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E822

Children of the Pandemic: A narrative inquiry exploring how children in England aged four-to seven-years perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact upon their lives.

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### **Abstract**

Research demonstrates that children and young people have been widely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This extended proposal explores current literature, identifying a need to hear and understand the unique voices of younger children regarding their experiences and perspectives. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory is examined as a model for enhancing understanding of how numerous factors interact to influence a child's individual experience. A narrative inquiry is proposed to gather the perspectives of four-to-seven-year-olds in England, with a view to improving understanding of how they feel their lives have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and to inform future support strategies.

## Chapter 1- Introduction

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). Shortly afterwards, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the U.K. government set out restrictions which included the closure of public spaces, businesses and schools, and the prohibition of social gatherings and social events. In the two years that followed, whilst many people were faced with illness and bereavement, everyone experienced restrictions on their freedoms to varying degrees. Mass vaccination campaigns culminated in the lifting of restrictions in England on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

A growing body of research is emerging regarding the vast array of impact caused by the pandemic. Serious and concerning issues have been raised about the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for certain groups within society. These issues include the increased disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged (Munir, 2021), further marginalisation of vulnerable groups (Jones et al. 2020), and increased risk of harm and reduced support for those experiencing abuse or domestic violence (Donagh, 2020). Developmental trajectories among children aged four-to-six years have been reported to be diverted more significantly among children from lower socioeconomic status, leading to losses in school readiness for those children who may have already been struggling (Gonzalez et al. 2022). Furthermore, as Sonuga-Barke and Fearon (2021) advise, the risks of long-term harm to young people in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic are plausible.

Concerns over the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people during and following the pandemic are becoming well documented. However, most of the available literature appears to involve older children and adolescents, with a lack of focus on younger children's own views. It is vital to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of young children throughout this challenging period, particularly with a view to ensuring support as they move forward with their lives and in the light of further possible lockdown episodes in the future. Brooks et al. (2020) refer to previous pandemics and identify negative psychological effects during quarantine and even some years after, confirming further the

need to understand children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to find ways to minimise the potential short- and long-term effects (O'Sullivan et al. 2021).

Pre-COVID-19 literature relating to children's stress, anxiety and worry provides useful context. Silverman, La Greca and Wasserstein (1995) identify worry as a key cognitive component to anxiety, with children typically worrying about school performance, health, social relationships and personal harm. This implies that a significant global event such as the COVID-19 pandemic would resonate significantly with children's "typical profile of worries" (Sarkadi et al. 2021, p. 945). Furthermore, pre-COVID-19 literature highlights the relationship between social anxiety in childhood and social difficulties later in childhood and adult life (Ooi et al. 2017; Beesdo et al. 2007). Therefore, if children's anxiety has been heightened during the pandemic, there are concerning implications for children's mental health and wellbeing in the future.

Underpinning the research activity for this dissertation is the view of childhood that has been explored through Masters' study of Childhood and Youth. That is, that children are active and capable agents in their own lives. The United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989, cited in Kellett, 2011) stipulates that children must have opportunities to voice their thoughts, ideas and feelings about matters that affect them. In much of the literature explored in this review, young children's perspectives are excluded or voiced by others, revealing a need to glean young children's own voices regarding their lived experiences of the pandemic. The literature review in Chapter 2 addresses key ideas around issues of voice and participation.

Furthermore, in Chapter 2, literature around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon children will be critically explored. During the process of reviewing topic literature, links with The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) have developed and will be explored alongside the critical analysis of research to date. This will be examined in more detail during Chapters 2 and 3.

A conceptual framework for the proposed research will be presented in Chapter 3. This chapter will advocate and explore an interpretivist paradigm, characterised by a constructivist ontology which accepts multiple realities based on meanings attributed by individuals (Corbetta, 2011). Thus, a subjective epistemology is realised based upon a desire

to understand. Appropriate use of Bronfenbrenner's model within the interpretivist paradigm will be considered. From ontology and epistemology is born methodology, therefore a narrative methodological approach will be explored as a vehicle for seeking understanding. Chapter 4 will present a brief introduction to the proposed research, followed by a detailed discussion of design and methods in Chapter 5.

This E.P. represents a significant journey of academic, professional and personal development. Feedback from TMA01 and TMA02 have significantly influenced the direction and focus of the research, with academic reading and engagement in dialogue during forums and tutorials supporting the development of an ontological and epistemological standpoint. In parallel, personal identity as a researcher has developed. This journey of growth will be outlined further within the dissertation, as will reflections upon the arrival at the following research questions:

- R.Q.1            How do young children aged four-to-seven years narrate their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  
- R.Q.2            What do young children aged four-to-seven years perceive to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

In summary, the focus of this Extended Proposal (E.P.) is on young children's perspectives regarding their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they understand it to have impacted their lives. Supporting this focus is the child's right to participation and voice. The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) is explored as a lens through which to make meaning of findings. The proposed research sits within an interpretivist paradigm, which will influence the research design and methods. This introductory chapter has provided an overview of key components of this dissertation and a rationale for the proposed research. Literature relating to the topic will now be critically explored in detail.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review- The Topic**

This literature review aims to provide the reader with a detailed understanding of the topic and insights into fundamental aspects of the researcher's positionality. The chapter will begin with a critique of relevant key literature from Masters' modules addressing research with children and the importance of participation, which is central to the researcher's position. Subsequently, material relating to the dissertation topic, that is, children's perceptions of the impact of the COVID:19 pandemic on their lives, will be critically analysed. In relation to the topic literature a key theory will be explored, namely The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013). In the context of the literature review, the theory will provide a useful framework for organising findings from current literature into themes. For this reason, key aspects of the theory will be explained prior to the interrogation of topic literature.

### **Children's voice and participation**

A key contributor to the nature and direction of this E.P., and indeed the researcher's standpoint, is material relating to issues of children's rights to participation as set out in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989, cited in Kellett 2011). Article 12 stipulates the rights of children to have their views taken into account regarding issues that affect them, recognising the child as "a full human being with integrity and personality and the ability to participate freely in society" (Freeman, 1995, p. 37, cited in Lundy, 2007). Indeed, the importance of children and young people having a 'voice' is situated within a view of childhood which acknowledges children as capable social beings who can communicate their own social realities (Graham, 2011). Research with children and young people is considered a vehicle to enable children's rights to participation to be realised. This perspective is the foundation for this E.P.: finding out about young children's experiences of the COVID:19 pandemic from young children themselves.

There is much discussion around the rhetoric of terms such as 'giving voice to children'. As James (2007) argues, giving voice to children is about exploring children's unique perspectives and recognising the contribution this can make to our understanding of the

social world, not simply allowing them to speak. James (2007) warns that such rhetoric can undermine child centred research because it masks several problems, namely representation, authenticity and the diversity of children's experiences. An exploration of these interconnecting issues will follow.

The view of children as capable social beings (Graham, 2011) implies that the experiences and perspectives of children may be different to, and just as worthy, as those of adults. Furthermore, the perspectives of those belonging to marginalised groups can provide insights into different social realities. For example, Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) exemplify how considerations of, and adaptations to, methodological aspects can ensure the participation of disabled children and young people in research, whilst also highlighting issues of representation with some children excluded from the study because of their type of disability. As James (2007) cautions, judgements about degrees of competency can mask the rich diversity of children's lives, disempowering children further as their voices become undifferentiated.

Further limitations to the authentic representation of children's voices are identified by Mand (2012) who, despite a strong participatory research agenda, realised that children's voices can be muted at the point of representation by pre-determined adult agendas. Several authors (for example James, 2007) have questioned whether research by adults can ever truly represent children's voices accurately. In agreement, Hammersley (2017) argues that even in participatory research by children, as endorsed by Kellet (2011) there is most likely some decision making by adults. James (2007) ascertains that due to the issue of representation, the view that is being presented is often the view of the author not that of the child.

Whilst it is vital to acknowledge the pitfalls and predicaments of research with children, the search for, and inclusion of, children's unique perspectives must not be abandoned (James 2007). Graham (2011) promotes the acknowledgement of the diverse and fluid nature of childhood as the starting point for understanding important aspects of children's lives and relationships. The significance and necessity of children's participation is neatly summarised by Montgomery and Tatlow-Golden (2018, p7) "How children are understood has a bearing on how they are treated."

It is now pertinent to consider the necessity for participation in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, as Munir (2021) recognises, very few studies during the pandemic have focused on children directly even though children's wellbeing has been disproportionately affected and many children's rights have been neglected (Munir, 2021). Furthermore, few studies focus on the views of young children aged four-to-seven years, thus cementing the aim of this E.P. to understand and gather insights from children in this age group. This chapter will now consider the structure of Bronfenbrenner's model and its capacity to illustrate the multiple factors that affect children's experiences.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development**

Bronfenbrenner's theory concerns the progressive and mutual accommodation between an active, developing person and the changing properties of their immediate setting, with the process being affected by the interaction between these settings and the larger contexts in which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Bronfenbrenner conceives the environment as a nested arrangement of concentric structures each contained within the next, likened to a set of Russian dolls (Ben-David and Nel, 2013).

**\*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS\***

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (Guy-Evans, 2020).

According to the theory, human development is always embedded in the environmental context. Bronfenbrenner considers an ecological transition to occur “whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting or both” (Bronfenbrenner 1981, p26). From these basic concepts it is clear to see that the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic would certainly have an impact upon human development.

As Rosa and Tudge (2013) explain, Bronfenbrenner’s theory has evolved over three phases, from an ecological to a bioecological theory. Crucial to the mature version of the theory is the focus on proximal processes and the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Rosa and Tudge 2013). In summary, regular interactions between organisms and their physical and social environments, as influenced by the nested ecological systems illustrated above, are also affected by individual attributes and the specific sociohistorical circumstances of the chronological time system (Slomp, Mombourquette and Marynowski, 2018). What is seen in the Bioecological Theory of Human Development then, is a “matrix for understanding the vast constellation of independent factors that influence human development” (Slomp et al. 2018).

As this chapter now progresses to consider the current literature regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, it is useful to utilise the different layers of ecological systems as a channel to assess the factors and dimensions affecting children during the pandemic. Furthermore, the theory can be used to organise and give additional context at each level (Kallander, Gordon and Borzekowski, 2021). It is worthy of note however that, in keeping with the theory, there is no assumption that children’s development is influenced by context alone. As stipulated by Rosa and Tudge (2013) proximal processes, person characteristics and time also mutually influence the development process.

### **The topic literature**

Search parameters relating to the title were deployed to ensure the relevance of material for the review. Initially the main Open University database was explored using phrase-searching and Boolean logic techniques, for example “children’s anxiety AND COVID-19”. Peer-reviewed articles were selected as preferable. The term “pandemic” was not used because research specific to COVID-19 was sought. Although this E.P. identifies with an

interpretivist approach, positivist studies and those using quantitative data were not excluded because of their potential to inform. In addition to the OU library, several databases and search engines have been explored including Oxford Bibliographies online, Childhood Studies, Academic Search Complete and Google Scholar.

A limitation in literature relating to the specified age group became apparent when comparing the return on the use of the term “children” as opposed to “young children”. Studies involving older children and those bridging adolescence have been included on the basis that they can inform learning, but those specific to older adolescents and young adults were rejected on the basis of veering too far from the focus of the study. Once theoretical connections had been made, COVID-19 related research which made specific reference to the bioecological systems model was trawled, helping to secure understanding of how the theory and topic material could interact.

