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School Readiness for Very Young Children: A Case
Study Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives and
Practices in One North Eastern Nursery Centre:
Valuing Community, Shared Pedagogy, and
Celebrating Authenticity: Including the Voices of
Children, Parents, Educators, Managers, Teachers
and Health Visitors

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education (EdD)

York St John University

School of Education

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Abstract

Global economic pressures and the link between school attainment and employability have renewed interest in school readiness (SR). The underlying premise is that children who enter school “ready” achieve more and ultimately contribute more to economic prosperity. However, SR remains a multi-faceted, complex and contested construct and is neither fully understood nor consistently practised.

This study advances understanding of SR by exploring how it is enacted within a local context in Northeast England. It examines stakeholders’ perceptions, emotions and experiences involved in supporting children’s transition from a “Ready for School” centre to a school nursery and reception class.

While existing research conceptually outlines what constitutes SR, often highlighting relational pedagogy, economic outcomes and academic achievement, little research integrates the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders into a local process. This study addresses this gap by bringing together the views of managers, health professionals, early years educators, family workers, parents, children and schools into an inclusive approach.

Adopting a two-stage case study design, stage one involved listening, observing and engaging with 56 stakeholders to identify how SR was perceived and practised. Stage two responded to these findings through inquiry-based stakeholder partnerships that acted as catalysts for change. Data were collected over three years, with the period extended due to COVID-19 restrictions, and were analysed thematically. The analysis drew on established frameworks, including Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and Illeris’s (2007) learning triangle.

SR was perceived as mechanical, holistic and political, intersecting with family circumstances, power relations and pedagogical practices. Key contributions highlight conceptual, political, practical and methodological recommendations, including advancing the idea that a “child’s readiness” should be understood through relational and personal attributes, foregrounding the child rather than the school, recognising the professionalism of early years educators, strengthening transition practices and evidencing an inquiry-catalyst approach to support system-wide change.

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Abbreviations

- BERA – British Educational Research Association
- CC – Children's Class
- CI – Children's Individual
- CSC – Critical Social Constructivism
- CM – Centre Manager

- CPD – Continuing Professional Development
- DfE – Department for Education
- DLD – Developmental Language Disorder
- DLO – Desirable Learning Outcomes
- ECE – Early Childhood Education
- EHCP – Education Health Care Plan
- EPPE – Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
- EYE – Early Years Educator
- EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage
- EYT – Early Years Teacher
- FSW – Family Support Worker
- GLD – Good Level of Development
- HV – Health Visitor
- IFS – Institute for Fiscal Studies
- NCES – National Centre for Education Statistics
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
- PECD – Patient Engagement in Clinical Development
- PR – Participatory Research
- RBA – Reception Based Assessment
- RSC – Ready for School Centre
- RPP – Research Practice Partnerships
- SALT – Speech and Language Therapy
- SCAA – School Curriculum and Assessment Authority
- SCR – School Readiness Centre
- SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- SES – Socio-Economic Status
- SLCN – Speech, Language and Communication Needs

- SNAP – Special Needs Assessment Profile
- SR – School Readiness
- STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
- TA – Teaching Assistant
- ZPD – Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter One: Introduction-What is School Readiness and who decides?

1.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the rationale for studying school readiness (SR) in a multi-agency nursery in a disadvantaged community during and after COVID-19. It traces readiness discourses from early developmental theories to current social justice and neoliberal agendas. By viewing SR as contested and context-dependent, it presents research questions and advocates for a locally responsive model that moves beyond deficit narratives and checklists.

The chapter highlights my researcher positionality, including insider tensions and reflexivity. Throughout this thesis, my voice shares insights that prompted reflection. I started jotting down thoughts before enrolling, initially reluctant.

This thesis has six chapters as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction: What is School Readiness and who decides? Introduces SR as a debated, political concept, with research questions, frameworks and a reflexive stance.

Chapter Two: School Readiness as Contextual, Relational, and Processual; Integrating Ecological and Learning Processes. Reviews academic and policy-based literature, viewing readiness as a multi-dimensional, culturally and politically influenced construct, emphasising the need for research into how school readiness works, for whom, and why.

Chapter Three: Methodology; Designing Research Collaboratively. Details the interpretative case study methodology, including ethical, participatory, and analytical methods. It explains and justifies the participatory method and data analysis process.

Chapter Four identifies findings, with five themes illustrating how readiness is understood and practised at the Ready for School Centre, highlighting contestation.

Chapter Five discusses practice improvements from these findings, emphasising a holistic, place-based approach.

Chapter Six synthesises contributions, offering recommendations and a framework for supporting equity, belonging and authentic childhood, focusing on child readiness rather than SR.

1.2 My Research Interest

My interest in SR began in the 1990s when I managed a nursery on a military base with 300 children. After returning in the early 2000s, I shifted to early-years development, focusing on expansion and quality. I started as a quality officer, then became a Sure Start manager. Later, I moved into children's centres and social care, leading a team offering early help and intervention for children and families.

Alongside my work in social care and children's centres, I was recruited to lecture in the children and young people and education department at York St John University, teaching modules on child development, safeguarding and pedagogy.

During this time, the term 'school readiness' was not prevalent. However, both the Desirable Learning Outcomes curriculum (DLO) (SCAA, 1996) and the later Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (2021) curriculum acknowledged the importance of preparing children for school. My initial interest was finding out what was included in the term 'school readiness' and how it differed from my curriculum knowledge and practice.

I was eager to learn more about SR after reading two releases at the same time. Firstly, I reviewed a committee report (North Tyneside, 2020) suggesting that children were not skilfully prepared for starting school. The report stated:

“Children who were not ready for school, with children not toilet trained, the overuse of dummies and nappies with children still being transported in buggies, poor speech acquisition, and an inability to interact with others, child protection issues, poor social skills, and poor language and communication skills” (ibid. p.3).

The report relied primarily on data from primary teachers and notably did not seek input from early years educators or parents. The report's observations aligned with a review of the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2012b), which focused on getting children school-ready to improve the attainment of children from deprived backgrounds. They present a picture of

children who lack appropriate development before transitioning to school and highlight what could be seen as a deficit view of SR. Such a view has pervaded discourse around SR and is recorded by Dolch & Bloomster (1937) as children needing mental maturity and measurable phonological ability as far back as the 1930s [Table 1]. The report (North Tyneside 2020) was released concurrently with funding for a ready-for-school nursery (RSC) in a large multi-agency centre previously designated as a children's centre. The new centre would focus on providing very early education and support for two-year-olds and their families, catering mainly to families with additional socioeconomic needs or those referred by social care, health, or other services. Both releases prompted me to question my thinking about preparing children for school, including at what age this is appropriate, what it involves and the curricula surrounding this concept. I wondered if others felt more certain about it.

