

Chapter 5

The World Café Approach: Partnering Parents Towards a Deeper Understanding of Child Transitions

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Abstract

This chapter presents the development of a collaborative research methodology with staff and parents around supporting infants' transitions into nursery. The authors argue that attachment formation is a process that can take a protracted length of time, and therefore, propose an alternative approach that offers better support to infants and parents during the earlier stages of transition. The aim of our research was to identify the key characteristics of a model that supports infants' gradual transition into nursery from both parents' and practitioners' perspectives. However, within the chapter, we seek to provide a rich real-life example of a lived experience of collaborative research with parents and practitioners from one nursery. Collaborative research with parents opened new possibilities for understanding the perspectives around infants going into nursery by drawing on the expertise of parents and practitioners. As part of the study, we employed a collaborative methods approach and encouraged parents and practitioners to work together through their participation in baby social sessions. Data analyses were conducted through thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes related to parent–practitioner collaboration around infants' transitions into nursery. The findings reveal significant emphasis on trust, care, mutual respect, and the development of warm relationships between

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parents, practitioners, and infants with open communication. Having shared values and knowledge around infant care routines aligning home with the nursery supported the infant's gradual transition into nursery.

Keywords: Parent–practitioner collaboration; infant transition; relationships; interaction; attunement; nursery

Introduction

In this book chapter, we present our experience on a professional research journey, based upon shared knowledge and relationships, within a collaborative working approach with parents in supporting infants' transitions into nursery. As more is understood about the potential for learning from birth, further attention is given to what can be learnt from sensitively observing children's autonomous actions within transition into nursery alongside their caregivers. [Trevarthen and Delafield-Butt \(2016\)](#) acknowledged infants' autonomy by revealing that they have 'the spirit of an inquisitive and creative human being' (p. 17). Taking this crucial element into account, staff, parents, and researchers have collaborated on the research presented here to foster sensitive and inclusive transitions for infants aged up to 18 months. This has been achieved by providing socio-emotional and socio-cognitively framed interactions that support attuned infant–caregiver interactions and caregiving routines.

In our research we adopted a qualitative collaborative methodology ([Degotardi et al., 2019](#)), which required us to engage with, manage and work alongside the nursery management, staff, and parents of the infants throughout the research design phase and during data collection. Being able to engage with and include all the parents of the infants transitioning into the nursery at the time of the research, and the baby room practitioners in the data collection process was seen by us as an important way to ground our research within the stories and conversations around early transitions into nursery. Our engagement strategy and involvement work were rooted theoretically and methodologically in the World Café Approach. The World Café approach ([Brown, 2010](#)) is a particularly suitable data collection method, it is a method that relies on meaningful engagement and collaborative action. Our utilisation of this approach to collaboration and engagement facilitated accuracy, and recognition of the knowledge of the process and practice of the infant's gradual settling into nursery. Although based in the UK and adhering to UK early years policy ([DfE, 2024](#)) the nursery we conducted our research in offers an innovative continental approach, inspired by principles of the Reggio Emilia model of day care. The Reggio Emilia approach ([Bove, 2001](#); [Edwards & Gandini, 2018](#)) places more emphasis on the roles of community and relationships with parents and children. Within this approach there is both a blurring of the boundaries between home and day care and, when contrasted with the UK, offering a more protracted and gradual timeframe for transitions into day care.

Our motivation was to work with parents and practitioners to assess whether current approaches to transitions, an approach framed around the importance of infant attachment formation with key persons within the setting, can be improved upon. In terms of our own theory and positionality, we reasoned that attachment formation is a process that can take a protracted length of time. Therefore, it is an alternative approach that offers better support to infants during the earlier stages of transition.

With these motivations in mind, we formulated an alternative theoretical model that outlines the benefits of providing socio-emotional and socio-cognitively framed interactions that support attuned infant–caregiver interactions and caregiving routines. In developing this research focus, both researchers relied heavily on their existing knowledge and research of attunement, infancy research and theory from developmental psychology (e.g., Bigelow, 1998; Moll et al., 2021; Terrace et al., 2022; Trevarthen, 1979). For example, would transitions into day care be smoother if the key person’s level of social and emotional engagement with a new infant mirrored that experienced with their primary caregiver? In this chapter we worked with parents and practitioners by having a conversation to explore issues around how initial phase of a transition to nursery is experienced by the infant. In the first instance, we explored critical questions around the idea that if the key person’s level of contingent interaction with the infant is not at a similar level to that experienced with the primary caregiver/s (Bigelow, 1998), then infants would experience a less-than-optimal start to day care.