The key findings of the literature review will now be explored in relation to the contextual ecological levels outlined in Bronfenbrenner’s theory. The findings are presented in a ‘funnel’ format, ranging from wider factors that the child does not directly participate in through to characteristics at an individual level, with the intention of emphasising the vast network of influences on development.

### **The exosystem - the impact of the media**

As Bronfenbrenner’s theory stipulates, the exosystem includes contexts in which the child does not participate directly but can still be of influence. Kallander, Gordon and Borzekowski (2021) identified factors in the exosystem as having the most impact upon children aged nine-to-thirteen years in Sierra-Leone, Nigeria and Tanzania. These exosystemic features were identified as the child’s religion, home country and exposure to media, that is TV and radio broadcasts. Increased media exposure was reported to have a great impact on children’s perceptions of the nature and severity of COVID-19 and seemed to be the central source of fear regarding COVID-19. Indeed, a theme which has emerged across a body of literature is the connection between high levels of anxiety and the type or amount of information about COVID-19 accessible to them.

The significance of media exposure is evident in a qualitative study by Thompson, Spencer and Curtis (2021) involving children aged seven-to-eleven years in England and

Wales. Children's interview responses and drawings were reflective of key messages and images from the mainstream media. Furthermore, these messages manifested themselves in fears, anxieties and deep sadness about the pandemic, relating to concerns about virus risk for family members and friends with a particular emphasis on death and dying. In agreement, Haig-Ferguson et al. (2020) assert that the real threat of COVID-19 is compounded by media spins on statistics, with a focus on numbers of positive cases and deaths rather than negative cases and recoveries. Haig-Ferguson et al. (2020) point out that children and young people are less likely to scrutinise the quality and relevance of incoming information, thus a threat response may be triggered more rapidly than for adults.

However, Cauberge et al. (2021) found that younger children tended to avoid COVID-19 related information as an avoidant coping mechanism. Yet, it can be argued that children can be continually exposed to messages from multi-media sources regardless of whether they consciously seek or avoid them. A possible oversight by Kallander et al. (2021) and Thompson, Spencer and Curtis (2021), is illuminated by Haig-Ferguson et al. (2020) who explain how health anxiety can be reinforced via mechanics between parent and child, that is the illness beliefs of an anxious parent drives the child's own illness beliefs, leading to intensified difficult dynamics within the family home. Thus, the influence of the media at exosystemic level intersects with interpersonal relationships at the microsystemic level, exemplifying Bronfenbrenner's theorising of the interconnectedness of contexts and the influence of proximal processes, individual characteristics and time (Rosa and Tudge, 2013).

The study by Kallander et al. (2021) highlights some of the challenges of conducting research during the pandemic. For example, the use of face masks can limit access to non-verbal communication. Also, connectivity issues whilst using phones to conduct interviews could distort responses. The study by Thompson et al. (2021) was informed by conversations with the author's own children and children of friends due to the speed with which the project was undertaken, resulting in a lack of diversity within the sample which omitted any perspectives of children from marginalized or vulnerable groups. In general, the inaccessibility of 'real-time' interactions and resulting dependency on online methods created barriers such as a lack of non-verbal cues and a reliance on digital skills and equipment, issues which must be considered when reviewing research conducted during the pandemic.

Despite the shortcomings of the aforementioned studies, they are successful in highlighting the need to create opportunities for children to express their perspectives and facilitate dialogue around challenges that directly impact upon their lives. Spray and Hunleth (2020) refer to a large scale 'invisibilising' of children within public health and media approaches to COVID-19, evident in the lack of child friendly, age-appropriate information available to inform children accordingly without instilling fear. Studies are therefore calling for accurate public health information to counter misconceptions and heightened fears around COVID-19 and have highlighted the need for children's roles and experiences to be included in public health information. Seale et al. (2020) identify the potential role of education in the process of countering the spread of misinformation.

### **The mesosystem - the impact of the loss of school and community groups**

The mesosystem comprises the interrelations among settings in which the developing individual actively participates, for example, relations between home, school, the neighbourhood and peer group (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). A troubling scenario which exemplifies interactions between ecological levels is in the context of family violence within the home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research identifies that social isolation can lead to significant social, economic, and psychological consequences which can be a catalyst for violence-inducing stress (Usher et al. 2020). For the child in these circumstances, changes within the mesosystem, such as school closures and restrictions within the community, exacerbate the potential for harm due to the reduction in safe spaces, reduced opportunities to disclose or be noticed, reduced avenues of support and reduced services. Usher et al. (2020) refer to this interplay of factors as 'the perfect storm', ultimately resulting in the increased risk of harm for those living in abusive households (Donagh, 2020).

As school closure and lockdown enforcement were predominant features of the pandemic it may be of little surprise that a large proportion of the research found relates to these aspects, with some general themes emerging including missing friends, teachers and the loss of daily routine. The position of childhood outlined so far in this chapter is reflected in the work of Pascal and Bertram (2021); and Alabdulkarim et al. (2021) who used play narratives and visual narratives respectively to explore young children's perspectives on school closures. Alabdulkarim, et al. (2021) found that children aged three-to-seven years

missed people, the environment (for example play equipment), nature, daily schedules, writing, food and transportation. Similarly, Pascal and Bertram (2021) report that children aged two-to-four years had a strong desire to regain their daily life and routines, be with friends, have time to play, be outdoors and have authentic information. Both studies champion the use of drawings and/or narrative to perceive children's experiences and provide opportunity for young children to express their own ideas, in contrast to studies which communicate parental concerns and perceptions relating to their children (for example, Fontenelle-Tereschuk, 2021; Egan et al, 2021; Wijaya, Bunga and Kiling, 2022; Vasileva et al. 2021).

However, whilst the study by Alabdulkarim et al. (2021) supports the notion that drawings can be used to perceive children's reflections on what they experience, there are issues in the design of the study which may detract from its authenticity and trustworthiness. Firstly, the prompts provided to facilitate data collection ("Draw yourself in the pre-school," "draw what you love in the pre-school," and "draw what you like doing in the pre-school") were deployed to confirm what children missed most. However, the assumption that loving something or enjoying something directly equates to missing something may lead to misinformation. Secondly, although some sensitivity towards the age of the children is evident, the question "What is it?" was used to prompt discussion of the child's drawing, possibly affecting the child's self-esteem by suggesting that their drawing is uninterpretable. A safer way to explore the child's expression would be a phrase such as "Tell me about this picture" which communicates interest and curiosity rather than criticism, therefore supporting the researchers' ethical duty to minimise harm.

Arguably, the use of play narratives by Pascal and Bertram (2021) to enable children to explore their individual experiences of the pandemic are well placed. However, the report seems to emphasise adult observations, speculations, and interpretations of the narrative rather than the children's expressions themselves, akin with James' (2007) concerns around representation. Indeed, only one example is given of a child's narrative, despite the stated intention to "disrupt existing power hierarchies" (Pascal and Bertram, 2021, p22).

Nevertheless, the studies by Alabdulkarim et al. (2021) and Pascal and Bertram (2021) raise important issues about what children missed out on during periods of lockdown and

school closure. Loss of the daily schedule was also found to be a prominent issue by O'Sullivan et al. (2021), who highlight this as particularly stressful for children with ASD and autism. For these families, mental health difficulties increased, exacerbated by the reduction of community groups and services. Thus, social isolation was recognised as another significant impact on young children's mental health and wellbeing. The paper exemplifies the need for access to services for children and young people during any future lockdown situations, as endorsed by Donagh (2020) and Jones et al. (2020).

Interestingly, this study consisted of online semi-structured interviews with families of children aged nine-to-twelve years. The rationale for interviewing families rather than individuals is not made explicit by O'Sullivan et al. (2021) but it is questionable as to whether interviews as a family group may enrich data or bias individual responses. Children and young people may feel unable to give their true version of experience during lockdown. In addition, the report features significantly more narrative data from parents than children themselves, which seems to be a missed opportunity to capture and reflect the lived experiences and views of children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crucially, studies which gleaned children and young people's perspectives directly were able to reveal perceived positive aspects of life during the pandemic as well as negative aspects. Gimenez-Dasi, Quintanilla and Fernandez-Sanchez (2021) report that children's mental health improved during the lockdown period and beyond. A self-report measure of anxiety was completed by participants aged six-to-eleven years at two time points- a few months prior to the start of the pandemic (for a different study) and 1 year into it. This enabled comparison which is a strength of the study. Gimenez-Dasi et al. (2021) discuss how the removal of pre-COVID-19 stressors, such as school context or social demands, enabled wellbeing to increase. In agreement, Sonuga-Barke and Fearon (2021) found that young people who had found normal pre-COVID life outside the home stressful had improved mental health during lockdown periods.

However, the sample in the Gimenez-Dasi study (2021) included middle/upper class families only, which limits the ability to generalize conclusions. As previously stated, children from disadvantaged backgrounds were likely to have experienced the pandemic differently

(Cowie and Myers, 2021). Other factors are likely to be influential too, for example, individual characteristics such as positivity, which will be explored later in this chapter.

Indeed, as Bacher-Hicks and Goodman (2021) conclude, it is impossible to isolate the impact of school closures on learning or developmental losses. Instead, there is a need to consider the pandemic as a myriad of interactive factors contributing to hardships among young learners (Bacher-Hicks and Goodman, 2021). Egan et al. (2021) emphasise the non-homogeneous nature of the experiences of families and how they were impacted by lockdown, recommending that each child's unique experience be considered in tailoring supports to the areas in which they faced the greatest challenges.

### **The microsystem- changing interpersonal relationships**

Within the Bioecological Theory, the microsystem refers to the immediate settings containing the developing child and the interpersonal relations experienced here, for example family and school. Parental voices appear to dominate the literature, describing the challenges, including boredom and behavioural changes, and benefits, such as improved relationships and spending more time together (Toran et al. 2021). Costa (2022) reports that the mental health of caregivers of pre-school aged children was significantly affected during pre-school closures, with more than 70% feeling sadder, angrier or more anxious. Key challenges were providing age-appropriate playful activities, finding ways to organise the routine care of the child at home, and educating the child when they did something wrong.

Salmon (2021) draws attention to mothers with children at home suffering more than any other group and being vulnerable to heightened depression and anxiety. Salmon (2021) adopts an ecological systems lens which is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's work and that of Pitchik et al. 2021 (cited in Salmon, 2021) explaining that multiple systemic pressures were likely at play during the pandemic, including financial and food insecurity, poverty, and job losses (Salmon 2021) which put varying degrees of pressure on parents and caregivers. Crucially, in turn, the impact that caregiver mental health has on child mental health must be recognised (Salmon, 2021; Cauberghe et al. 2021; Schmutz, 2021) and Salmon (2021) calls for structural, systemic, and financial support to reinforce parental tools and knowledge to enable parents to create a 'buffer' to children's stress and anxiety.