1.3 School-Ready Local Agendas

This study examined a “Ready for School Nursery” (RSC) active during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023. Originally part of a Sure Start centre and later a children's centre, it aligns with Blair's 1996 strategy to end child poverty. Blair aimed for the first generation to end child poverty within 20 years by reforming welfare to focus on families and children. The northeast centre was built to support this goal and remains in a disadvantaged area with social housing and a transient community. The local authority refocused its activities on very young children and local families.

This study aims to identify key challenges in delivering SR to very young children, understanding them as more than just schoolchildren in waiting (Peckham, 2017) to explore holistic, playful approaches to education. It also focuses on engaging parents, families, and communities, nurturing collaborations that remain child-centred (Bradbury, 2025; Children's Alliance, 2024; Grimmer, 2018) within the SR process, while also considering the potential impact of the global pandemic on early childhood development and education.

This research study began at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2021. Consequently, some early practices reflected national proximity guidelines.

Initially, the work could be described as crisis-adapted education, or learning under constraint (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which created a dichotomy between usual practices and what was delivered during and immediately after COVID-19. Indeed, in one interview, a stakeholder described a fantastic open-door practice and then realised they were recounting a past iteration of the centre, as pandemic-orchestrated changes meant that what was happening that day was very different. This research follows stakeholders as they transition from a constricted (pandemic practice) situational learning environment into a community learning environment, with groups forming and intersecting to deliver a valuable approach to preparing children for school.

While my research interest remained focused on the construction of SR within this community, my ability to work with both children and the adults involved stems from my personal background, which is discussed further below.

1.4 Personal Position

Researcher positionality is a dynamic presence that shapes every aspect of this study, shifting between the background and the foreground. At the beginning of the process, I was masked as a researcher because participants were unaware of my prior knowledge, connections and experience. Later, as participants became aware of my background, I was unmasked, which influenced the research project and helped build relationships with participants and the centre. I find it impossible to separate myself as a researcher from the research process (Sikes & Goodson, 2003). While participants had preconceived ideas about me and the role I played during the study's lead-up, their perceptions and interactions with me changed as the research progressed.

From an epistemological view, I understand what I know through my skills, knowledge, experience, and disposition. I work as a senior lecturer in early childhood and have connections with social care practitioners and early years educators, acting as a 'pracademic' (Panda, 2014). As Bauman (1998, p 205) notes, identity awareness arises when questions like "Who am I?" are not straightforward. This reflects my identity conflict as I shift from being an early year's educator to a lecturer-researcher doing theoretical work, which challenges my previous identity.

As briefly mentioned, I have a military background and managed a well-funded, well-staffed military nursery abroad. This gave me a good grasp of early years work and the nursery's role in child development. I had to continually remind myself to recognise my ethnocentrism (Thin, 2024; Harris & White, 2018), as I studied the setting and the people around me, and avoid personal comparisons, as the settings differed in size, community, geography, funding, staffing, and decades. However, the ways children develop and learn, and the adult role in supporting or hindering this, remained consistent.

Researching with families and practice, I acknowledge challenges from outsider research supporters (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012; Merriam et al., 2001), who suggest I may lack criticality as an insider. However, belonging and understanding nuanced practices enables me to engage meaningfully with participants and gather detailed information, as this recognition was mutual. They recognised me as one of their own.

During the three-year research process, I remained an insider, a position supported by my supervisors who consistently discussed my positionality and subjectivity as my role evolved throughout the project's timeframe, with shifts in my level of participation due to time and research events outlined briefly below.

These moments of ethical difficulty and angst often led to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981) when I questioned my conditioned thinking. Moments explored with supervisors are included in discussions within Chapters Four and Five.

- Doing to, doing on, and doing with ideas – was this community under the spotlight and being researched due to being designated disadvantaged – were participants fully complicit?
- Consenting to please or transactionally – were participants joining in to please the manager? Was there a reason for being interested in SR, and did the reason matter?
- The impact on participants of being observed – were my observations true?
- Safeguarding during the research – on one occasion, I had to report a safeguarding issue – this altered my researcher status considerably.
- Being a critical friend to all participants – a term coined by one worker and explored

during the second part of the research, as becoming a research tool, an inquiry catalyst.

During these moments of perplexity, I found reflexive thinking and internal gazing were needed; these pauses led to continued repositioning of my role as a researcher.



Figure 1 Researcher Positioning

In summary, while I may have started with the “pracademic” label (Panda, 2014) as both a practitioner and an academic, my position evolved and flexed during the research. Notably, I grew more committed to being recognised as a researcher, reflecting a personal shift from reluctance to acceptance of this identity.

1.5 Theories Used to Underpin This Study

Using numerous data collection methods within the case study facilitated thematic mapping at both the beginning and end of the two-part research study. This aided understanding of SR as a construct, including its delivery, the individuals involved and the underlying rationales. Overlaying this mapping with both Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Illeris's (2007) learning theory further helped conceptualise SR as a multi-layered construct.

