again feeling, touching and getting that vocab. Crunchy, soft and all of that, and then obviously developing them further by asking questions. (School 1)

We're lucky enough to do forest schools in reception, which I have found is really good practice. One of my TAs [Teaching Assistants] has got trained on it so she actually takes ours out and the language and the discussion that she has had has been really brilliant...it is like their imagination comes alive... building dens for fairies and dragons and the children absolutely love it...the children that are usually quite withdrawn, and quiet have actually come out of themselves and communicated with us, so that has been really good. (School 2)

An insightful example of bringing experiences in the wider world to the children was provided by one of the nurseries:

At the college they have got an aeroplane in one of the rooms, an actual half an aeroplane. The children have visited that today, so they have got that experience of going on to an aeroplane and they have brought their suitcases with them today. We have got passports for them and boarding tickets for them to use and we set up a trolley with all soft drinks and we gave them money so that when they go, they can buy things you know while they are there sitting on the aeroplane. (Nursery 1)

To summarise, effective provision in relation to The World ELG entails broadening access to the outdoors and thematic topics and child choice. External visits are made by settings wherever possible, and other examples provided by practitioners included visits to the zoo, farms, the beach and a barge. There are noticeable differences between schools and PVI nurseries, however, where there was limited funding to be able to travel very far afield from the nursery setting. Providers typically explored The World by themes whereby a range of activities are linked across the provision to one particular theme, an example offered was 'Under the Sea'. Typically, practitioners provide

relevant thematic resources, decorate the setting in line with the chosen theme and outside activities will also be related to that theme.

Technology: conceptions of best practice and effective provision

Moving now to consider best practice across the Technology ELG (15). Almost half (44%) of survey respondents were extremely or very confident in the settings' range of technological resources while a fifth of the survey respondents were not confident at all. This suggests limited resources might affect their ability to deliver a robust learning experience for the children. Practitioners indicated in the survey that they had television, computers and laptop, tablet type devices, programmable toys and communication devices, such as play telephones. In the interviews, practitioners described as having in their settings, for example, interactive whiteboard and whitetable, microphones, story tins and cameras. This range of resources was utilised in various ways via child-led and adult-led activities. In the survey, approximately two thirds of respondents indicated they were extremely or very confident of staff using technology, and in staff using technology to support children, and in children using technology. The remaining third of respondents indicated they were moderately confident of staff using technology, and in staff using technology to support children, and in children using technology. Evidence in the data in relation to the Technology ELG identified best practice aiding progression and attainment through: providers identifying the most appropriate resource for their cohorts to enhance learning; extending the use of the resources to facilitate a wider application in the children's day, an embedded way of using technology across the EYFS; and broadening the definition of technology in response to the child's experience. Extracts from the data are drawn upon below to illustrate these findings.

As well as children being able to use a range of technological resources, a practitioner emphasised how it is also important for children to understand how devices worked:

It is all of the other bits and bobs that aren't as obvious, so it is having your mobile phones out for the children to explore and not using them, but like taking the back off, having a look at how the battery comes out...(School 1)

School 3 expressed concern about the financial challenge of updating technology and obtaining resources to keep up with technology children can access at home. The nurseries seemed generally less technology-rich than schools, with a lack of mobile devices such as tablets and apps attributed by practitioners to financial limitations. This again highlights the funding/resourcing inequalities

between schools and the PVI sector. Some differences in what was deemed as best practice were evident in approaches taken, as can be seen by these examples:

In comparison to other settings, they have got tablets, computers, we don't offer those because ...the feedback that we get, the children have a lot of access to a lot of technological resources at home, well they don't come here to do that, they come here to do different things, so we don't have those facilities. We do a lot of, well the children are very much involved in how to work the Hoover, how to use the stereo, those kinds of things...we just had a new intercom system so they are going to learn how to use that as well. (Nursery 2)

We have got a big whiteboard on the wall for the children to use that they can interact with and we have interactive games on there that the children can access and use; the staff sit with them and show them how to use the programmes that are on there. (Nursery 1)

Technology was utilised in an open-ended manner to enhance and extend learning, for example using cameras to photograph role play experiences which are then processed and displayed, and which promote further conversation. There were many different examples provided in the data about how technology could aid communication such as children recording their voices in 'listening tins' and telephones where children and staff have their own number 'to call and ring up and talk' in the setting.