Whilst the views of parents and caregivers are indeed informative, it is apparent that research into young children's perspectives on relationships at the microsystemic level is thin. Cassinat et al. (2021) found that some families with adolescent children experienced increases in 'family chaos' with the onset of the pandemic which related to negative changes in numerous family dynamics including parenting processes, parent-child relationships and sibling relationships. Similarly, Garcia de Avila et al. (2020) found that high levels of anxiety amongst children aged six-to-twelve years were associated with having a higher number of persons living at home, relatively young and less educated guardians, and having a parent who continued to go to work throughout lockdown, a finding replicated by Vasileva et al. (2021). Due to the quantitative nature of the data, there is much speculation on behalf of Garcia de Avila et al. (2020) about the detail behind the findings. For example, it is unclear whether anxiety amongst children whose parent continued to attend work was related to the increased risk of the parent/carer contracting COVID-19 and worries for their health and safety, or the separation whilst social distancing, or both.

Although limited, the available research exemplifies the interconnectedness of familial relationships and the impact of this upon family functioning. The connection between exosystem and microsystem is highlighted, and the studies together serve to illustrate further the interrelatedness of factors within and across systemic levels.

### **Individual characteristics- positivity and hope as protective factors**

According to the bioecological model, children's dispositional characteristics (for example, temperamental shyness or positivity) may contribute to interactions with societal, political, cultural and economic factors thus affecting socio-emotional development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, cited in Sette et al. 2021). Research into coping suggests that children who are more active, sociable, and emotionally positive are more resistant to the effects of stress, perhaps due to pre-dispositional coping mechanisms relating to temperament, for example reactivity and response regulation (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Thompson, Spencer and Curtis (2021) reflect on children's sense of responsibility and general positivity regarding the pandemic. Literature has revealed positivity to be a potential protective factor for shy children's levels of depression and loneliness, especially during the

COVID-19 pandemic. Sette et al. (2021) deployed online self-evaluation scales with children aged six-to-twelve years which highlighted the role of children's positivity in buffering the link between shyness and negative feelings during the pandemic. Arguably, the data for this quantitative study was collected at home which may have masked children's real dispositions. Furthermore, the study cannot compare its findings outside the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In keeping with Sette et al. (2021,) Kirby et al. (2021) report on 'Hopeful Minds,' a 12-week hope-based intervention programme. Post intervention, significant increases in hope, resilience, stoicism, and social support seeking behaviours were documented. The identification of traits such as positivity and hope as potential buffers for negative feelings is important because of potential application and impact. As Sette et al. (2021) point out, positivity is a somewhat malleable trait, therefore opportunities for intervention from parents, caregivers and practitioners in promoting children's positive attitudes towards themselves, their life and their future are tangible. The 'Hopeful Minds' project is also illustrative of positive promotion of coping mechanisms.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has presented a critical argument for the participation of young children in research. The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) has helped to demonstrate the complex interrelating network of factors which have influenced children's experiences of the pandemic, both positive and negative. Key themes emerging from the literature include the lack of appropriate information within the media, social and educational isolation during lock down periods, the loss of the daily routine, complexities of interpersonal relationships and the impact of individual characteristics such as positivity. Most relevant to this E.P. is the evidenced lack of direct interaction with young children to find out their own expressions of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reinforces the justification of the following research questions:

- R.Q.1            How do young children aged four-to-seven years narrate their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?

R.Q.2           What do young children aged four-to-seven years perceive to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

### **Chapter 3- The Conceptual Framework**

This chapter aims to present an underpinning philosophy of the research proposed, of which the focus is young children's perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and their understanding of its impact upon their lives. To begin, the researcher's world view will be established through exploration of ontology, epistemology and axiology, illustrating the arrival at an interpretivist paradigm. This will be followed by a critique of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) with a focus on its relationship with the researcher's world view and values, and its role in the proposed research. Arising from this, narrative methodology will be explored as a system for acquiring knowledge about social reality within the interpretivist paradigm, thus laying the philosophical foundations for the instrumentation of the proposed research which will be outlined in chapters 4 and 5. Thus, the relationship between philosophical understanding and practicalities of research will be illustrated, as highlighted by Farrow and Mathers (2020). Furthermore, the reader will gain an understanding of the interconnectedness of the development of the conceptual framework and the author's identity as researcher and how both have evolved.

#### **Ontology, epistemology and axiology- identifying with interpretivism**

A useful starting point for addressing these somewhat challenging concepts is the consideration of three basic questions set out by Corbetta (2011):

1. Does social reality exist?
2. Is it knowable?
3. How can we acquire knowledge about it?

In chronological order, the questions refer to ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what can be known) and methodology (how we can find out) and help piece together the philosophical elements which underpin research. Farrow and Mathers (2020) add to this further by introducing the concept of axiology, that is, the study of values and value judgements. Farrow and Mathers (2020) advise researchers to reflect on "what ought to be in an area of research that drives you" (p. 357). For this E.P., the researcher's values are

reflected in the assertions surrounding a child's right to participation and having their voice heard, underpinned by an ethics of care (Noddings, 2012). Therefore, in answer to Corbetta's first question of ontology, the researcher affiliates with the notion that there are multiple subjective realities, each of which is socially constructed by and between individuals (Farrow and Mathers, 2020). This clearly relates to the axiological stance, namely the value and necessity of listening to children's varied realities, which in conjunction with the ontological stance leads to the epistemological view that knowledge is subjective and formed at the individual level (Farrow and Mathers, 2020).

With these views established it is possible to identify with an interpretivist research paradigm. Bunniss and Kelly (2010) establish two key features of interpretivism which resonate powerfully here. The first is a subjective epistemology which anticipates multiple, diverse interpretations of reality rather than the seeking of an absolute truth. The second is an interpretative drive to collect a range of detailed accounts to build a picture of how a phenomenon is understood by those who have experienced it. In contrast, a positivist epistemology considers knowledge to be objective and generalisable (Bunniss and Kelly, 2010) and is rejected due to its limitations in the study of human behaviour (Cohen et al. 2011).

The interpretivist standpoint both propels and supports the proposed research around understanding young children's perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic based upon their experiences of it, and how they feel it has impacted upon their lives. As Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011) stipulate, interpretive researchers begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them. Certainly, the 'generative' nature of this type of research as referred to by Bunniss and Kelly (2010), which allows different interpretations of a particular phenomenon to emerge, well describes the research intentions.

To summarise, the proposed research is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm which is supported by an axiology which values children's own interpretations of their own reality based upon their experiences. The chapter will now go on to consider how The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge,

2013) can be used to serve this research orientation, followed by the methodology arising from the interpretivist stance.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory – its place within an interpretivist paradigm**

As demonstrated in Chapter 2 of this review, The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) can be a useful lens through which to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children because it identifies the complex network of systemic influences upon an individual's life. Indeed, some studies have drawn upon it to develop a theoretical underpinning (Salmon 2021; Kallander, Gordon and Borzekowski, 2021; Goldfeld et al. 2022).

However, as Passey (2020) asserts, "taking models, frameworks and theories for granted will only limit our ultimate knowledge; we must be prepared to question these from the inside (when and during use) as well as from the outside (before we use them)" (Passey 2020, p15). It is therefore necessary to interrogate theory and how it is used to support research. Rosa and Tudge (2013) point out that Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development evolved from ecology to bioecology over three phases and it is vital that scholars state which version they are using to support their research given the extent of the changes over time. Furthermore, Tudge et al. (2016) recognise widespread failures within literature to correctly describe the theory and acknowledge its central concepts. Salmon (2021) and Kallander et al. (2021) are both examples of studies which do not refer to the PPCT aspect of the model (proximal processes, personal characteristics, context and time), which according to Tudge et al. (2016) could pose significant issues for future research due to the misrepresentation of the theory.

Yet, it is vital to pay attention to the role to which a theory is assigned within a research project. As Passey (2020) cautions, the choice of underpinning and the choice of its role can both provide for and potentially limit the opportunity for a study to question and develop theory. It is pertinent to refer to the interpretivist paradigm as a guide and establish that within the interpretivist approach theory does not precede research but follows it (Cohen et al. 2011). As Glaser and Strauss (cited in Cohen et al. 2011) stipulate, theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations- it should be grounded in data generated by the research act. This justifies the chosen role of theory in the studies by Salmon (2021), Kallander et al.

(2021) and Goldfeld et al. (2022) and supports the proposed use of Bronfenbrenner's theory within this proposal.

This E.P. does not claim Bronfenbrenner's theory as a foundation; there is no intention to test a hypothesis or control or measure any variable as Tudge et al. (2016) suggest would be required. In terms of application, the theory will provide a framework of categories into which data will be organised, and provide contextual understanding of the findings, furthermore, providing opportunities for discussion and conclusions (Passey, 2020). As demonstrated in the review of topic literature, the bioecological model illuminated the connections between different factors of influence and may therefore be applied in the same way to data collected here, supporting the development of themes. Furthermore, the bioecological model may influence dissemination in terms of sharing the findings with parents, practitioners and policy makers who operate at different systemic levels within the child's environment.

Given that a paradigm serves as a theoretical perspective and guides the research, (Corbetta, 2011) it is important to ensure that any theoretical influence can work harmoniously within the parameters of the identified paradigm. Tudge et al. (2016) present a robust argument that Bronfenbrenner's theory sits within a contextualist paradigm, which ascertains that human development results from the synergistic interactions of environmental and material (genetic, biological and physiological) causes. Contextualists recognise that trying to control variables to see their effects independently is futile, therefore the goal of contextualism is to try to understand the joint, synergistic effects of several relevant influencing factors (Tudge et al. 2016). This has some resonance with a central aim of the interpretivist paradigm, that is, to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al. 2011). Indeed, it could be argued that the interpretive paradigm and Bronfenbrenner's theory are united in their concern for the individual. So, whilst it is accepted that the theory may not be interpretivist in a pure sense, with differing academic views as to its ideal placement, it is believed to be sympathetic towards the interpretivist paradigm, thus further justifying its selection and role within this E.P.

In summary, this E.P. acknowledges that theory can be used in different ways to support the research process and recognises the importance of a critical approach to theory.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) will be used here within an interpretivist paradigm as a framework for data organisation, to support contextual understanding of the findings, to facilitate discussion and guide dissemination. This chapter will now go on to explore narrative methodology as signposted by the axiology, ontology and epistemology established above.

### **Narrative methodology as a path to understanding**

As discussed above, and to paraphrase Allison and Pomeroy (2000), the way in which we see the world will have an impact on what we know. Furthermore, ontological and epistemological issues impact the preferences for quantitative and qualitative methods. Where quantitative data can provide statistics from which generalisations can be made, qualitative data offers increased understanding, and enables 'verstehen,' meaning insight into the point of view of the person (Allison and Pomeroy 2000). A qualitative methodology affiliates with the participatory approach advocated in previous chapters because it enables the generation of rich detail from children about their own lived experiences. Therefore this E.P. will seek qualitative data from young children regarding their perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic and their understandings of how it has impacted upon their lives.