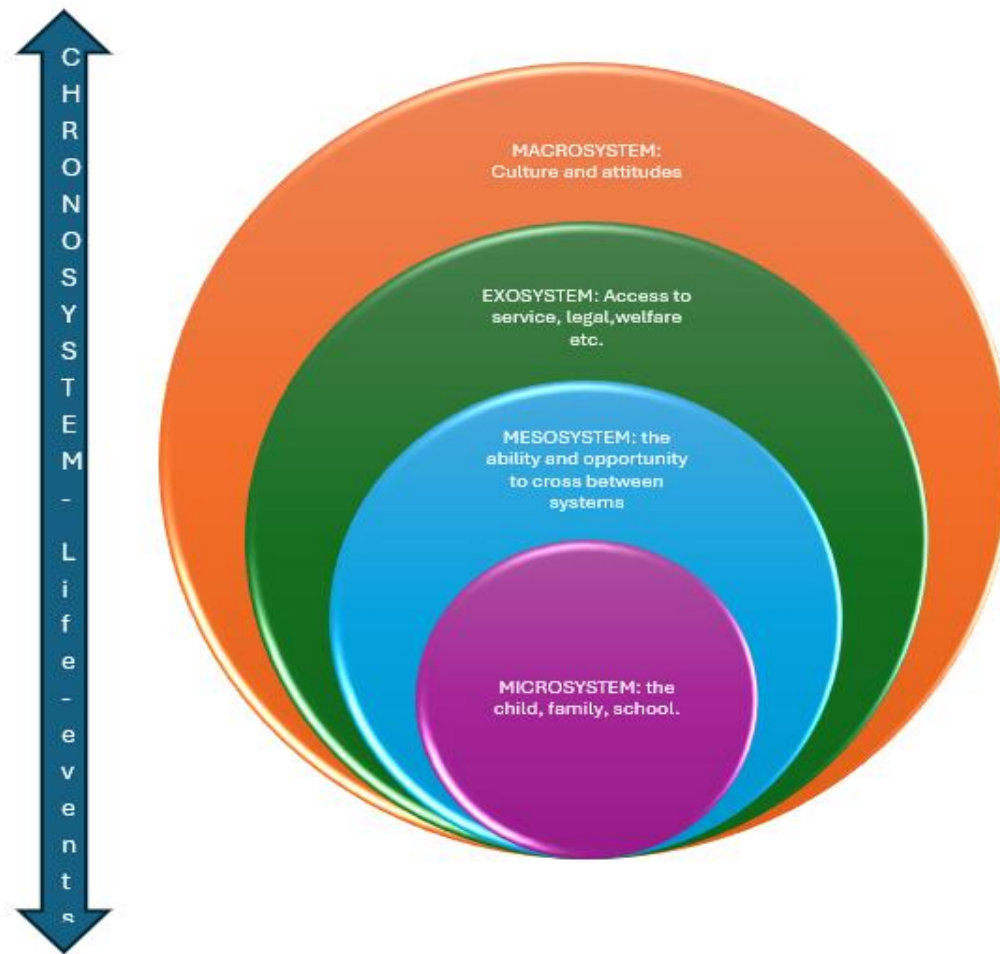


Figure 2 Theoretical Model Used to Analyse the Nursery

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model supports an interpersonal explanation of the population, resources, professionals, changes over time, and children's and families' access to SR. Complementing this understanding, Illeris's (2007) model of learning highlights the intrapersonal structures that support or impede children's learning. Although Illeris's model was inspired by andragogy/adult learning, I am interested in how it translates to pedagogy and the learning spaces within Bronfenbrenner's microsystems.

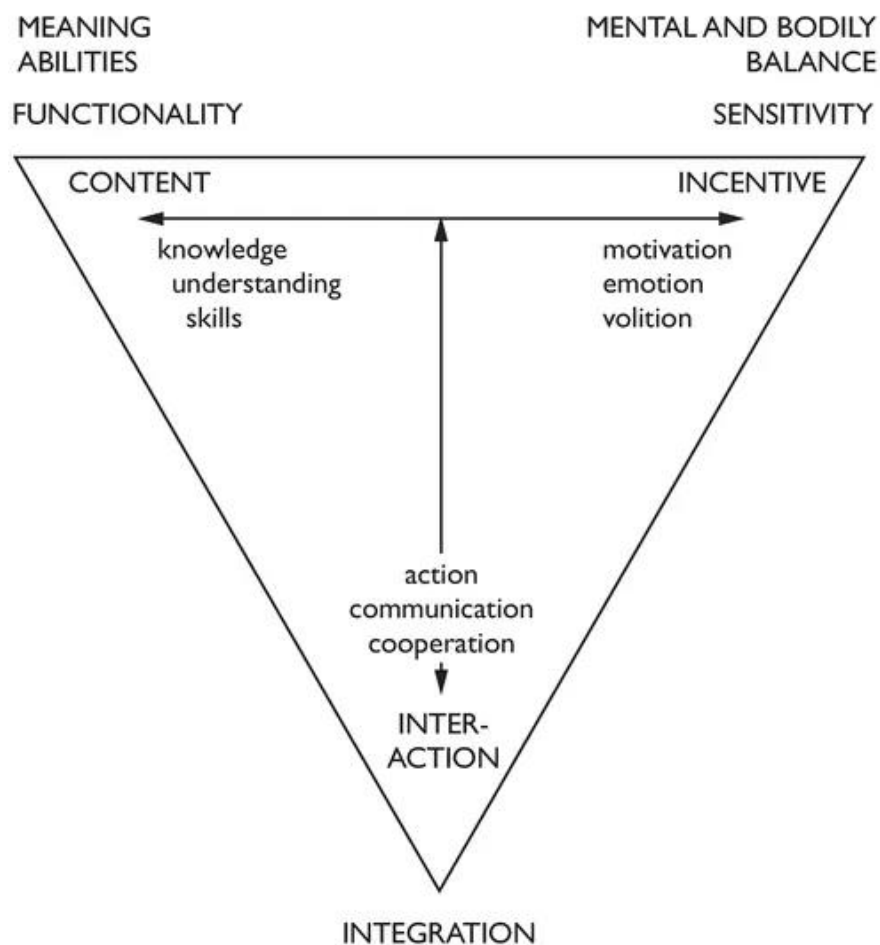


Figure 3 Illeris' Model for Understanding Learning (Source: Illeris, 2007, p.25)

Engaging with these well-established theoretical frameworks helped develop a broader understanding of SR as a relational process. When considered alongside my thirty-three years of professional experience in early years, these models revealed tensions between theoretical concepts and individual expectations. Together, theory and experience have shaped the research questions, which aim to explore what works, for whom, and why in supporting very young children's readiness.

1.6 Research Questions

Core Research Questions:

RQ.1. What are stakeholders' concept(s) of school readiness, as experienced by one NE Centre? (in Micro, Meso, and Macro systems)

RQ.2. How far does the centre in the NE practise SR as defined by Government policy?

Sub-Questions:

RQ.3. When are, and what strategies are used to enact school readiness? (Across both Illeris's (2007) learning triangle and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework)

RQ.4. How far are strategies of school readiness equitable (including SEND)

RQ.5. Who is involved in school readiness?

RQ.6. What should be achieved during the school readiness stage of education?

RQ.7. What are the benefits, to whom and why?

RQ.8. Effects of policy on local school readiness enactments and indicators.

1.7 School Readiness History

Examining the past 100 years of education aimed at preparing children for school reminds us that readiness is not a new concept (Peckham, 2017). What is new is the context in which SR is promoted, often focusing on children whose socio-economic status negatively affects their early experiences. SR aligns with societal needs of the time [see Table 1]. However, it often emerges strongly during periods of great change.