In summary, with regards to the Technology ELG, effective provision constitutes consideration of appropriate technology use and a broad definition of technology which includes household items. Certainly, the data reveals different views and practices for this ELG and funding differences between schools and nurseries. However, there was no real consensus on technologies utilised and what constitutes effective provision. For five settings, the focus was on a variety of devices including touch screen resources and laptops. One setting was particularly focused on using household equipment such as hoovers and washing machines. Effective provision seems to require technology to be embedded across the setting, to be used throughout the curriculum and to include some access to digital devices as well as everyday household appliances.

Obstacles impeding children's progression and attainment

The analysis of the data revealed four areas in provision where obstacles were identified which impeded children's progression and attainment. First, relevant training and formal opportunities for continued professional development (CPD) specifically in relation to Understanding the World appears to be negligible. There is evidence in the data suggesting some confusion or misunderstanding amongst some practitioners regarding what constitutes 'Communities' and what constitutes 'The World'. Provider confidence appears to waver in how children understand the differences and similarities between places, and between features of their own environments. It also appears that Technology is regarded narrowly by some in terms of digital and electronic technologies when 'technology' per se could arguably be conceived as a broader topic area. While some practitioners clearly collaborate with those in other settings and even may make periodic visits, others divulged there were minimal formal opportunities to meet and collaborate with other early years practitioners in similar settings in order to exchange ideas and learn from each other's practice. It was considered that collaboration, in particular between nurseries and primary schools, would foster better understanding of these ELGs, their delivery and summative assessment. As such, access to bespoke training and events to bring practitioners together would undoubtedly be beneficial. Second, there are limited resources in budgets and available funding. Hiring transport to take children beyond their local community for outings and a wider exploration of the world, was thus curtailed. Practitioners are imaginative, nonetheless, in making effective use of free or low-cost resources. They also spend time and money, often their own, researching and buying suitable resources. Third, language acquisition, speech development and EAL present obstacles impeding some children's progress and attainment. Due to the city's diverse population some children, and indeed some parents, present with a range of language needs. Thus, language barriers can inhibit practitioners' abilities to engage some parents in their child's learning. Finally, everyday pressures on practitioners result in inadequate time to invest in developing relationships especially with community organisations. Practitioners consider devoting the time required to engage fully is challenging, for example, "there is such focus on reading, writing and maths it is difficult to find time to capture Understanding the World" (School 3). Nevertheless, findings illustrate that in delivering the People and Communities ELG practitioners do manage to use effectively some of their parents and some local community contacts to broaden children's learning and enhance their social and cognitive development.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research revealed early years practitioners' experiences of delivering the three ELGs associated with Understanding the World. The project was designed to tap into practitioners' professional knowledge and their perceptions of children's understanding with regards to this particular area of learning. In so doing, the research sought to identify examples of best practice, features of effective provision and illuminate any recognised obstacles to children's progression and attainment. In the EYFS, early exposure to a diverse and rich environment, guided by parents, carers and early years practitioners is essential from birth to allow children the opportunity to make sense of an ever-changing society (Halfpenny and Pettersen, 2014). Inevitably, the extent to which children are exposed to the wider world will vary and often this is due to their socio-economic background and family circumstances (Allen and Kambouri-Danos, 2017). Indeed, this research exposed inequalities through the limited previous experiences of some children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Siraj-Blatchford, 2014). There is much evidence in the data which exemplifies practitioners' enthusiasm for children's development, and the creative ways in which they make learning exciting and possible through both adult-led and child-initiated activities, and in spite of the constraints of limited budgets.

In relation to best practice for ELG3, People and Communities, this is manifested through the participation of parents or family members in the setting (Crawley and Wheeler, 2010) who can share first-hand experiences of, for example professional and cultural practices. Establishing links with local organisations encourages a sense of belonging to a community through connections and collaboration with others which stretches beyond a child's home and their early years setting. Effective provision can be described as supporting progression and attainment through utilising purposefully the knowledge of parents/families and members of the local community. Consistent engagement with the local community helps children develop relationships with others. Practitioners seek to provide a range of realistic learning opportunities and activities of which also promote language development.

Regarding best practice for ELG 14, The World, relies heavily of the professional expertise and knowledge of practitioners to enhance the quality of children's experiences, which in disadvantaged locations may often be quite limited. The role of the practitioner is key here in having the capacity to explore and process information in order to create a broad and enlivened learning environment (Boyd, 2020). This may also involve securing access to immediate and external environments and facilities that are within the means of often limited budgets. The research found effective provision involves creating access to the outdoors to facilitate children's interests and enabling them to explore their