Transitions Are Difficult for Parents

It is important to acknowledge that working with parents and practitioners as research partners can be difficult because both parents and practitioners can struggle emotionally during these transitional periods. Highlight that the competing demands between home, work and day-care setting can manifest in feelings of stress and tension as the parent seeks to find a new sense of balance and equilibrium (Monk & Hall, 2017). Parents can experience a sense of loss of control due to relinquishing caregiver responsibilities to the practitioner and feelings of fear, distress, and insecurity, especially if the transitional process is not managed with sensitivity and care (White et al., 2020).

Within the current research we adopted the key aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach in our attempts to help better understand how these types of stressors can be better managed for parents. For example, this approach advocates for a more community-based approach within which there is less of a delineation between home and day-care setting (Bove, 2001). Rather, emphasis is placed on what is termed ‘*inserimento*’. This translates literally from Italian into English as ‘insertion’ and its key function is to allow parents and infants more time and space for a smoother adjustment during the settling period. Here parents are welcomed openly and encouraged to become part of the caregiving community. In doing so there is greater opportunity for the parent themselves to become acclimatised to the experience of transition and, in turn develop deeper supportive relationships with other parents and with practitioners in the setting.

Overview of the Research: Our Initial Theoretical Position

Our research falls very much within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) tradition. It was motivated by an attempt to develop an enhanced theoretical understanding of, and practical approach to, infant transitions from the parent, family home into formal day care. Of specific interest were the views and opinions of both parents and practitioners before, during, and after their infant had made the transition. Beyond these key sources of information, we were also motivated to observe how infants experienced all stages of the transitional process.

At the earliest stages of our research, at a time when we were still developing and refining the research focus, our theoretical lens was focussed exclusively on consideration of whether current DfE (2024) policy and practice was sufficient in adequately supporting all parties during the transition to day-care process. We reasoned that current policy, advocating the need for the formation of attachments with key persons within the nursery (Elfer, 2015; Elfer et al., 2012; Page & Elfer, 2013), offers more of a longer term ‘outcome model’ of day-care transition and does not adequately support all parties, especially infants during the earlier periods of transition. In contrast, we utilised a body of infancy theory and research evidenced from developmental psychology to argue that a different socio-emotional approach to transitions may be more suited. Specifically, we outlined an ‘intersubjective’ approach to transitions. This approach emphasises the importance of key persons adopting ‘attuned’, synchronous, and contingently organised emotional engagement with infants within both dyadic and triadic caregiving routines and play activities (e.g., Bigelow, 1998; Moll et al., 2021; Terrace et al., 2022; Trevarthen, 1979). Central to our views was that such practitioner attunement, with newly arriving infants, should be modelled on the rhythms and regularities in emotional displays and behaviours similar to what infants experience with their primary caregivers (Bigelow, 1998). We also reasoned that through such sensitivity and emotional and social attunement within routines, infants would be more readily placed to both navigate the trials and stresses of the transitional period and develop secure attachments (Field, 1985; Schore, 2001) with practitioners operating in key person roles.

It is important to note here both how and where each researcher developed the views that formed the basis of this research. Essentially, our views are a mixture of (1) significant reading of key academic sources within our field, which encompass developmental psychology, educational psychology and early childhood studies, and (2) our experiential learning having spent several decades working within and/or visiting day-care settings to carry out tasks such as data collection for research or to carry out assessments. Importantly, one staff researcher did not have any direct experience of working as a staff member or key person within the nursery subject to this research or recent practice. Therefore, we recognise that we could be criticised for being decontextualised from the real-life experiences of current staff members within settings.

Engaging with parents in involvement work and having conversations about the topic of transitions can be difficult because it also raises questions around

attachment and parenting perspectives, values and beliefs about what is important. The synergy between parents and practitioners plays a pivotal role in influencing positive outcomes around transitions for the infant. As primary agents of socialisation, parents play an important part in shaping the transition process for their infant.