Allison and Pomeroy (2000) identify a hermeneutic methodology, defined by Josselson (2004) as the theory and methodology of interpretation including the art of understanding and communication. Interpretation can be viewed in two ways. One perspective is a hermeneutics of faith which aims to restore meaning and examine the various messages in an interview, giving 'voice' to the participants in various ways. Alternatively, a hermeneutics of suspicion attempts to decode disguised meanings, guiding the researcher to strive for explanation beyond the participant's narrative. It is the former with which this E.P. affiliates because, as Josselson (2004) explains, the hermeneutics of faith is concerned with the co-creation of meaning and grounded theory, tying in with the interpretivist view that theory emerges from the data rather than preceding it (Cohen et al. 2011). This can be described as 'emergent narrative truth' which is co-constructed in the moment, relying on the roles of the participant and researcher in order for meaning to emerge. (The Open University, 2021). Importantly, the hermeneutics of faith approach demonstrates a commitment to authenticity and trustworthiness, or demonstrating the credibility of findings, as considered by Guba and

Lincoln (2007). In addition to co-construction of truth, a further example would be a researcher presenting their analysis to the participants for review, a strategy which is a planned part of this E.P.

To justify the selection of narrative methodology for this E.P. it is useful to refer to the work of Daiute (2014) who recognises that a sound rationale for using narrative reports in research is to gather information about personal experiences, memories, feelings and knowledge, which is the shared aim of this E.P. Indeed, surveys or controlled experiments do not have the capacity to capture the “particular, idiosyncratic, deeply held experiences of being in this world” (Daiute 2014, p10). A further benefit to such ‘thick’ data or descriptions is the socio-cultural or historical context that can be provided to the reader, aiding them in making decisions about transferability (Guba and Lincoln, 2007) and how useful the work is to their own circumstances (Allison and Pomeroy, 2000).

Furthermore, Daiute (2004) proposes that narrative reporting results in the empowerment of those who may have been excluded from public hearings of personal experience, which addresses the gap in literature around the experiences of young children during the COVID-19 pandemic and connects with the researcher’s axiological commitment to enabling young children to participate. Clandinin (2018) refers to narrative inquiry as a way to “stay awake to the world children and families live in” (p. 22). So, for reasons which have been discussed here, namely the agreement between narrative and the interpretivist paradigm, the seeking of rich and thick data to aid understanding and the value of giving voice to young children, a narrative methodology is appropriate and beneficial to this E.P.

Research with children requires special ethical consideration which aims to balance autonomy and agency with prevention of harm. As stipulated by Oates (2019), a rights-based approach commands a need to avoid the exclusion of children from research and ensure children’s voices are heard on issues that concern them. This supports the researcher’s argument that a participatory approach is an ethics in itself- it would be unethical not to include the views of young children regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, researchers have an obligation to enable participation for children and young people in ways that are safe and appropriate to their evolving capacities (Oates, 2019). Detailed exploration of ethical issues relating to this E.P. will take place in Chapter 5.

To recap, this chapter has so far established that the E.P. exists within an interpretivist paradigm affiliating with a qualitative, narrative methodology which will guide the selection of methods and tools by which to collect the required data. The process will be informed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 2001, cited in Rosa and Tudge, 2013) which will serve as a framework for the organisation of data and discussion and dissemination of findings. Therefore, it is possible to echo Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead (2009) in the development of a methodology that is child-centred but also acknowledges that every child is embedded within a network of social and economic relationships. The following section will outline the journey that the researcher has embarked upon to arrive at this position and their identity as researcher.

### **Researcher identity and the journey here**

The arrival at the position of emerging researcher within an interpretivist paradigm is the result of many influences including personal experience, academic reading, dialogue, reflection and reflexivity. It is vital that researchers can recognise and attend to their own investment in the research because it is likely to influence the research process and outcomes (Bunniss and Kelly, 2010). The journey has been inextricably linked with the development of the conceptual framework, through the ongoing study of Masters' module E822, as detailed below.

The researcher's own experience as a mother of two young children during the COVID-19 pandemic can certainly be identified as the nucleus of the E.P., sparking the interest in the topic area. At TMA01, it was recognised by the researcher that this personal anchor could influence their relationship with the research, hence the beginnings of a reflexive approach and ongoing mindfulness towards emotional links (Arber, 2006). Relevant here is the researcher's positionality within the research setting (explored more fully in Chapter 5). The researcher will be conducting the research from an 'outsider' position but recognises some links with the position of 'insider' due to connections with the setting (a primary school) in terms of parental status. As pointed out by Arber, (2006), the experience of being an outsider, an insider and on the boundary between these two roles can cause some strain for the researcher and has implications for the research process. For example, as Mercer (2007) stipulates, disadvantages of 'insider' research include the potential impact of the researcher's

own pre-conceptions, and those that participants may have formed about them because of their shared history.

In addition to personal experience, feedback from TMA01 and TMA02 have shaped the researcher's journey. At TMA01, tutor feedback prompted careful consideration of the age-group focus for the E.P. which was clarified and reinforced through further engagement with topic literature and the discovery of the gap in representation of young children's perspectives, specifically those aged between four and seven years. Subsequently, TMA02 feedback prompted deeper interrogation of the methods and methodology within published studies, cultivating a growing understanding of paradigms, ontology and epistemology, thus helping to crystallise the researcher's emerging paradigm position. This is viewed to be an ongoing process as further research experience is acquired. Thunberg (2021) points to the importance of researchers sharing their positive and negative experiences of different methods with each other and establishing reflection as part of the research process.

A further channel of guidance has come via academic dialogue with tutors and peers. For example, a specific E822 tutorial regarding narrative methodology resonated with the researcher's axiology and provided insight into new and exciting ways of accessing young children's truths which seemed to fit well with the researcher's developing view of the world.

In essence, a number of academic and personal factors have shaped and supported the researcher's emerging identity and paradigm position which has simultaneously enabled the growth of the conceptual framework. This interconnectedness serves to highlight further the assertion that the researcher's perspective is inextricably bound up within the study (Bunniss and Kelly, 2010). As Josselson (2004) reinforces, "the researcher is a constitutive element of the hermeneutic circle and must speak his or her own positioning in the world" (Josselson, 2004, pp. 10-11).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has enabled the reader to gain understanding of the conceptual framework and how philosophical aspects such as ontology, epistemology and axiology have influenced the methodological perspective. Theory has been critically evaluated and considered within the chosen interpretivist paradigm, with its role in this E.P. clearly established. Analysis of the journey to the researcher's current position has been provided

highlighting the mutually influential relationship between the researcher's journey and the development of the conceptual framework. Having considered the philosophical groundings for this E.P., the following chapters will address the research design and methods which will seek to answer following research questions:

- R.Q.1            How do young children aged four-to-seven years narrate their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  
- R.Q.2            What do young children aged four-to-seven years perceive to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

## Chapter 4- The Research Proposal

The research title, “Children of the Pandemic: A narrative inquiry exploring how children in England aged four-to-seven years perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact upon their lives,” reflects the intention and purpose of the study, which is to find out from young children themselves their realities of the pandemic and how they feel it has affected their lives. The research therefore comes from a desire to understand, influenced by personal experiences as a parent, academic reading, reflection and dialogue. It is hoped that the research will provide insight into young children’s perspectives while demonstrating that every child will have a unique set of experiences, shaped by multiple factors, which will be interpreted by them in a unique way. Furthermore, it is hoped that the research will contribute to the advancement of young children’s participation in research and other contexts.

Through reviewing the existing topic literature alongside module materials relating to children’s participation and voice, it became clear that gleaning the voices of young children themselves in relation to the recent pandemic was a valid research avenue. Links were forged with the work of Bronfenbrenner whose Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Rosa and Tudge, 2013) is harmonious with the idea that there are multiple realities which are dependent upon individual, social and environmental factors. In tandem, the researcher made connections with an interpretivist paradigm from which emerged narrative methodology (Bunniss and Kelly, 2010).

The wording of the title and research questions have evolved during the literature review and planning process in several ways. Firstly, the original age range specified was four to eight years, but at the point of TMA01 this was refined to reflect the gap identified in current literature and to fit with the school age range of reception and Key Stage One. A second adaptation is the reference to methodology within the title, with the inclusion of ‘narrative’ over ‘qualitative’ enhancing specificity for the reader. This is also reflected in the research question of how children ‘narrate’ their experiences as it is recognised that this may occur in different ways, for example verbally or through drawing.

Furthermore, the original version of the title referred specifically to ‘reflections, worries and hopes’ but it was felt this might be presumptuous in assuming that children would necessarily harbour worries and hopes. The evolved wording is more open and is not based on any assumptions by the researcher. Similarly, the research questions have been purposefully kept open and not reflective of preconceptions because it is the children’s interpretations that are of interest not the researcher’s (Bunniss and Kelly, 2010).

At TMA02 it was also recognised that it would be beneficial to enable some ‘forward looking’ feedback from the children, hence the inclusion of the term ‘impact’. Indeed, narrative inquiry accounts for a reconstruction of the past and an anticipation of the future (McAdams, 2011, cited in Venuleo et al. 2020).

Therefore, the final version of the research questions for this E.P. are as follows:

- R.Q.1            How do young children aged four-to-seven years narrate their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  
- R.Q.2            What do young children aged four-to-seven years perceive to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

The following chapter will now address the research design, methods, and data analysis procedures which will serve to answer the research questions outlined above.

## **Chapter 5 Research Design, Methods and Analysis**

This chapter will set out the research design and show how it has been born out of the research philosophy presented in Chapter 3. Key literature will be drawn upon to help explain the intended narrative approach. Research methods will be explained and justified with consideration given to sample selection, ethics, positionality, authenticity and trustworthiness. Methods of analysis will be presented, and the dissemination strategy will be outlined. This chapter will therefore provide a comprehensive overview as to how the following research questions will be answered:

- R.Q.1            How do young children aged four-to-seven years narrate their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- R.Q.2            What do young children aged four-to-seven years perceive to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

### **Research paradigm**

The research design has been informed by the interpretivist paradigm which acknowledges multiple and diverse interpretations of reality and endeavours to collect detailed accounts based on individual experience. Furthermore, the research design strives to realise the researcher's axiology of enabling participation for young children. A narrative approach relates to children's ways of viewing and understanding their worlds and serves to limit adults' perspectives and elicit children's voices (Fane, 2017) regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon children's lives.

### **The Research Approach**

The research approach recognises narrative as a way of understanding experience, a process through which individuals represent and make sense of past experience, evaluate experiences in the present and plan and anticipate future experiences (Garvis, 2015). As explained in Chapter 3, a hermeneutics of faith (Josselson, 2004) is adopted, highlighting the co-creation of meaning between participant and researcher as opposed to the participant 'telling' and the researcher 'interpreting' (The Open University, 2021).

An important feature of narrative inquiry, to which the interpretivist paradigm is sympathetic, is the sense of ambiguity in terms of data collection. As Clandinin (2018) stipulates, researchers have to go where participants' stories and life-making tells them. Therefore, starting points for research are planned but there is 'openness'. Dauite (2014) refers to short narrative reports which focus on specific moments in life such as a traumatic event (like the COVID-19 crisis). Research activities will therefore aim to glean participants' 'stories' from that event up to the present but limited structure will be included.

The research design comprises a flexible multi-method approach which provides varied opportunities and modes for expression. Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead (2009) advocate a multi-method approach to widen opportunities to engage diverse groups of children, recognising that children possess a broad range of capacities and preferences for self-expression. Visual methods, for example, can enable children with limited literacy to participate. Furthermore, an element of choice encourages a power shift between researcher and participant, an objective integral to enabling young children's voices to be heard. As Fane et al. (2018) endorse, participatory research approaches must "dismantle hierarchical arrangements which elevate adult views over children's" (Fane et al. 2018, p. 364).