The Industrial Revolution increased demand for children's education. Leibovich's (2018) research shows the Macmillan Sisters responded by establishing nurseries with education, health, and welfare for working-class children. During WWII, day and residential nurseries expanded rapidly, freeing mothers for industry (Riley, 1979). Hansard (1941) noted hundreds of nurseries opened from 1941, reaching around 1,500 by 1945, led by health and education ministries. These innovations helped more mothers work during and after the war (Davis, 2015).

In the 1960s and 70s, philosophical and economic influences led many women to work part-time, and early education reflected this pattern. The labour market changed in response to part-time working patterns, often roles taken on by married women (McCarthy, 2016). Although policy- and gender-related assumptions still favoured the male breadwinner, much of the wartime nursery provision became largely sessional and part-time, mirroring women's working patterns (Lewis, 2013). During this time, school

preparation largely remained within the family domain. However, following the financial crash in the 80s, an increased need for childcare grew primarily because families found they needed two full-time wages to meet the rising cost of living, creating a demand for early years settings to deliver on SR (Grimmer, 2018).

The 1990s saw a massive increase in interest in the desirable learning outcomes targets set in an early year's curriculum, solidifying the role and scope of early years educators, with a focus on literacy, numeracy and social skills before children entered compulsory education (SCAA, 1996).

The 1990s also saw the development of the government backed Sure Start local programmes, developed as part of a strategy to end child poverty. It implemented findings from the Start Right report (Ball, 1994) to provide high-quality early education, health initiatives, speech and language interventions and parenting support. Research shows that Sure Start represented a significant shift towards evidence-based, integrated early intervention designed to coordinate multi-agency services in deprived areas (Glass, 1999). Evaluations indicate that Sure Start delivered measurable improvements in child health (Hayre et al., 2025). Moreover, it improved social, behavioural and early cognitive outcomes, laying the groundwork for children's centres and children's hubs (Lewis, 2011).

Following the 1990s, a period of national austerity, and then the recent global pandemic, the early years sector has since undergone significant changes. The number of children's centres increased to one in every community in the early 2000s and has since decreased significantly, reducing in number from 3,620 in 2010 to 1,668 in 2022/23, with new data due to be published, which is likely to show further reduction in centres, representing a loss of more than a third of the original network. (Unison, 2024).

Recently, free childcare places have increased as eligibility expanded from April and September 2024, with a 30-hour entitlement for working parents of children from nine months starting in September 2025 (House of Commons Library, 2025; DfE, 2025). However, funding hasn't kept pace with provider costs, causing closures, especially in deprived areas (Simon et al., 2024; NDNA, 2024). Local government reports show workforce shortages and the need for up to 70,000 new places by 2025, creating a crisis

in sufficiency and sustainability (DfE, 2024; LGA, 2023). To date, only 10,000 have been created (28.01.26). The government has pledged to invest in early education, aiming for 75% of five-year-olds to reach a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028 (House of Lords Library, 2025; Nesta, 2024). On 10th December 2024, ministers announced over £2 billion in extra investment, increased Pupil Premiums, and efforts to make more children school-ready by age five, based on GLD (DfE, 2024; The Conversation, 2024).

Additionally, in Spring 2025, the Government confirmed funding for 300 school-based nurseries in the first wave, positioning schools to open or expand on-site nursery provision (DfE, 2025). While these school-led expansions may improve access, early years scholars caution that conceptions of SR risk being “school down” rather than “early years up”, potentially shaping pedagogy through a trickle-down of school practices and sidelining EYFS-aligned approaches (Lewis, 2011; IPPR, 2024). The sector warns against creating places before the workforce is in place (NDNA, 2025).

The changes above are represented in Key Governmental reports:

- The 1967 Plowden report recommended mainly part-time nursery places for three and four-year-olds and promoted the developmental principles of Piaget (Plowden, 1967; Gillard, 2022).
- The Start Right Report (Ball, 1994) reframed early learning as a matter of national social and economic urgency, calling for universal, high-quality, integrated early education and childcare alongside parental support and renewed professional standards. The Start Right Report further influenced area-based, multi-agency, and early interventions aimed at reducing child poverty and improving health and educational outcomes (Melhuish & Hall, 2007; Belsky, Barnes & Melhuish, 2007).
- The Government’s “Plan for Change” policy (REF, 2024) announced expanding hours, entitlements, and increasing high-quality learning. It discusses investment and the government’s milestones for improved childhood outcomes. This policy sits alongside the Best Start in Life strategy document (GOV.UK 2021), which includes workforce incentives, school transitions and the expansion of family hubs.

Despite shifts in policy names and language, SR reflects national concerns, economic productivity, labour force participation and national recovery as well as the governance of childhood itself. Taken together, the history of SR shows how early childhood provision is not static and has been continuously reshaped by political ideologies and economic conditions. The concept of readiness has therefore become a policy instrument, with expectations for the child, family and educators alongside influencing early childhood systems.

1.8 School-Ready Perspectives

As discussed earlier, early years and SR have been part of the educational landscape for 100 years. During that time, they have been examined and researched from various perspectives, including literacy, numeracy, behaviour and health. Notably, Gesell (1925) researched SR alongside his controversial theories of maturation. He argued against all children starting school at the same time, emphasising that children will naturally be prepared at different stages and that education should adapt to these natural stages of maturation, a view shared by Piaget (1930/72). Interestingly, this seems to be mooted currently, as discussions evolve around keeping children in the foundation stage longer. For example, in her 2025 report, Dame Rachel de Souza proposed introducing “reception plus”, in which children may repeat reception rather than start formal schooling unprepared, with parental consent (The Children's Plan 2025).

The table below [Table 1] illustrates how perceptions of SR have evolved. This overview suggests that readiness remains an issue, and that we are still having the same conversation as 100 years ago.

Author and Year	Idea
Gesell (1925)	Gesell was the first to demonstrate that a child’s developmental age may differ from their chronological age. In a large-scale research study, he found a relationship between school-entry unpreparedness and later school challenges. This research was the foundation for future development assessments.