Our First Conversation with the Setting: Thinking About, Developing, and Revising Ethics

Our involvement in work and research conversations enabled us to understand more about practice, and it became apparent that the more practice-based approach being employed within the setting was different to, and yet compatible with, our own intersubjective model. The key difference was seen through the adoption of what is termed the Reggio Emilia approach [Edwards and Gandini \(2018\)](#), within which emphasis is placed on the importance of time and space with key practitioners focussing on a more gradual, community-based approach to transitions. Within the framework, the boundaries between home and day-care setting were blurred in a manner that emotionally and socially supported all parties as infants (and parents and practitioners) gradually acclimatised and emotionally adjusted to the parents' absence over sustained periods of time and other key aspects of the transition experience ([Bove, 2001](#)).

Both researchers came into this research process with a deep familiarity with early childhood developmental education, and although we were 'outsiders' to the setting, we had an 'insider' perspective on the debates around infant transitions into day care. Our first meeting with staff members was pivotal within our research journey, both at a theoretical and practical level. Importantly, in terms of the ethical issues we would immediately encounter and continue to engage with throughout the course of our data collection and analyses over the following months. Through our early negotiations with staff and involvement in work with them, it quickly became apparent that our own theoretical account (based solely on the importance of attuned socio-emotional caregiving and socio-cognitive forms of play and stimulation did not account for the full complexity of experience during the period of transition. Reflexivity during fieldwork is important, and our engagement in Parent-Practitioner Involvement (PPI) work with nursery staff led us to reconsider our own positionality and theoretical perspective. Rather, a more ecologically valid approach should situate such sensitive forms of practitioner provision within a wider socio-cultural framework that acknowledges the key aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach.

Once we felt that a firm theoretical grounding was established for the research, we began the process of completing a standard University ethics form. This took place alongside the relationship building. According to Lyndon (2023, p. 143), 'The ethics of research can all too often be reduced to a single form and a checklist of requirements.' This statement mirrored our own experience as we began to consider how we, as researchers, would look to minimise risk to participants, help maintain psychological well-being throughout, avoid deception and allow for transparency, help maintain confidentiality and anonymity and allow for

debriefing and voluntary withdrawal at any stage during the research journey. For any academic who has conducted their own research and helped support numerous undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation projects, such ethical topics are routinely encountered as standard fare with such forms feeling a little like a one-size-fits all tick box exercise.

Innovation and the World Café Approach

Our idea of having professional conversations with parents was to understand their lived practice experience and then engage in a constructive dialogue around their experiences, perceptions, and practices around infant transitions into nursery. This approach builds on elements of the World Café (Brown, 2010). The World Café approach is an appropriate public involvement and community engagement tool and method. It is a conversational process that helps people to engage in constructive conversations around critical questions, whilst building personal relationships and fostering mutual learning. Some shared principles underpinning this approach, that we based our professional conversation around, were recognising the knowledge and expertise of the parents, baby room practitioners, and nursery management; a commitment to the collective wisdom of each group; allowing sufficient time and space for each conversation group to critically reflect, to form and share their views (Brown, 2010).

The nursery offers a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, like that of the World Café, where we encourage involvement and foster open discussions that encourage participants to freely share their perspectives, experiences, and expertise. The method enabled parents to reflect on their own values, beliefs, and experiences whilst digging deeper into the topic of transitions and generating new insights. Furthermore, the conversations helped us understand and compare the perspectives of parents alongside staff, as well as highlight the good practices occurring within the nursery. The World Café approach also serves as a catalyst for future practice (Ropes et al., 2020). This method played a pivotal role in stimulating conversations and encouraging parents to explore infant transitions in a deep and meaningful way.

Consideration of Ethical Complexities: Challenges to Current Beliefs About Praxis?

The nursery was selected due to its known good practices and reputation. The setting's ethos encourages children and parents to participate in decisions which affect them, mirroring the ethos of participatory research (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Practitioners in this setting have been very active in reflecting on transitions and have been offering 'baby social' for over a year prior to this study, as part of their usual practice. Within these sessions, parents and newly arriving infants spend the morning interacting with other new arrivals, staff members, and infants who are now fully established within the setting. With the support of the different 'gatekeepers' such as the nursery management, baby practitioners, the parents, and the Board of Governors, we built trust and a collaborative research

interest. Concerns with trust, mutual recognition, and authenticity are key characteristics of good and high-quality research.