world as fully as possible which essentially aids the development of early scientific skills and understanding. Having thematic topics for planned indoor and outdoor provision provides exciting learning spaces and also enables children to make choices. Practitioners use appropriate language to describe places children know or have visited and which provide concrete concepts which further children's understanding of the world and potentially enable them to ask questions about it. Marian and Jackson (2017, 229) suggest such an approach is in line with Piaget's adaptation, assimilation and accommodation processes and Chomsky's theories where 'cognitive ability is closely linked to communication and language development as children continuously interact with people and their immediate environment'. Halfpenny and Pettersen (2014, 3) explore how the ongoing process of experience, reflection on learning facilitates the '...updating of mental representations of the world...'. They explain how children actively construct knowledge of the world due to their interactions with it. Children will also reflect on their experience as an ongoing process and which drives cognitive development and greater understanding. As such, enabling children to experience their immediate surroundings and local environments to the fullest, as well as helping to broaden children's life experiences of the world, arguably facilitates the development of vocabulary and language skills.

Finally, the third ELG in this area of learning is Technology (ELG 15). Best practice is evidenced here in practitioners recognising and selecting appropriate technologies to facilitate children's understanding around why technology is used. Practitioners reported most children in their setting having access to a range of different technologies at home. Some practitioners divulged that children, from an early age, are already adept in the use of some items, such as ipads. Practitioners can respond to children's immediate experiences and develop their skills by working with a broader definition of technology and also making cross-curricula links to extend children's knowledge and learning (Barnes and Scoffham, 2017; Nutbrown et al., 2013). Effective provision aids progression and attainment through informed planning and careful consideration of appropriate technology including a wider application of technology, such as household items. Practitioners described interacting with children through play-based activities; by observing and posing timely questions which can support learning considerably. Language is thus a major tool which helps children develop social skills to interact with others, engage in conversation and communicate with others. Glenton (2012) suggests practitioners model vocabulary and play alongside children to extend language skills through discussion and questioning.

This research contributes to a better understanding of best practice and effective provision for the delivery of the three ELGs in the Understand the World area of learning. As such, recommendations

for practice include: the provision of relevant training and regular CPD opportunities for Early Years practitioners to facilitate effective delivery; greater collaboration between settings and formal opportunities to share good practice and learn from others; sufficient funding and resources to better support the delivery of these ELGs; a celebration of the contribution made by local communities and their engagement with early years settings and which could also serve as means by which members of local communities could be made aware of how they might be involved in and contribute to children's learning in the early years; finally further research to investigate issues surrounding language acquisition and development particularly the extent to which parents/carers interact and communicate with their children at home.

The longer-term and overarching intentions of the City Council and the government's Department for Education is to reduce inequality and promote social inclusion, raise achievement and aspirations, address the detrimental link between disadvantaged socio-economic origins and destinations, and ultimately improve social mobility for children and young people within the city. It is known that children from the City's most deprived wards are least likely to achieve the expected standards and so by targeting early years provision, as well as a range of other subject areas in Key Stage 2 into 3, it is anticipated that the Opportunity Area programme projects will ultimately improve outcomes for the city's children and young people.

Acknowledgments

The project was funded by the Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area programme. We thank the survey respondents and interview participants for the generous giving of their time and their insightful contributions. We also thank Dr Jo Basford for her very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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Author Bios

Dr Gillian Forrester is Associate Professor of Education in the School of Life Sciences and Education at Staffordshire University, UK where she leads the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) and supervises PhD and EdD students. She has over 20 years' experience in higher education. Her main research interests lie in education policy; she is broadly interested in policy processes and the lived experiences of pupils, parents, classroom teachers and school leaders.

Dr Jim Pugh is the Head of Education at Staffordshire University. Jim has worked at Staffordshire University, primarily as an education studies academic since 2006. Jim's career has developed from multi-level teaching, to award development, and cross faculty leadership. Jim is a Teaching Excellence Fellow of Staffordshire University and Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Jim's PhD related to access to higher education, organisational culture and management within universities. Other interests include active and engaged learning and wider support roles in education. Jim developed his passion for learning and teaching first of all within the primary school setting and then working in the FE sector as an Advanced Skills Teacher.

Dr Ruth Hudson is a Course Director of Early Childhood Studies and Education at Staffordshire University, UK. She teaches on Early Childhood Studies programmes and has experience at Postgraduate level teaching and supervising MA students nationally and internationally. She has 20 years of Early Years sector experience and 10 years' experience in Higher Education. Ruth's research

interests are well-being, childhood bereavement and attachment focusing on the Early Years phase in Education.

Dr Jane Rowley was formerly Senior Research Fellow in the School of Life Sciences and Education at Staffordshire University where she also taught on the Doctor of Education (EdD) and supervised students. She is currently Research Associate in the End of Life Studies Group at the University of Glasgow and researcher on the ESRC Dying in the Margins project.