In summary, the overall research design is a narrative inquiry which seeks to elicit children's voices about the COVID-19 pandemic through the generation of co-constructed meaning in the form of short narrative reports. A multi-method approach underpins the research design providing children with different ways to express their views. This chapter now goes on to consider how participants will be recruited, practically and ethically, to take part in the research.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

A primary school setting was chosen for reasons of accessibility, consistency with the chosen age range, and diversity in terms of background, ethnicity, home language, and SEND. The school currently holds a valid DBS check for the researcher. In terms of impact, teachers and school staff are well placed to respond to the outcomes of the study which will be of benefit to young children (Sarkadi et al. 2021). The setting is also familiar through personal and professional connections, although it is recognised that this can pose challenges as well as benefits. As Clandinin (2018) reminds, the researcher must be aware of the impact the

setting could have on the data, for example children may feel they need to give the 'right' answer or behave in a certain way in the presence of an adult. This has been addressed in the research methods which will be set out later in this chapter.

The researcher will meet with the Headteacher and discuss the research intentions and gain Gatekeeper permission (see Appendix 1). Children and parents within the specified age-group of four-to-seven years will then receive details about the study (See Appendix 2) and an invitation to participate. The opportunity to participate is open to all pupils aged four-to-seven years regardless of gender, SEND, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. Once the expressions of interest have been received there will be a random selection of two children per year group, resulting in a total sample size of six children, a suitable number to allow time for transcription of narratives which can be a time-consuming exercise (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). To capture perspectives across gender, a balance of male, female, and non-binary participants should there be any, will be secured.

### **Procedure and ethics**

The research design is firmly underpinned by ethical considerations and the virtues of integrity and respect. The research adheres to the ethical guidance for research in education by BERA (2008) and has been guided by The Open University Ethical Appraisal Form (see Appendix 3). Working with young children requires special ethical sensitivity, and consideration has been given to this throughout the research process. Furthermore, as endorsed by Beazley et al. (2009) researchers must be open to being challenged and criticised if participation is to be achieved. Therefore, reflection and reflexivity are necessary parts of ethical research and will be actively practised throughout.

Parental and participant consent and assent will be gathered in the first instance via a child-friendly consent form to be shared with the child by parent/carer (see Appendix 4) and will be re-visited during and after data-collection, as stipulated by Oates (2019). Participants can withdraw without consequences at any point, as stipulated in the information letter (Appendix 2) and by re-visiting the issue of consent the participants have explicit opportunities to discontinue should they so wish. Part of the consent required is in relation to the audio-recording of the research activities for accuracy and reference. Data protection guidance (GDPR, 2018) will be adhered to in the storing of files which will be held

electronically under password protection by the researcher, with pseudonyms applied consistently. Participants have the right to access their individual data on request.

Research activities will take place in a quiet room within the school. Negotiations with the Headteacher will help to establish the best timings for the activities to occur, considering factors such as what the children will be missing in class, timings which may suit individual characteristics best, and availability of space.

An important ethical dilemma within the use of narrative methods concerns being faithful to the meanings of the interviewee (Josselson, 2004). Issues of confidentiality can arise because the collection of detailed data may result in the participant being identifiable in the report even when pseudonyms are used. Furthermore, issues of representation, like those set out in Chapter 2, are relevant and require the researcher to continually ask themselves whether they can adequately convey the meanings of the participant (Josselson, 2004).

Thunberg (2021) discusses the tension arising from the reliance upon participants' sharing of (potentially) sensitive stories and the ethical duty to protect participants' personal integrity and prevent harm. The possibility of evoking emotional or upsetting memories from the lockdown periods has been considered and the researcher intends to ask the Emotional Wellbeing Leader within the school to be on hand to offer support if necessary. From a reflexive viewpoint, it is also important to consider the wellbeing of the researcher which, in turn, could affect the participant and the data. As Erben (2000) explains, through the telling of stories and hearing of stories our narrative selves engage with culture. This can be a catalyst for a 'double effect', that is, "as one transmits a narrative to the other, one takes on the task of simultaneously configuring one's own life story" (Erben, 2000, p. 385).

One way to reduce the risk of compromising the integrity and wellbeing of participants is to look for non-verbal cues and steer, divert or offer to stop the research accordingly, as endorsed by Thunberg (2021) who ascertains that minimizing harm to the participant must be the researcher's priority. Furthermore, awareness of the researcher's own non-verbal cues is vital as they can have consequences, such as over-disclosure on the part of the participant (Clandinnin, 2018).

Additionally, the researcher must be mindful of incidental findings, deploying 'situation specific ethical reasoning' if necessary (Kotch, 2000, cited in Oates, 2019.) For

example, a disclosure of harm or abuse will override the confidentiality agreement, as communicated to parents and children in information letter (Appendix 2).

In order to maximise the validity of the research, a pilot study will be carried out with different children to evaluate the suitability of the methods and gain insight as to how the research design could be improved for participants (Skinner, 2018). Participants for the pilot study will be recruited in a similar way as outlined above. The researcher believes that one four-year-old and one seven-year-old will be sufficient for the pilot study, to ensure that the planned activities are suitable across the age spectrum. The children will partake in the research activities akin to the main study and will be asked to provide their thoughts and feedback on their experiences. The design for the main study can then be adjusted accordingly. As Mand (2012) asserts, interrogating the process of working with children can help to address issues of voice, power and authority.

It is the researcher's intention that consideration of the ethical issues raised here will be evident in the practical research activities which will now be outlined.

## **Measures**

The measures for data collection have been organised into three phases. The first phase is primarily focussed on the forming of relationships between researcher and participants as an essential pre-cursor to data collection. The second and third phases focus on data-collection itself. Each phase will be outlined and justified here. Please see Appendices 5, 6, and 7 for detailed descriptions of each activity in action.

### *Phase 1 Group circle-time activity*

Arguably, relationships, rapport, familiarity and trust between researcher and participants are a vital foregrounding for data-collection (Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead, 2009; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, Thomas and O'Kane (cited in Fane et al. 2018), promote the creation of an environment where answers are not right or wrong. Therefore, Phase 1 consists of a circle time activity designed to encourage communication and engagement with children to develop relationships of mutual respect and trust (Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead, 2009). Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to introduce the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead (2009) reflect that the presence of peers can shift the power balance between adult and children, thus contributing to a culture of participation. Certain mechanisms have been incorporated into the design to further promote this culture and challenge hierarchical systems. These include having participants and researcher seated on the floor together, using language which invites participants to teach the researcher, and using a 'check-back' mechanism (Fane et al. 2018) of repeating back to the participant what they said to correct misunderstandings (to be used throughout all phases).

A potential drawback of forming relationships with young participants could be that their desire to please becomes heightened, and therefore the check-back mechanism could result in children agreeing with the researcher's erroneous interpretation rather than correcting them. However, it is hoped that the culture of respect that the researcher is aiming to establish will over-ride any such issue. This will be an important reflection point following the pilot and the main study.

Please see Appendix 5 for details of the Phase 1 Circle Time Activity.

### *Phase 2 Draw and tell activity*

As previously mentioned, the methods have been designed to enable participation in different ways. Among other researchers, Sairenan and Kumpulainen (2014) advocate visual narrative inquiry as a way of listening to children. Indeed, Alabdulkarim et al. (2021) describe drawing as a second language and an outlet for children through which they can freely express themselves. Therefore, an optional drawing-based activity, based on what the children remember about life during the pandemic, has been designed to widen opportunities for participation, influenced by the work of Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead (2009).

Two important reflections arose from the aforementioned study. Firstly, the drawing activity was best placed on an individual rather than group level due to the potential for discussion of sensitive issues. This is pertinent to the topic focus of this E.P. as children may have experienced distressing circumstances during the pandemic. Secondly, younger children may need scaffolding to support their drawing. Caution is needed here as too much influence from the researcher could affect the data and therefore mask the participant's true meaning.

However, a strength of this approach is the opportunity for narrative alongside the drawing, enabling the researcher to support the participant in expressing their truth.

Please see Appendix 6 for details of the Phase 2 Draw and Tell activity.

### *Phase 3 Unstructured interviews*

Interviews will enable participants' short narrative reports to be expressed. Thunberg (2021) refers to 'teller-focused' interviews in which the researcher uses open-ended questions to let the participants tell their stories in their own words. In this scenario the focus is on the 'teller' and the interaction with the researcher, shifting the focus from the story itself to the participant and the communicative process. Mooney and Duffy (2014) refer to the use of open-ended questions and letting participants talk in order to be engaged in their experiences; letting them lead but using sub-questions like "tell me more about..." The focus of the interviews will be children's current feelings about the pandemic and their perceptions of how it has affected their lives. Please see Appendix 7 for details of the Phase 3 Unstructured Interviews.

A possible drawback to this technique could be that some participants may require further interaction in order to engage with such open questions. Herein lies the strength of the co-emergent hermeneutic (Josselson, 2004) in which the researcher will also naturally interact with the participant to establish shared meaning. Indeed, the Open University (2021) encourage researchers to look for shared understanding of ideas, not necessarily an 'outsider interpretation'. This places the researcher as an active player in the data collection process, evident in the continual checking of meaning alongside the participant.

### **Credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity**

To complete this section, it is timely to refer to the concepts of authenticity and trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln, 2007) within the research process. The explicitness and transparency deployed here about the research decisions made contribute to the credibility of this research. As explained in Chapter 3, the hermeneutics of faith (Josselson, 2004) is, by nature, committed to authenticity and therefore trustworthiness. Furthermore, specific elements of the process are recognised as directly contributing to this, for example the check-

back mechanism (Fane et al. 2018). To build on this further, a member-checking strategy will be implemented in which the researcher will take the interpretation of data back to the participants to check for accuracy, fairness and representation (Creswell 2002, cited in Fane et al. 2018). It is hoped that the 'thick data' generated by this narrative inquiry will place the reader in a position to make decisions about transferability and relevance to their own circumstances, as established by Allison and Pomeroy (2000).

The chapter will now consider how the data will be analysed prior to the member-checking practice (Fane et al. 2018).

### **Analysis**

The research paradigm and research design affiliate with an inductive, 'bottom up' approach to data analysis, whereby the data analysis process generates themes to group the data and identify relationships and patterns relating to the research question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Thus, a suitable approach is Thematic Analysis which allows the researcher to search for answers to their questions and make a rich, detailed and complex description of the data (The Open University, 2021a), identifying and interpreting key features of the data guided by the research question (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

The flexibility of Thematic Analysis, as advocated by (Clark and Braun, 2017), appeals to the quality of uncertainty that narrative inquiry brings (Clandinnin, 2018). Seeking to understand what participants think, feel and do requires the identification of patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experiences (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Arguably, the association between Thematic Analysis and grounded theory is visible here: the truth is emerging from the data as it is inductively analysed with no pre-determined themes. However, as Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, grounded theory expects a theoretical commitment which, given the scale and scope of this investigation, is not on the researcher's agenda per se. The aim of the research is to understand.