Dolch & Bloomster (1937)	It has become widely accepted that a child cannot begin learning to read until he has reached a certain degree of mental maturity. This mental maturity is called reading readiness, chiefly SR.
Peller (1946)	Peller argues that children should not be rushed to join a group, that each child's maturation follows an individual trajectory, that motivation and emotional security are essential, and that education should address multiple domains. Finally, he frames early education as an interplay between emotional and intellectual development.
Brenner (1957)	Brenner has found that many disturbances and frustrations of his young patients, especially in adolescence, can be traced to the time of school entrance.
Peterson (1970/71)	Cooperative work by elementary counsellors and parents can facilitate behaviour changes that improve school performance. Participants can be trained through modelling procedures and brief instruction in behaviour modification principles.
Okon & Wilgocka-Okon (1973)	Examined forms of educational activities in the preschool period to find those most effectively stimulating developmental processes. A SR test was devised and generally accepted by primary school teachers in Poland.
Hains et al. (1989)	This study aimed to obtain information on the school skills that preschool and kindergarten teachers expect children to display in regular kindergarten classrooms by using the Skill Expectation Survey for Kindergarten Readiness.
May & Kundert (1997)	This article examines SR practices for children at risk. Conceptual problems, such as those related to readiness and risk, are defined and examined. The research on SR practices includes screening, testing and delayed school entrance. Other concepts, such as socioeconomic factors, are prevalent here, including those related to Sure Start.
High (2008)	SR includes the readiness of the individual child, the school's readiness for children, and the ability of the family and community to support optimal early child development. Schools are responsible for being ready for all children at all levels.

Vogler et al. (2008)	Linked to a child's cognitive, linguistic, and social capacity. And highlights potential objectification <i>of the child?</i>
DfE (2008 – 2021)	EYFS: Is there a good level of development in the five areas?
Britto (2012)	Children's readiness for school - Schools' readiness for children - Families' and communities' readiness for school. Furthermore, Transition is defined as children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work with a sociocultural system (i.e., education), and schools making provisions to admit new children into the system, representing individual and societal diversity.
Pacey (2013)	Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) (2013) report on parent and practitioner views of transition: Children who: have strong social skills; can cope emotionally with being separated from their parents; are relatively independent in their care.
Gibb (2015)	The school's minister, Nick Gibb, said admissions rules would be changed so that children born between 1 April and 31 August could attend reception a year later if their parents felt their child was unprepared for school.
Blair & Raver (2015)	Research on the development of self-regulation in young children provides a unifying Framework for the study of SR. Self-regulation abilities allow for engagement in learning activities and provide the foundation for adjustment to school.
Hong & Henly (2020)	This analysis examines the relationship between participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and SR skills, specifically in early reading and early math. It approaches learning skills among low-income children in their preschool.
HM Government (2021)	The Best Start for Life – Focuses on the first 1001 days as critical for child development. Recommends integrated early years support to improve health, well-being, and readiness for school.
Jose et al. (2022)	An ethnographic study exploring parents' views on SR. Findings show parents prioritise independence, social skills and adaptability over purely academic skills, influencing how they prepare children for school

Garon-Carrier et al. (2024)	A systematic review of studies using person-centred approaches to SR. It identifies multiple readiness profiles among vulnerable children and highlights which profiles are most at risk for later academic and social challenges.
Ofsted (2024)	Ofsted: Strong Foundations (2024) examine how early years education supports SR post-pandemic. It emphasises high-quality EYFS provision for language, literacy and socio-emotional development.

Table 1 School Readiness Discourse in the Last 100 years

Table 1 shows evolving thinking yet highlights sameness, as thoughts and ideas over the last century are repeated. Nevertheless, this acknowledges that we have an extensive body of knowledge concerning early education alongside SR.

While the table outlines diverse approaches to SR, it also highlights competing priorities that may contribute to the lack of definition and mixed messages about SR. In contrast to Gesell's work (1925), SR has been discussed as a means of enhancing literacy and numeracy (Dolch & Bloomster, 1937; Duncan et al., 2007; Law et al., 2018). There is a crisis in the early years, affecting both staff retention and staffing levels (Sumsion, 2002; Le Peller, 1946). At the same time, others have sought to establish testing for SR (Okon & Wilgocka-Okon, 1973; May & Kundert, 1997).

In addition to research, there are advisory guidance books that parents can buy, promoted as “ready for school” checklists, some of which mirror the lists created by the Early Years Coalition (Nursery World March 2025), which define SR as including four key areas: (1) Growing Independence, (2) Building Relationships, (3) Communication, (4) Physical Development and Healthy Routines. They also outline some skills they would like children to possess:

- The ability to use cutlery
- The ability to use the toilet by themselves
- Being able to share and take turns
- Recognising their own names
- Being able to hang up coats
- Being able to pay attention for short periods

- Having the ability to talk about their feelings
- Being active for at least three hours a day
- Being able to put their coats on
- Limiting screen time is also recommended.

Others posit that SR includes attachment, social and emotional regulation, and well-being (Brenner, 1954; Peterson, 1970/71; Stacks & Oshio, 2009; Blair & Raver, 2015). Following the pandemic, this view is growing alongside the concern for children's mental health. Interestingly, SR has also been seen as the school is ready for the child. Both High (2008) and Britto (2012) argue that schools must prepare for the diversity in their populations. This argument is relevant as governments tackle the issue surrounding a lack of nursery places. While Gesell (1924) may have introduced the idea of SR or unreadiness, others have since added to this thinking, increasing the complexity of the definition and concept of being school-ready.

1.9 School-Ready Models

Models of SR synthesise ideas from research and consider how they could be shaped and delivered. However well conceptualised or in-depth the key features, many fail to articulate clearly how SR is implemented in daily practice. This study will identify essential practices. The following section discusses established and prominent models.

1.9.1 UNICEF: The Localist Model

UNICEF's (2012) notable model [Figure 4] highlights the impact of environmental and socioeconomic factors on SR and discusses the gap between countries, suggesting differences in what can be achieved by adopting SR policy globally. This research contests the notion of regional differences and argues that SR should be a local model that benefits the children and families who live in the area.

