Listening to young children

Survey of parents and children

A survey of parents and children yielded 137 responses, of which 132 contained direct answers from the young children about what mattered to them. Their responses were coded by theme and the most frequent theme was 'friends' (63%), closely followed by 'play' (51%). Many children said that they liked being outdoors (40%) and some referred to specific natural features (18%), including bugs, water, sand as well as climbing, running, riding bikes. Movement (13%) was also mentioned overtly when children referred to arts (and crafts) / creative activities (19%), such as dancing and singing. Many children (31%) said their teachers / practitioners mattered to them.
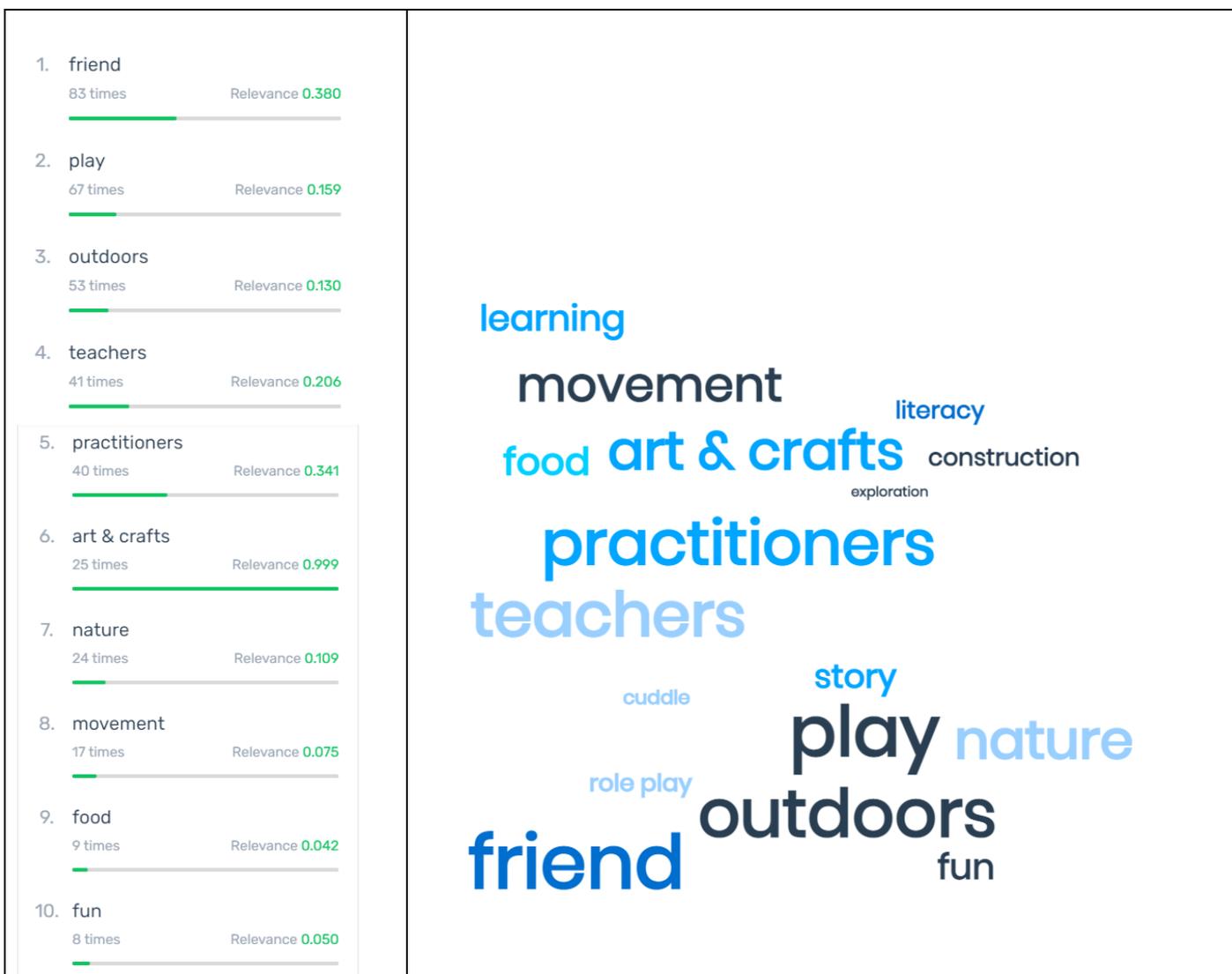
11. learning
8 times   Relevance 0.027

12. story
7 times   Relevance 0.025

13. role play
4 times   Relevance 0.107

14. literacy
4 times   Relevance 0.029

15. construction
4 times   Relevance 0.016

16. cuddle
3 times   Relevance 0.039

Literature review

A review of literature was also carried out, seeking answers to the question: what matters to children in the EYFS? A search was carried out in Google scholar and colleagues with a special academic interest in 'children's voices' were also asked to recommend relevant titles.

For manageability in the short time available, only peer reviewed journal articles written in English and published since 2015 were included. Subsequently, articles that referred to research that had not been carried out in England were excluded, as were those that did not include 'direct reports' of children's perspectives (which came in multiple forms including tracked movements). The latter included articles about children's right to be heard, methodologies for involving children in research or listening to them; and the perspectives of early childhood students, practitioners and parents about young children's views. Articles that reported the perspectives of children aged 6 and 7 about their learning (in Key Stage 1) were also excluded unless they incorporated the views of younger children about the EYFS as well.

More than 120 articles were collected and seventy-three were reviewed. This first stage of reviewing included articles that were not necessarily about England but they were read for comparability and to look for potential articles of relevance that could be included. Ultimately, after full-text reviews, 21 articles met the inclusion criteria.

The ages of the children varied, the youngest being in baby or toddler rooms where the ranges were 3 to 23 months; and the oldest being in reception classes in school (and KS1, as mentioned above). In general, sample sizes were small – fewer than 10 children were involved. The largest sample involved 138 children. Samples included boys and girls and in some cases, children had been selected by the researchers on the basis of specific characteristics. For example, children whose first language was not English or who had speech, language and communication difficulties.

Methods for 'listening' were diverse but frequently included observation and arts-related practices, such as photography and drawing. It was common for researchers to adopt a combination of different strategies to document children's views. In all cases, the research ethics were described or discussed by the authors.

The findings from these articles (and indeed in the excluded articles about children in other countries) corresponded with the children's views from the survey. Additional themes were also evident, although it is possible that some of these were implied by the children's comments that parents recorded in the survey.

- The time, space, ability to move around and to access resources in play and learning with support from sensitive adults.
- Children's ability to make choices, decisions and to feel a sense of autonomy and agency.
- Emotional attunment and responsiveness
- Stories and play narratives
- Multimodality
- Connections to children's memories, histories, famillies and cultures
- Freedom of movement, imaginative and embodied learning experiences
- Opportunities / space in the curriculum for investigation, experimentation and discovery
- Caring for and about others, sensitive touch and empathy
- Enjoying the company of (male and female) teachers / practitioners who join in with or support play
- The right to withdraw from taking part / to be silent
- Children assessing, understanding and taking self-managed risks as well as being supported by adults

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