Therefore, it is the researcher's intention to adopt a holistic approach to the data, to capture the 'wholeness' of individuals and groups (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Each participant's data will be examined across phases (research activities) for emerging themes which will be responsive rather than pre-ordinate. Then, patterns between individuals and

groups will be explored, again applying an inductive approach. A simple numerical coding system will be used to identify themes.

As an aide to understanding and discussing themes, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Rosa and Tudge, 2013) will be used to 'map' emerging themes, highlighting the complex network of influences upon individuals. However, it is vital that the researcher acknowledges, rather than ignores, how their awareness of this theory may influence their interpretation of data (James, 2007). Such reflexivity is paramount within the research process and therefore the researcher will make notes on ideas, insights, comments and reflections throughout the process, thus generating parallel reflexive data which will be reported upon. Hohti and Karlsson (2013, p. 559) refer to a "reflexive space of listening" in which researchers question their own ways of selecting and interpreting children's voices. The benefit of doing so is to highlight the context of the interpretations, for example the researcher's values, thus challenging, and therefore enhancing, the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings. Furthermore, reflexive reporting can be useful for other researchers in understanding the challenges of participatory research.

To summarise, a Thematic Analysis approach will be used to code emerging themes within and across data. Reflexive notes will serve to illustrate and enlighten the process. Bronfenbrenner's theory may be useful to help identify, organise and understand the themes, facilitating further discussion. As mentioned previously, the practice of member-checking (Fane et al. 2018) will be used to maximise the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings. It is now timely to consider the dissemination strategy.

### **Dissemination**

The dissemination strategy will serve to fulfil the researcher's responsibility to those involved and potentially affected by the proposed research. This includes groups and individuals at a local level and within the academic community. Dissemination may also be extended to professionals and policy makers who operate within the different levels of the child's environment, as indicated by the bioecological model.

Participants and their parents/carers will be provided with a summary leaflet which includes a link to the full report. The leaflet will outline the identified themes and acknowledge limitations of the study in a way that children and parents/carers can

understand. The leaflet will also include an expression of thanks, placing value upon the participation of the children, and thus taking the opportunity to flag the benefits of participatory research. This will ensure that the participants recognise their contribution and hopefully encourage further participation in the future. It may also enhance the self-esteem of the children, knowing that their voices have been heard and valued.

School staff will be given access to the full report with an overview summary provided to outline the key components of the research process, key themes and limitations. Again, the opportunity will be used to highlight the benefits of participatory research with the intention of encouraging future research projects within the setting. It may be useful to provide some discussion prompts regarding the key findings which staff may wish to use in a staff meeting to develop dialogue around the impact that COVID-19 may have had on pupils within their school, and actions that might be taken. Links to further information regarding participatory research with children will be provided, for example, [Children's Research Centre | Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies \(open.ac.uk\)](#).

The researcher is motivated to share findings with the academic community via a conference presentation in the first instance. This would enhance the researcher's professional development and generate potential interest in a larger scale study. Future research could then be submitted to relevant journals for publication, with findings then entering into a wider arena with the potential to reach policy makers. This would enhance understanding of the views and experiences of young children regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and the multi-systemic factors which affect development. It will also advocate the benefits and challenges of participatory research with young children aged four-to seven years.

### **Postscript narrative critical reflection**

At the time of selecting a focus for the dissertation, COVID-19 restrictions were fully in place. A strong sense of uncertainty over how the pandemic would be overcome and concerns about the impact on my own two children were in the forefront of my mind. This was the driving force for wanting to pursue this line of inquiry. Previous feedback from assignments had recognised a strength in reflection and reflexivity (Appendix 8) and so I was ready to apply these skills to explore the challenges of planning research into a topic I felt emotionally invested in. This was picked up on in TMA01 of E822, in which a journey of awareness regarding my own positionality began and has been an ongoing theme throughout the module (Appendix 9).

One of the main challenges which I feel I have addressed is the overall handling of an extended project. As identified in the PDP reflection grid (Appendix 10, section 1) my confidence in this area has grown significantly through the duration of the module. Strategies which I have found particularly useful include the use of a Gant chart; short-, medium- and long-term planning; and ensuring work-life balance through taking planned, and sometimes more spontaneous, breaks. Whilst these are useful mechanisms to deploy, I feel they are further enhanced by regular review, placing oneself in control of what needs to be done and when, amidst the unpredictability of work and family life. From an academic perspective, further challenge was brought by an outstanding EMA from a previous module which I was required to work on alongside the E822 dissertation. This certainly necessitated discipline in time management which was not always easy. However, a positive aspect was that I was able to draw on my learning from both modules at the same time, thus enhancing my understanding.

The effectiveness of the organisational strategies identified above are evident in tutor feedback from the submission of Chapter 5 (Appendix 11, sections 3 and 9). I was successful in meeting deadlines set for the submission of chapters and was able to identify what remained to be done prior to submission of the dissertation.

I feel that my academic skills have developed during E822, particularly in terms of criticality. I have found it a challenge to synthesise ideas succinctly, but I hope to have

achieved some success with this. At a significant point during the writing process, I received feedback from the postponed EMA mentioned above, and this was hugely encouraging (Appendix 12). The feedback reignited my motivation and helped me to keep going towards the completion of the dissertation.

I look forward to applying my learning from this module to my professional practice. As I have been out of the workplace for a period of time this will be a new challenge. The PDP grid (Appendix 10, section 4) provides helpful reflection points which I believe will support me in beginning a new professional chapter.

**Appendix 1 Letter to Gatekeeper****Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, Language and Sport**  
**Study related to Masters module 'E822 Multidisciplinary dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth'****Letter to Setting Gatekeepers: E822 Dissertation**

Dear Mrs X,

I am currently studying on the Masters module 'E822: The Multidisciplinary Masters Dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth' at the Open University in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, Language and Sport. My studies are being supervised by my Open University personal tutor, supported by the module team [WELS-ECYS-Masters@open.ac.uk](mailto:WELS-ECYS-Masters@open.ac.uk) and follow research protocols reviewed and supported by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. As part of my studies, I would like to request whether I could develop a Small-Scale Investigation, which would involve data collection in your setting, using narrative and visual methods. I will be able to provide and discuss further details about which methods I would like to use as my studies develop during the module.

Information collected from all participants will be kept confidential, de-identified to remove identifying features of individuals and the setting, and stored securely on password protected devices. Original notes and digital files will then be destroyed. I confirm that no information leading to the identification of your setting or the individual participants will be included in my submissions to the University or in any related publications. If there is a disclosure of a safeguarding nature during data collection, then, as will have been explained to the participants in advance of data collection, this will be immediately passed to the setting Designated Safeguarding Officer. Please could you confirm how best to contact them.

Your setting's and participants' involvements are voluntary. To help you in making a decision, the University have provided Guidance for Setting Gatekeepers, which I attach. You can withdraw permission for the study to take place as outlined in this Guidance. The children in the setting who are invited to provide data as participants can also withdraw their consent and request destruction of data collected up to two weeks after each form of data collection has taken place. I will respect these wishes. In this situation, for any interview or observation assuming there is time, I would like your support in contacting alternative participants to collect sufficient data for my research.

I am required by my University to complete a jointly signed Dissertation Ethical Agreement Form. If you are happy for me to develop a dissertation on the basis outlined above, I would like to discuss this with you to further explain my plans. This would allow me to explain more about my studies and these requests, including the timeline and processes and protocols for ethical research in this setting. Please suggest a suitable date and time or guide me to the most appropriate person to consider these requests.

Yours sincerely

Researcher's name and signature

## Appendix 2 Information letter

### E822 Information letter for children and young people (pre-18): Narrative Inquiry

#### What is the aim of this research?

The aim of the research is to gain children's views on what the COVID-19 pandemic was like for them and their lives.

#### Who is conducting the research and who is it for?

This research is part of my studies on a masters-level course at The Open University in which I am carrying out a small-scale investigation. I am using a range of ways of collecting information to answer the following questions:

1. How do young children aged 4-7 years narrate their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What do young children aged 4-7 years perceive to be the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

This is aimed to help me better understand children's ideas about the pandemic and to share my findings with others for whom the findings will be relevant to changing practice.

#### Why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited because your views would be valuable in answering the question set for the study and I hoped you might be prepared to talk to me about your experiences and opinions.

#### If I take part in this research, what will be involved?

There are three research activities which should take no more than 10 minutes each. I will make sure that I have checked with your teachers that when and where we talk is the most convenient for you and them. Permission has been given from Mrs X for me to invite you to join in. I would like to ask your consent to make an audio recording of our conversations so that I can refer back to what was said more accurately than would be possible just from my notes. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, I will accept your wish, and will make notes about what you say to help me remember. Only I will have access to the audio recording. I do not need to share this with those at the University or in this school. In any part of the interview which will be shared with my tutor or form part of the final dissertation report you and anyone else you name during

our discussion will be referred to by a false name (pseudonym) and you will be asked if you would like to choose which name you would like me to use.

#### What will we be talking about?

In the activities I will ask you to tell me about what you think about the COVID-19 pandemic. There are no right or wrong answers, I am interested in your thoughts and ideas.

#### Will what I say be kept private?

Your participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). No personal information about you, such as the details contained in your consent forms, will be shared more widely. In the case of the audio recording and my notes of the interview, these will be kept private only to me and typed up as soon as possible. However, if you let me know anything during the research activities which could tell me that you might be unsafe or at risk of harm, I will need to tell a grown up in school (Designated Safeguarding Officer) because this is a Safeguarding concern. When I make anonymised records of our conversations, as outlined above, these will be stored securely on password protected devices and the original notes or recording will then be destroyed. I can confirm that neither you as an individual nor the setting will be identifiable in my submissions to the University or in any presentations that I make of my findings to interested audiences.

#### What happens now?

After reading this information sheet with your parent/carer, please read and complete the consent form. This means that you and your parent/carer sign your and their names and the date to say you are all happy for me to set up a time and place for the research activities. Whether you agree or not is entirely up to you and your parent/carer, as the invitation is for you to take part voluntarily. You can change your mind later and withdraw from the study by letting me know and I will destroy the information (consent forms and interview files) I have created. This will be possible up until the time I am using your information as part of my assessment.

#### What if I have other questions?

If you have any questions about the study, I or my tutor at the University would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me at [contact email] or contact my tutor [add name and email].

### Appendix 3 E822 Ethical Appraisal Form



#### Masters: Education, Childhood and Youth

**NB: it should be noted that The Open University is unable to offer liability insurance to cover any negative consequences students might encounter when undertaking ‘in-person’ data collection. It is therefore very important that you follow appropriate research protocols which should include seeking Gatekeeper permissions to undertake any data collection within your setting and adhering to ethical principles for the safety of yourself and your**

**Because ethical appraisal should precede data collection, a completed version of this form should be included with TMA02 for those developing a Small-Scale Investigation (SSI) and as part of the EMA submission for those completing an Extended Literature Review and Research Proposal (EP) form of the Dissertation.**

**participants.**

Fill in section 1 of this document with your personal details and brief information about your research.

For section 2, please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of significant risk please tick yes. Even if your list contains all “no” you should still return your completed checklist so your tutor/supervisor can assess the proposed research.