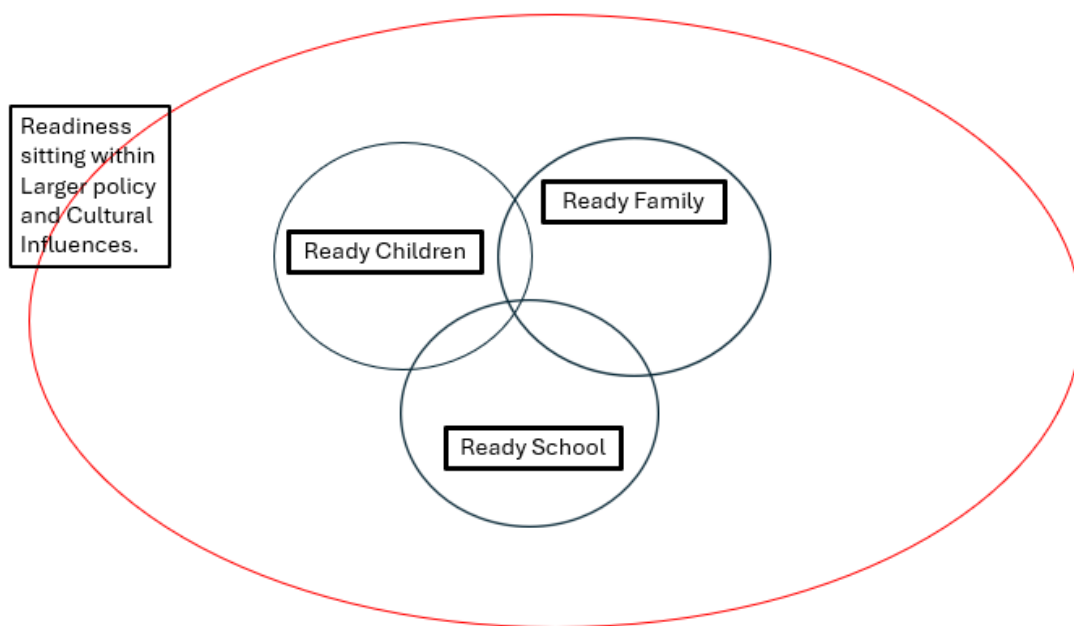


Figure 4 Adapted from UNICEF's School-Ready Diagram (Source: UNICEF, 2012)

UNICEF highlights that each stakeholder partner has a role in being ready: the child, family, school, and population, and it serves as a strategy for change. However, it could go further by offering ideas on how to implement the change in local practice.

1.9.2 Meisels: A Theoretical Model

Meanwhile, Meisels (1998) introduces a model [Table 2] that moves from strategy into a theoretical domain and suggests how SR areas relate. Using this model, it is easy to identify areas that fit. However, it misses a pragmatic lens that could add a practice element to the table.

Theory	Content	Implementation in the RSC
Idealist Nativist	Concerned with the maturation of the child	Health Visitor Checks and EYFS scoring. Using the EYFS and EHCP to judge each child's development status, are children reaching the ideal levels?
Empiricist Environmental view	Proficiency in skills	Tyneside Councils are concerned about children's personal self-skills in the ward. (2020) As the area is designated as disadvantaged, a focus should be placed on closing the gap and improving life chances. Are unemployed parents able to offer the support children need to be school-ready?
Social constructivist	The community assigns meanings and values.	The Centre stakeholders are encouraged to decide what SR is and how to implement it for their children, families, and the community.
Interactionist	What children know and schools' ability to adapt to the child	Transition planning and TBC by the researcher

Table 2 Meisels' (1998) Ideas of School Readiness and How it is Implemented in the Ready for School Centre.

This section identifies perspectives and models of SR, including who may be involved and why it matters. These models highlight the need for further definition and clarity, an SR start and end date, an understanding of who is involved, and what practice looks like, to suggest where SR sits in society today. The following section seeks to identify gaps and clarify this study's purpose.

1.10 Examining Past Ideas on School Readiness to Find Clarity for the Future: *Make Ready – School Ready - The Military Model: A Personal Reflection*

I reflected on readiness in my journal and found myself returning to its roots in military language, particularly the command to “make ready” (Maryat, 1830). Growing up, I absorbed this notion subconsciously, seeing readiness as deliberate preparation before

engaging in something significant. This imagery has stayed with me throughout my professional life. In a military context, readiness is a clear, tangible goal; soldiers prepare for a known event. However, I realise how different this is from preparing children for futures that none of us can fully predict. The steps through education (early years to primary, primary to secondary, secondary to further and higher education and eventually work) are framed as sequential stages of readiness. But this linear model assumes a level of certainty that does not exist in children's lives today.

Schoon et al. (2015) show that early success often predicts later achievement, like military logic: preparation leads to success. But, unlike military planning where outcomes are rehearsed, education must adapt to a changing world. For me, readiness isn't about perfect preparation for a known future but about developing adaptability, curiosity, and tolerance for uncertainty. Readiness is an ongoing process, a dynamic between who a child is now and who they might become. I share my view of SR and its background before discussing established and emerging definitions.

1.11 Defining School Readiness Today

SR is a debated concept that has appeared in education discussions for over a century. It has been linked to social justice, neoliberal ideas, and claims that effective SR benefits children. However, lacking a clear model with defined goals, start and end points, and responsible parties, the focus on readiness is unlikely to improve on past efforts.

In her first speech (5th July 2024) as Secretary of State for Education, Labour's Bridget Phillipson said:

“So much in life depends on those crucial early years: before school, when the gaps between rich and poor open. It is my priority; the life chances of our children, and the future of our country demand nothing less. A year ago, I told you that we were launching a review of early years education. Our manifesto pledged to create 3,000 new school-based nurseries (...) Today, I can tell you that change begins, and delivery begins: those extra places start opening next year – the first phase of our new nurseries of high-quality early education, boosting life chances for children and work choices for parents.”

It was a speech that demonstrated a tenuous view of SR, articulating recognition of the

early years and the need to close inequality gaps. This is laudable; however, before acknowledging the review's results, she stated that investment would be via schools under the auspices of parental choice and arguably suggested the current arrangements do not deliver high-quality education. This added further pressure on the early years' workforce.

This pressure has already been discussed by early years professionals, who suggest that the SR agenda is subsuming their educational practice, creating tensions between developmentally appropriate pedagogy and policy-driven expectations for formal learning (Kay, 2023; Neaum, 2016). The early years curriculum is already designed to prepare and support children for their futures. As set out in the current curriculum documents, the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2021, p. 6) asserts that "it promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's school readiness (...) for good future progress through school and life."

However, the minister's views and the curriculum documents offer a simplistic view that only works if there is a universal understanding of what SR is. Arguably, SR depends on the child's performance and what they know and can do to "negotiate school expectations" rather than on schools being held accountable for being ready for the child (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012, p.53).

Understanding what's included or excluded from the SR curriculum is crucial. Without clarity, 'ready' in SR remains ambiguous, leading to mixed messages about objectives, responsibilities, and success criteria. This causes varied interpretations among policymakers, managers, and practitioners across education, health, and social care. The lack of clear communication makes SR seem like an empty signifier. Action is needed to reduce confusion, agree on a single definition, or accept that SR is a fluid concept shaped over time and space.

1.12 School Readiness: Clear Start

The timing of the SR stage is debated. The 1001 Critical Days report (HM Government, 2021) suggests it may start at birth and end when children begin formal education in Key Stage 1. Alternatively, it could be defined as the period before school entry at age four or

when a child enrolls in early education. The differing interpretations affect which professionals are involved, depending on the definition. Establishing a clear timeframe can support those involved in delivering SR.