It soon became apparent to us during our early discussions, with the nursery manager and senior staff, that this alternative framework, whilst theoretically grounded, was in fact lacking some aspects of ecological validity (Denner et al., 1999), and that there was a need for ongoing involvement and conversations around wider aspects of emotionally attuned support for infants. For example, staff members commented on the requirement that aspects of caregiving, such as feeding, comforting, and sleeping, also needed to be acknowledged within this attuned framework. Through such conversations, the initial questions that had been generated, and which were framed more around the more social and cognitive routines (such as play and stimulation), were modified and broadened to better capture the real-life experience of both infants and key persons during and beyond the initial periods of transition into day care. In effect, whilst getting professionals onboard, the experienced staff members had become integral partners in our attempts to develop a set of ecologically valid research questions that would be administered more widely within this setting and more widely across other settings.

Voluntary and Informed Consent

Our relationship with the nursery was of paramount importance, and to this end, we ensured that participation in this research project was not only based on voluntary, informed consent, but there was interest and motivation from the nursery. Informed consent was vital to our research, and so we talked through all the materials with the nursery manager and her deputy and sent all planning documentation to the nursery for all participants to read and approve. We provided all those involved with full and honest information about the content, purpose, and process of the research, and all parents were given the opportunity to agree or disagree to participate and have opportunities to guide and develop the research at all stages.

Baby Social Observations

Engaging in a meaningful way with parents as research partners and participants was key to our research, and naturalistic observation formed an essential part of both our planning and underpinned our research process. We adopted participant observation (Mayall, 2002), which is a form of observation that involves watching, listening, reflecting, and engaging the participants in conversation. This approach also helped us build our relationships with the baby practitioners, parents, and infants, and ensure equality in power and status within the research. Written observations were made using narrative descriptions of each session observed, with a focus on the structure of the session, relationships, attunement, joint involvement episodes (Schaffer, 1992), infant/adult interactions, infant/infant interactions, and conversation topics. Between us, we observed eight sessions of 'Baby Social' where we became familiar with the baby practitioners,

parents, and their child, and other infants who joined in the session. It is important to note that throughout this initial stage of the project, there were several important issues that required full consideration.

The infants' key workers and parents were present throughout the observations. As researchers, we were sensitive to the needs of the infants, and there was no pressure for them to engage in anything other than usual play and settling-in activities. Had any child shown distress, we would have ceased the observation immediately. Parents were curious about the observations shared with them and keyworkers prior to our subsequent reflective conversations.

Developing Our Research Focus – Parents and Practitioners as Partners

Beyond these early conversations with the manager and deputy manager of this nursery, and over the coming weeks, we became more confident in our initial impressions of the setting. We became fully aware that there was a real synergy between this practice and our own views, which (1) also considered the need for a more protracted and sympathetic approach to transitions (inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach), but (2) went one step further to offer a framework that allows for infants to be supported by practitioners (key persons) who provide a form of emotional caregiving, social interaction, and cognitive stimulation that is similar to what each infant experiences within their primary caregiving relationships with parents (an intersubjective approach). Our conceptual model, emphasising relationships amongst contexts and persons, also informed the approach we took in conducting our research. If we were to understand transition for infants, parents, and practitioners, and if we were to facilitate interactions amongst participants in this process, then our success in this research endeavour was tied to forming relationships with the participants and building partnerships in inquiry, as stated in the introduction to this chapter.

It became apparent that some members of staff were reluctant to be interviewed by so-called 'experts' in this field. We had to address this issue to keep the professionals onboard, but we also did not want the staff to think that they were being assessed as they engaged in the sensitive transitions that they undertook on a daily basis. Doing so would tap into the power relations dynamic, which is evident within all human participant research (Hickey, 2018), resulting in a perceived sense of vulnerability and/or lack of competence of practitioners. It was important to note here that such concerns were not made directly to either researcher but emerged indirectly through dialogue with the nursery manager and deputy, and only after several sessions of attendance at the nursery. These conversations were invaluable for both researchers as they allowed us to reflect on our own position with both the research and the nursery. We also appreciated the honesty. Reflexivity is key to assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity means that researchers should reflect and share with readers how their social positions vis-a-vis research participants may interfere with the researcher's ability to maintain objectivity. The effects of the researcher on the research participants and vice versa are both potential areas for bias and misunderstanding.