#### Section 1: Project details

a.	Student name	
b.	PI	
c.	Project title	Children of the Pandemic: A narrative inquiry exploring how children in England aged four-to-seven years perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact upon their lives.
d.	Supervisor/tutor	
e.	Qualification	Masters in Education <input type="checkbox"/>
		Masters in Childhood and Youth

f.	MA pathway (where applicable)	Extended Literature Review and Research Proposal
g.	Intended start date for fieldwork	
h.	Intended end date for fieldwork	
i.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in <i>If you are resident in the UK and will be conducting your research abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> for advice on travel.</i>	

Section 2: Ethics Assessment		Yes	No
1	Does your proposed research need initial clearance from a 'gatekeeper' (e.g. Local Authority, head teacher, college head, nursery/playgroup manager)?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Have you checked whether the organisation requires you to undertake a 'police check' or appropriate level of 'disclosure' before carrying out your research? <sup>1</sup>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Have you indicated how informed consent will be obtained from your participants (including children less than 16 years old, school pupils and immediate family members)? Your consent letters/forms must inform participants that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. <sup>2</sup>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Will your proposed research design mean that it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge/consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in nonpublic places)? If so have you specified appropriate debriefing procedures? <sup>3</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/>	No

<sup>1</sup> You must agree to comply with any ethical codes of practice or legal requirements that maybe in place within the organisation or country (e.g. educational institution, social care setting or other workplace) in which your research will take place. If required an appropriate level of disclosure ('police check') can be obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service (England and Wales), Disclosure Scotland, AccessNI (Northern Ireland), Criminal Records Office (Republic of Ireland), etc.

<sup>2</sup> This should normally involve the use of an information sheet about the research and what participation will involve, and a signed consent form. You must allow sufficient time for potential participants to consider their decision between the giving of the information sheet and the gaining of consent. No research should be conducted without the opt-in informed consent of participants or their caregivers. In the case of children (individuals under 16 years of age) no research should be conducted without a specified means of gaining their informed consent (or, in the case of young children, their assent) and the consent of their parents, caregivers, or guardians. This is particularly important if your project involves participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children under 16 years, people with learning disabilities, or emotional problems, people with difficulty in understanding or communication, people with identified health problems). There is additional guidance on informed consent on the Masters: Education and Childhood and Youth website under Project Resources.

<sup>3</sup> Where an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants, the withholding of information should be specified in the project proposal and explicit procedures stated to obviate any potential harm arising from such withholding. Deception or covert collection of data should only take place where it has been agreed with a named responsible person in the organisation and it is essential to achieve the research results required, where the research objective has strong scientific merit and where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.

5	Does your proposed design involve repetitive observation of participants, (i.e. more than twice over a period of more than 2-3 weeks)? Is this necessary? If it is, have you made appropriate provision for participants to renew consent or withdraw from the study half-way through? <sup>4</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
6	Are you proposing to collect video and/or audio data? If so have you indicated how you will protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality and how you will store the data?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Does your proposal indicate how you will give your participants the opportunity to access the outcomes of your research (including audio/visual materials) after they have provided data?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Have you built in time for a pilot study to make sure that any task materials you propose to use are age appropriate and that they are unlikely to cause offence to any of your participants?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Is your research likely to involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. adult/child relationships, peer relationships, discussions about personal teaching styles, ability levels of individual children and/or adults)? What safeguards have you put in place to protect participants' confidentiality?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Does your proposed research raise any issues of personal safety for yourself or other persons involved in the project? Do you need to carry out a 'risk analysis' and/or discuss this with teachers, parents and other adults involved in the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
11	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
12	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	No

If you answered 'yes' to questions **12**, you will also have to submit an application to an appropriate National Research Ethics Service ethics committee (<http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>).

<sup>4</sup> Where participants are involved in longer-term data collection, the use of procedures for the renewal of consent at appropriate times should be considered.

## Appendix 4

### CONSENT AND ASSENT FORM

(to be completed by all participants alongside their parent/carer/guardian)

**Please would a parent, carer or guardian read these questions to the child and, if necessary, complete the replies for them.**

Please indicate YES or NO for each of the questions below. You can circle the word or draw a smiley face for yes and a sad face for no. Please return the completed form by (insert date) to (researcher's name and email address).

Have you read (or had read to you) the information about this research?	YES	NO
Has someone explained this research to you?	YES	NO
Do you understand what this research is about?	YES	NO
Have you asked all the questions you want?	YES	NO
Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand?	YES	NO
Do you understand it is OK to stop taking part at any time?	YES	NO
Will you have an adult present with you?	YES	NO
Are you happy for the interview to be audio recorded?	YES	NO
Are you happy with how your data will be stored?	YES	NO
Do you understand that your and any other real names as well as any identifiable information will be removed from what will be shared after the interview?	YES	NO
Are you happy to take part?	YES	NO

If any answers are 'no' you can ask more questions. But if you **don't** want to take part, please let me know and **don't** sign your name.

If you **do** want to take part, please write your name and today's date

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you are happy for the child you are responsible for (as their parent, carer or guardian) to participate, please could you also sign and date below.

Print name \_\_\_\_\_

Sign \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Return form to \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your help. Please do not hesitate to contact me on xxxxx with any further questions relating to the research.

## Appendix 5

### **Phase 1- Group Circle time Activity in Action.**

Researcher and participants sit in a circle on the floor. Researcher invites participants to say their names, one at a time, to break the ice and reinforce turn-taking. Researcher: "I'm interested in what grown-ups can learn from children. Can you teach me something about yourself that I don't know?" Researcher uses check-back technique for each response. Researcher introduces a teddy wearing a face-mask to initiate general COVID-19 discussion. Researcher: "Why do you think Teddy might be wearing a face-mask?" Researcher uses check-back technique for each response. See where conversation leads. Use as a bridge to our next meeting. Researcher: "Can you tell me more about it next time we meet?"

## **Appendix 6**

### **Phase 2- Draw and Tell Activity in Action.**

Researcher and participant sit together at a table with pens and paper available. The teddy introduced in the previous phase is present and visible. Researcher uses opening prompts “Can you tell me what you remember about COVID-19? What do you remember about life then?” Researcher asks “Would you like to draw it or just talk?” If more scaffolding is needed, the following prompts can be used “Can you remember anything happy during the pandemic? Can you remember anything sad during the pandemic?”

## Appendix 7

### Phase 3- Unstructured Interviews in Action.

Unstructured interviews in action:

Researcher and participant sit together at a table. The teddy introduced in Phase 1 is present and visible. Where applicable, drawings from Phase 2 will be discussed with an open-ended prompt such as “Can you tell me about your picture?” Researcher uses check-back technique for each response.

After this, and for any participant who did not produce a drawing, the following questions will be used to prompt dialogue:

1. How do you feel about the COVID-19 pandemic now?
2. Has anything changed in your life now because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Form questions will be used throughout to elicit more detail/depth e.g. “Can you tell me more about that...?”

### Appendix 8 - Feedback from E809 TMA03 27.7.21

\*\*\*Part B (1500 words)

In this part of the TMA, you were asked to write an account of a personal experience of working with or supporting children or young people which had a significant impact on your thinking or practice. In particular, you were asked to reflect on why it was significant, what you learnt from it and how your thinking or practice changed as a result. In this part, it was your ability to reflect critically on the experience, in the light of what you have learned from Part 3 of the module, which was needed the most.

Your reflection piece definitely explores a very interesting experience. Thank you for sharing this. YOU have used, explored and link ideas from the module very well into your reflections too, analysing how both the theory matches with your lived experience and how such a lived experience may be newly reflected upon as well. Well done - great work again in this part of the TMA too.

## Appendix 9 Positionality feedback TMA01 E822

### TUTOR'S COMMENTS AND ADVICE TO STUDENT:

Dear Caroline,

Thank you for submitting TMA1 for E822. This assignment required you to present your early ideas for your SSI or EP. It constitutes 10% of the assessment marks for this module.

This assignment was split into three main areas: The topic (750 words), key literature (650 words) and your research questions (150 words). You were also asked to have submitted supplementary evidence at this stage and explain how. Thank you for completing this.

Overall, you scored 78% which is a good pass and band B. I have made script comments throughout the document and have included a marking grid at the bottom of the page (this can be seen in the assessment guidance). I do hope you're able to see my comments - if not, do ensure that you have 'all markup' selected under review but let me know if you're unable to see these still. Some general comments below.

#### PART 1

There were some very good points here, well done. Thank you for also structuring as per the guidance, this was useful. Some signposts to show how you were responding to each part of the assessment criteria would have been useful.

Your working title was well written - I hope my script comments will help this to develop.

Thank you for explaining your reason for conducting an EP, this was useful to read.

It was helpful to read about the range of beneficiaries to your research - and it is especially important to consider the children themselves, which you do, so well done with this. Some more consideration of how this would support them would be useful.

Your rationale was well explained. I think there is more scope to focus on the reflections and hope aspects of your title too...whilst there will of course be worried and anxiety, we cannot assume this and so broadening to consider wider reflections is a sensible approach. It would be useful to really justify why you're focusing on the age group of 4-8 too as this ends up crossing into Year 3? You do show a good understanding of the topic area.

It was clear that you are aware of your own positionality, which is important, so thank you for explaining this. Well done also for considering your ontological and epistemological stance. This will also develop as your reading around the area progresses and you are able to identify these within others' research.

Well done.

#### PART 2

Well done for including four pieces of literature - these all seemed relevant and you did make reference to their importance and contribution to your own EP. I've made some detailed

comments on the script, but I wondered how far the first paper has been cited by others and whether anything more recent would have been useful? In terms of the other papers, there was scope for some more application over description, and also to consider wider reflections and not just worries, but I can see that these are useful sources that have informed the early stages of your ideas. I also wondered what theories are underpinning your ideas as some reference to this would have also been useful and will feed into your conceptual framework.

### PART 3

Well done for coming up with your initial research questions here. I have posed some questions on the script which would be useful to think about, as this isn't actually worded as a question at the moment. However, as you quite rightly say, this will evolve as the research ideas progress.

Well done with this. I can see the start of an interesting project. As you know, I am always very happy to discuss, so drop me an e-mail if you would like to talk anything through, or if any of my comments are unclear.

I look forward to seeing your ideas progress and working more with you on this.