1.13 School Readiness has a Clear Intention

Effective SR helps bridge educational gaps and reduce future poverty. While its benefits are often seen as educational, Allen (2011), Tickell (2011), and Bercow (2008) highlight SR's role in maximizing social and economic life chances. They report that children in poverty tend to start school with fewer language, literacy, and social skills than their advantaged peers (National Literacy Trust, 2007; The Communication Trust, 2017).

Earlier research by Schweinhart & Weikart (1993) showed that early quality education reduces social costs and boosts success later in life, such as higher education and earnings. This supports work on human capital and early childhood intervention, especially for disadvantaged children (Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Mosso., 2014). Garon-Carrier et al. (2024) found that early language issues and low socioeconomic status predict future social and academic challenges. These studies provide evidence to identify those needing extra support for equitable outcomes.

Taken together, this research demonstrates that we already have evidence of which children are at the greatest risk and therefore most in need of early and sustained intervention (Allen, 2011; Tickell, 2011; Bercow, 2008; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993; Heckman & Mosso, 2014; Garon-Carrie et al., 2024). This helps explain how the SR agenda has been shaped by research and clarifies its intentions as political, economic, educational and redistributive.

1.14 Chapter Conclusion

Interest in SR has recurred during periods of social and political change, yet it remains ambiguous and unevenly operationalised. Historical analysis reveals cyclical patterns of investment and reform, while current policy rhetoric intensifies pressure on early-year provisions without resolving; definition, timing, funding and responsibility. This chapter concludes that the absence of a coherent, practice-sensitive model perpetuates confusion and risks narrowing early childhood education to a preparatory function for

formal schooling. It identifies four key messages that the research questions will address:

1. Conceptions of SR have shifted over time, reflecting ideological and economic priorities.
2. Lack of definitional clarity undermines consistent and equitable practice.
3. The inclusion of very young children in readiness agendas demands critical scrutiny.
4. A new, contextually grounded model is required to reconcile competing perspectives and support holistic development.

The next chapter presents a comprehensive literature review, examining historical trajectories, geographical variations, theoretical frameworks and practical interpretations of SR. It interrogates seminal and contemporary research, compares global and local models, as well as explores how political agendas shape readiness discourses. This review provides the study's conceptual foundation, highlights knowledge gaps and informs the analytical lens through which stakeholder perspectives and practices will be examined. This approach disrupts the conventional hierarchy that privileges the academic researcher as the sole creator of knowledge, insisting instead that stakeholders can fully produce and apply knowledge (Meredith, 2020).

Chapter Two: School Readiness as Contextual, Relational and Processual, Integrating Ecological and Learning Processes

2.1 Introduction and Conceptual Orientation

School Readiness (SR) remains one of the most contested and inconsistently defined constructs in early childhood.

This chapter is structured thematically and ecologically, moving through Bronfenbrenner's systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) from the chronosystem to the microsystem to show that school readiness is not located within the child alone but is socially constructed across interconnected contexts. To understand how interpretations of readiness have evolved, the literature is organised around key themes and positioned within the ecological system to which they most closely align.

The review begins with the chronosystem, examining historical developments and periods of disruption that have shaped understanding over time. It then explores the macrosystem, considering the cultural, political and societal influences that frame expectations of children and families, before examining the exosystem, where the roles of family support, community resources and local authority structures are considered. The mesosystem is subsequently explored to understand the quality of connections and relationships between systems, and how alignment or lack of alignment influences children's experiences. Finally, the microsystem focuses on the child's immediate environment and relationships, drawing on Illeris's (2007) dimensions of content, interaction, and incentive to illuminate how learning is activated within everyday contexts and to identify practice associated with effective SR.

2.2 Chronosystem: Time, History and Disruption

The following section traces the origins of early pedagogical thinking, examines key

theoretical shifts over time, and highlights how the pandemic exposed and reconfigured relational practices in childhood contexts.

Ideas about readiness are never neutral; they are shaped by history, crisis, and shifting priorities. As such, historical theories of child development continue to influence contemporary understandings of SR. However, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a different kind of influence: a significant temporal rupture that disrupted home, policy and family life (Weiland et al., 2021). This point is supported by Gomes et al. (2021), who conducted research across five countries and suggested that COVID-19 created a new environment that needed reimagining, drawing attention to sociocultural relationships and pedagogy.

2.2.1 Maturationist Origins and Developmental Universalism

Modern readiness frameworks remain influenced by the legacy of developmental universalism: the assumption that children progress through biologically determined, sequential stages. Early theorists such as Hall (1904), Gesell (1925), and Piaget (1972) established a developmental narrative in which learning was understood as internally driven, predictable, and age dependent. These theories positioned readiness primarily as a matter of biological maturation, rather than as a function of context or experience.

This paradigm still shapes checklists, debates, and assessments that favour age-appropriateness. Despite advances in developmental science, maturationist views remain rooted in parental expectations, policies, and practice. This persistence is problematic amid changing social conditions, diverse childhoods, and broader views of learning and development.

In contrast, more contemporary perspectives challenge stage-based determinism by conceptualising development as transactional, relational, and variable (Horm et al., 2016). Dockett & Perry (2006) argue that readiness is a shared responsibility among children, families, schools, and communities, a position that aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework for development. From this perspective, readiness cannot be separated from the environments and systems in which children live and learn (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2014).

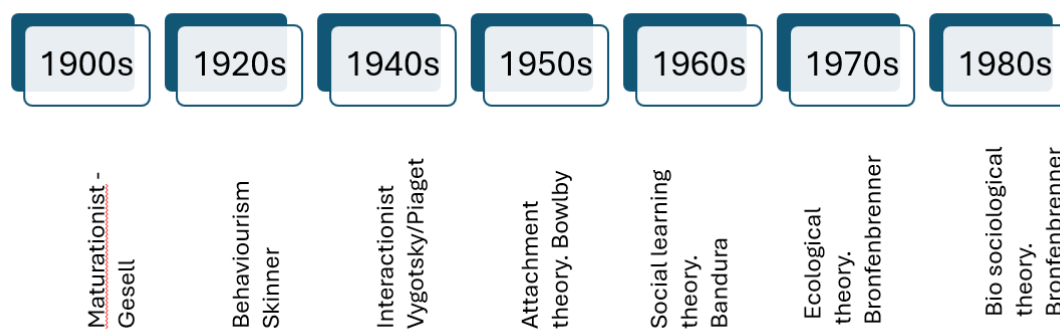


Figure 5 Timeline of Development Theory: From Maturationist to Bioecological Models

The following section builds on this one and focuses on the growth in understanding around systems and their impact on childhood.