Through such reflection we became more aware of the impact of our presence during the daily working routines of caregiving practitioners. We concluded that such concern did not only reflect the silent number of practitioners within the setting but may also have been underlying, and very real concern of all current and potential participants within this research. With these issues in mind, we concluded that our approach to data collection within the setting would benefit by adopting a slower approach to that which was the actual focus of our research. This more considered approach allowed staff members to gradually become comfortable with our presence as we transitioned to becoming regular visitors within the setting.

Open-ended Research

With the issues considered above very much at the forefront of our thoughts, we, as researchers, felt that there was a need for an exploratory and open-ended approach at each stage of the research process. This issue was most evident during the formulation of the open-ended research questions. Initially, both researchers had utilised their own knowledge and academic understanding of the theory surrounding transitions into day care to help direct both the theoretical and empirical focus of the present study.

Thus, we adopted a qualitative approach, in which we conducted relevant research conversations with parents and practitioners. These data were then thematically analysed. We also felt that there was much that we as researchers could both learn and gain from having a collaborative approach within this project. We, therefore, developed a 'practitioners as partners' approach. As outlined below, this allowed for the development of the research questionnaires and has helped inform data collection and analyses. By conducting research in this manner, we aimed to help provide additional support to facilitate smoother transitions moving forward.

Conclusion

Within this chapter, we have described our engagement with the parents, professionals, and children in the nursery and engaged in a sympathetic, critical assessment of our own PPI approach and practice. In the future, we would advocate for more naturalistic public involvement approaches like 'World Café' and ongoing reflexivity to ensure that children and their parents are fully informed about and appreciated in the research process. In our work, the PPI approach we used enabled us to consider our approach, positionality, and practice in the setting in a way that resulted in deeper learning for us. This approach also enabled us to engage more productively with nursery staff and to move from 'outsiders' to 'insiders' in such a way that parents accepted our presence and that practitioners never felt (or were able to manage) that they were being assessed in relation to such a fundamental part of their practice: re-transitions. Trust is one of the basic and core components of good quality research and also trauma-informed research (see Adams, Ramsey, Cooper, and Lhussier in this collection) and is vital in collaborative processes and research with parents and public members. Trust was central to

our public involvement work, and incorporated trust building within our research by consciously developing a reflexive and responsive way of working with parents and practitioners, which we describe as a trust-building approach.

Whilst we were motivated to offer a critique of the current attachment approach to day-care transitions, we were also aware that managing the transition from parent to professional and the attachment formation occupy a central role within parenting and infant emotional well-being. Therefore, in this instance, we had to ensure that both the nursery and we, as researchers, were aligned in our views regarding the importance of primary caregiver presence in supporting the infant during their initial experiences of new people in a new nursery.

It was important for us as infancy researchers to acknowledge that humans in general, and parents in particular, can not only be susceptible to their infants' perceived levels of anxiety and stress, but may elicit such behaviours themselves in a manner that is transmitted back to the infant. Importantly, transitional periods into day care, especially first-time parents, can be especially difficult. For example, there is the potential that such stressful emotions can be interpersonally transmitted from the primary caregiver and infants within such environments which may 'catch' their caregivers negatively heightened affective state (Waters et al., 2017).

As with the previous examples, this issue (an emotionally upset parent) can be the catalyst for the onset of an emotional stress response in the infant, which could possibly persist for several hours after the initial event. Beyond these issues, there is also the potential for infants to either remember (a cognitive interpretation) or become conditioned (a behavioural interpretation) to such experiences (a negative stimulus), and therefore, increase the possibility of similar stress responses in future situations. Nurseries are vibrant research contexts and places where professionals and parents nurture and foster warm and inclusive relationships within them. There are places where so much can be learned by engaging with parents, staff, and children, and those who are allowed to enter these settings should consider themselves privileged. Those challenged with entering and researching these types of areas need to be willing to manage a complex set of corresponding and competing beliefs, values, and perceptions of what is right and what is best for children in relation to their transitions. These issues and concerns can only be managed when research practice is informed by a willingness and ability to engage with different PPI approaches and participant groups and manage them as the research is designed, refined, and delivered in practice.

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