Best wishes

<b>Appendix 10</b> <b>Reflection on progress</b> <b>Start of E822</b> <b>Completion of E822</b>	This is new to me	I have some idea about how to do this	I am confident in this area	I am confident and can explain to others how to work in this area
<b>Personal skills and researcher identity</b>				
1.1 Studying by distance learning in terms of accessing the various tools which allow me to engage with materials, my peers and tutors		x	x	
1.2 Organising my study notes and a research journal		x	x	
1.3 Finding a work-life balance whilst I am studying		x		x
1.4 Maintaining enthusiasm for my research for the duration of the dissertation		x		x
1.5 Challenging my own assumptions about education, childhood and youth.		x	x	
1.6 Managing an extended project		x		x
(Feel free to add any other skill you would like to work on)				
<b>Academic skills</b>				
2.1 Independently search for and access a wide range of academic publications		x	x	
2.2 Independently read academic publications with a critical perspective on findings and research methods (as appropriate)		x	x	
2.3 Critically analyse current themes and issues in relation to the focus of my dissertation		x	x	
2.4 Apply knowledge and understanding of themes/issues from one context to another		x	x	
2.5 Formulate an argument in relation to debates about issues related to the focus of my dissertation, showing abilities to synthesise ideas		x	x	

2.6. Clearly communicate ideas through written text employing an academic writing style appropriate for an extended literature review or small-scale research study		x	x	
2.7 Manage a wide range of source references and cite source materials correctly		x	x	
<b>Research skills</b>				
3.1 Understand approaches to the practice of applied research and ethical issues relating to research and enquiry.		x	x	
3.2 Explain and justify, with reference to reading, the processes entailed in carrying out a small scale research enquiry or extended literature review	x		x	
3.3 Interpret, assess and deploy research methodologies and their evidence	x		x	
3.4 Articulate my own perspective on research approaches and my influence/ assumptions within the process.	x		x	
<b>Application to professional practice</b>				
4.1 Be able to articulate a personal perspective on learning in relation to the focus of my module	x	x		
4.2 Critically reflect on aspects of my own practice (as relevant to the focus of my module)	x	x		
4.3 Be able to engage critically and creatively with debates relevant to the development of my professional thinking about issues relevant to the focus of my module	x	x		
4.4 Reflect on how theory applies to practice or practice to theory	x		x	
4.5 Share my research thinking and findings with other professionals	x	x		
4.6 Consider the legacy of my dissertation for myself and others	x			

## Appendix 11- Tutor feedback from Chapter 5

### Masters in Education Dissertation Feedback Form

The purpose of this form is to allow you to obtain some preliminary feedback on sections or chapters of your dissertation as you write. After receiving the feedback, you will probably make alterations to your work prior to finally submitting the dissertation for formal assessment. You may want to use your tutor's feedback as a source of evidence to draw on your in your Appendix 1 The EMA reflective evidence grid.

#### Section 1

To be completed electronically by student:

Name:	Personal Identifier:	
Email:	Date submitted:	20.7.22

Dissertation title and research question(s). Please highlight any major changes since these were last seen by your tutor

*Working Dissertation Title:* Children of the pandemic: A narrative inquiry exploring how children in England aged 4-7 years perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact upon their lives.

*Research Question(s)*

How do young children narrate experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What are young children's own perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their lives?

#### Section 2 – Late Submission

Only complete this section if you have submitted late

Tutor Name:		Email:	
Reason for late submission:			
Permission granted: Yes/No		Date:	

#### Section 3 –Sections Already Submitted and Previous Feedback

You can submit up to three chapters or sections of your dissertation for formative feedback from your tutor, as a guide, each chapter or section will be about 2,000 words or equivalent in length. You should submit one section at a time during weeks 36, 40 and 43 of the course. Use the table below to indicate what sections or chapters you have already submitted, the date of the submission and what you have done to address your tutor's feedback.

	Chapter title or main focus of section submitted	Date submitted	Note here what you have done to address Tutor feedback from each section or chapter.
1.	Ch2 Literature review (topic)	9.6.22	Re-structured themes to fit theoretical framework Synthesis analysis more effectively Include details of lit search parameters
2.	Ch3 Conceptual Framework	30.6.22	Clarified paradigm position more effectively Taken an over-arching view of ethics saving details for Ch5 Considering more application of theory to inform my framework
3.	Ch 5 Research design	20.7.22	

## Section 4 – Formative Feedback

Before asking your tutor to provide feedback on your chosen dissertation chapter/ section you should reflect on your work and what you have written and record your thoughts in the relevant ‘Student Comment’ boxes below. Use these boxes to record your critical reflections on what you are about to submit and considerations about whether it meets the requirements and assessment criteria outlined in the assessment guide. Use the first box under each question to outline how you would answer the question about your work. Your tutor will use the second box to record their feedback – if any – on that aspect of your work. If you are not submitting a single chapter, then please clearly identify, under each heading, if you are referring to specific parts of your submission.

If this process results in specific questions then you should record them in Section 5 of the form for your tutor to consider. Please remember, your Tutor will provide feedback on the sections or chapter of your work which you elect to submit. Therefore you should not expect your tutor to fill in each section of the form for every submitted section or chapter, some will not be applicable. Your tutor will use their professional judgement to give the formative feedback that you need in order to progress towards producing a well formed, critical dissertation.

Remember, you must submit this document as part of your dissertation.

1. Is the section/chapter well-structured and coherently framed? (e.g. are ideas introduced thematically, chronologically etc. as appropriate, do the ideas move from broad to more focused etc.)

*Student Comment: I have tried to follow the guide structure and have made good use of sub-headings*

*Tutor Feedback:*

Well done, lots of useful information here. Some comments below.

1. Useful subheadings as this helps to ensure the main elements are included. However, I wonder whether the titles of these need tweaking (e.g. ‘research approach’ rather than ‘design’?) and whether there is real scope to break these down further such as recruitment and participants.
2. You refer to participants and there is some useful discussion here but more is needed about the recruitment method – how many will be involved and how will they be recruited? Will this be a volunteer or opportunity sample?

3. Remember to include copies of your research materials in the appendix and signpost to these within the chapter.
4. There is a useful breakdown of the different stages of data collection but more needed on the pilot.
5. I wonder if it is worth following a structure more like:
  - Research paradigm
  - Discussion of the research approach
  - Sampling method and recruitment approach
  - Discussion of the procedure (**including pilot and ethics**)
  - Description of the measures with signposts to appendix
  - Some reference to the analysis and dissemination (well done for thinking about the latter, this is really useful).

The subheadings are very useful and I would recommend keeping these in but building on them as per above.

2. Does the section/chapter present, summarise, critically analyse and/or evaluate the literature / methodologies / conceptualisations / findings that it covers?

*Student Comment: Does this section need to be more critical?*

*Tutor Feedback:*

You have presented a range of detail, well done and backed this up with literature. There is potentially scope to be somewhat more critical and evaluative when presenting the methods. Some reference to Cohen's ideas for instance to help justify some of the approaches may be useful.

Also really think about the strengths of the approach you're taking and what you will gain from this.

In terms of your mention of the pilot – I wonder whether there is scope to also refer to validity here also in relation to your conceptual ideas.

There is scope to be a bit clearer about the approach...are these young children's views likely to be incorporated within analysis of each method to find the main themes or will you look at each child's contributions separately across methods to then identify themes? I know you discuss a range of analysis ideas but do ensure that you're very clear here with this when writing it up.

3. Does the section/chapter use theory and / or literature appropriately to conceptualise or justify ideas and findings? Are the ideas appropriately applied to practice?

*Student Comment: I have tried to use literature to support and justify my research design decisions.*

*Tutor Feedback:*

This isn't a literature heavy chapter, so the amount included is appropriate, well done.

I also think there is scope to make more reference to **practical issues**. For instance, are there specific timings etc that need to be considered? E.g. a more appropriate time of day to speak with young children?

4. Do the research question(s) play an appropriate part in this section/chapter? Have they been established, used to create and justify the methodology or methods or appropriately answered in this section?

*Student Comment: Research questions were set out explicitly in Ch4. They can be seen in the methods but perhaps this needs to be more explicit?*

*Tutor Feedback:*

I think there is scope to restate these again in this chapter. Some direct reference to how the research questions relate to the selected methods and measures would be useful.

5. Have you clearly explained and justified the decisions you have made about for example what literature to include or the data collection or analysis methods used?

*Student Comment: I have justified decisions made so far, chapter is not yet complete.*

*Tutor Feedback:*

Yes, some useful content here and I can see plans to expand upon these.

6. Have ethical issues clearly impacted all the research decisions you have made and have you explained how?

*Student Comment: I have tried to include a comprehensive consideration of ethics.*

*Tutor Feedback:*

Good, but a separate subsection for this (as suggested in comment box 1) would be useful and ensure that you signpost to the ethical checklist. Well done for explicitly referring to BERA. Also remember to include any research documents in the appendix with all the appropriate ethical info on.

7. Have you used good academic writing throughout the section? Has it been carefully proof read? Have you ensured your references are accurate and consistent?

*Student Comment: I believe the writing to be an appropriate standard but very happy to consider areas of improvement.*

*Tutor Feedback:*

Yes, the writing is clear and easy to follow. Do have a think about the rewording of subheadings and moving some sections around to help this flow more clearly which in turn makes it more academic.

8. Any other comments about the chapter/section?

*Student Comment: The chapter is not yet complete (trustworthiness and credibility, analysis and dissemination still to be drafted into prose from note form- notes included) Please could we discuss data analysis and dissemination during the meeting?*

*Tutor Feedback:*

It is useful to see what you also plan to include so well done for this. It would be helpful to discuss the analysis approach as I can see some ideas here but it would be useful to understand what you would actually propose doing and how as you could potentially end up with quite a bit of data.

9. What is the next step to take in producing your dissertation?

*Student Comment: Complete the chapter and continue to work on suggestions from tutor feedback. Ensure chapters work together as a whole. Work on Abstract and post narrative reflection.*

*Tutor Feedback:*

It sounds like you're really on track, well done.

## Section 5 – Feedback Focus

Use your comments in Section 4 to identify particular areas that you would like your tutor to focus on in their feedback. This could relate to a particular aspect of your work, such as the structure of your ideas or whether you have shown sufficient criticality, or you may wish to ask specific questions about the content you have submitted. Record up to 3 questions below.

	Focus Area	Specific Questions
1.	Ethics	Is it extensive enough? Do I demonstrate that ethical considerations have occurred at each stage of the process? <i>I think this is clear, but see my comments from above.</i>
2.	Research methods	Are these appropriate and described accordingly? <i>Scope for clarity in places, and detail on the pilot and sample size etc.</i>
3.	Data analysis and dissemination	Please could we discuss? <i>Of course.</i>

### Section 6 – Student reflection/action plan

Use the box below when you receive this form back from your tutor to make notes on how you intend to respond to your tutor's feedback, in preparation for your 1:1 session with your tutor. The questions are suggested as examples that might help you prepare for and get the most out of the session, they are guidance, only.

1. *What did I learn from the feedback I did not know before? I learned more about possible recruitment procedures and dissemination approaches.*
2. *Based on the feedback, what parts of my submission should remain the same? The current content, but refined and some more detail in places.*
3. *What am I doing that is helping me to gain marks? Good academic writing style, lots of relevant detail so far.*
4. *What could I do to help me gain more marks? Improve structure by tweaking subheadings, more criticality regarding methods (ie awareness of potential limitations and strengths), more detail regarding pilot and sample size, recruitment etc).*
5. *After reviewing the marking criteria for the dissertation and based upon the answers to the questions above, what do I need to do to be successful in my dissertation?*

**Appendix 12- Feedback from EMA E809**

**Your overall task performance**

**Value A** which is **85-100%**

**The following comments have been recorded for you**

**EMA Part A**

A beautifully written and structured reflection which draws thoughtfully and insightfully on module materials.

Nicely draws together the personal, professional and academic.

**EMA Part B**

A thorough, impressive and sophisticated literature review which handles the literature confidently and critically and provides a thoughtful and balanced discussion.

**EMA Part C**

A thoughtfully reflexive research proposal which draws effectively on the literature and on intimate knowledge of the practice setting.

Just occasionally, the style strays into essay territory rather than keeping the focus on the planned research, but overall an impressive piece of writing.

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