2.2.2 Transactional and Socio-ecological Shifts in Developmental Theory

Building on critiques of maturationism, transactional and socio-ecological theories reconceptualise learning and development as dynamic processes shaped through interaction. Illeris's learning dimensions, while originally developed in adult learning contexts, reflect this broader theoretical shift by foregrounding the interdependence of content, interaction and incentive. In early childhood contexts, this emphasis aligns with play-based pedagogy and ecological understandings of learning as relational and situated rather than transmissive.

Similarly, Rimm-Kaufman and Piñata's (2000) transitional model extends transactional thinking by emphasising relational continuity across home, early years settings and schools. Their work shows that successful transitions depend on coordinated relationships across settings, rather than on child characteristics alone, and highlights the structural conditions that support or constrain such continuity

Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta's (2000) transitional model [Figure 6] illustrates how children's transitions into school are shaped through reciprocal relationships between children, families and educational settings. The model foregrounds continuity across contexts rather than individual readiness.

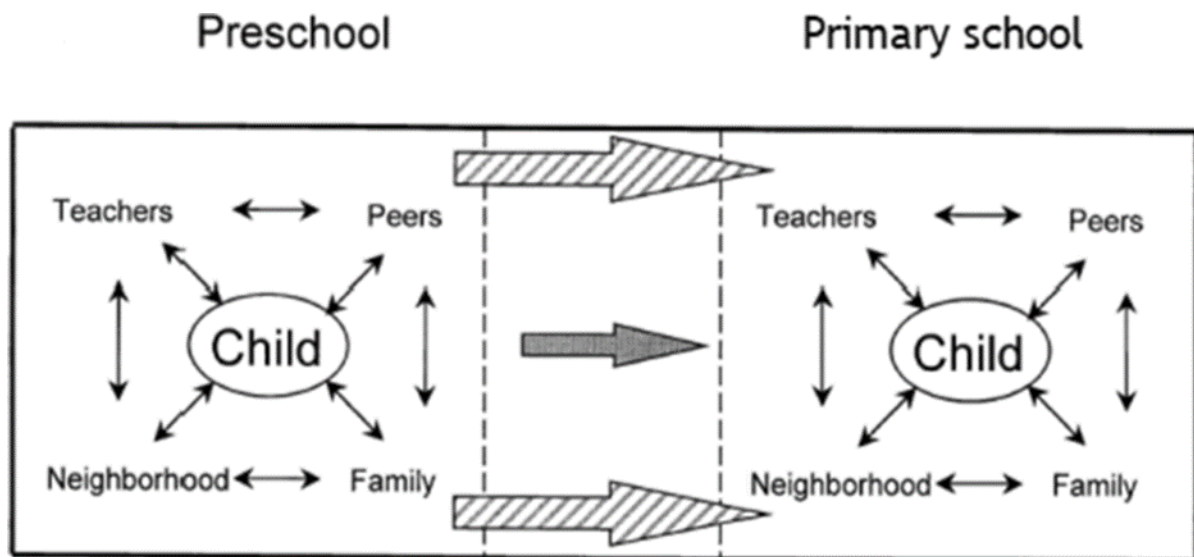


Figure 6 Transitional Model (Source: Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, p.497)

In 2012, UNICEF introduced the SR framework, and in 2022, added a multisystemic view [Figure 7] that integrates child, school, and family/community wellbeing, aligning with holistic, child-centred practice.



Figure 7 UNICEF's School Readiness Framework (Source: UNICEF, 2012)

UNICEF's School Readiness Framework (2012, 2022) further extends socio-ecological thinking by integrating child, school, family and community wellbeing within a multisystemic model. This approach reinforces the argument that readiness emerges through aligned systems rather than developmental thresholds. Grimmer's (2018) work builds on this idea by explicitly incorporating structural factors such as policy

environments, community resources and social inequities, drawing on parental background and home learning, and offering a more comprehensive, system-oriented account of early learning featuring a play-based curriculum.

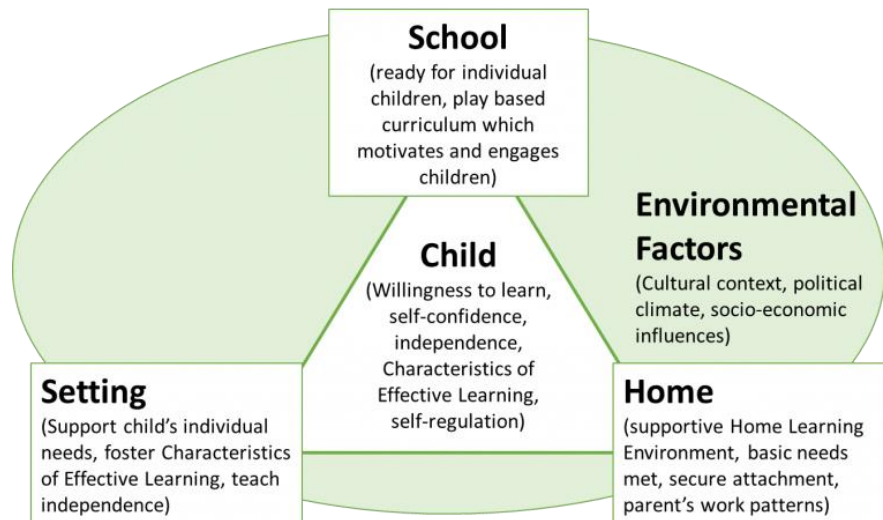


Figure 8 Grimmer's School Readiness Model (Source: Grimmer, 2018, p. 27)

Grimmer's integration of structural influences further reinforces Meisel's (1999) critique of reductive, threshold-based notions of readiness. Together, these developments establish SR as a complex, socially produced process situated in historical, relational and systemic constructs. Grimmer's (2018) model integrates broader social and environmental influences while still recognising the three established spheres of child, family and school/community identified earlier in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and UNICEF's (2012, 2022) work. This trajectory is further reinforced by Lee & Veal's work (2025), which foregrounds how structural inequality and policy environments actively shape early childhood systems, positioning readiness as inseparable from broader social justice concerns. Arguing that SR should be understood as a relational process rooted in connection, continuity and care.

Across these models, a clear theoretical evolution is evident; from early transactional accounts focused on dyadic interaction to contemporary socio-ecological frameworks that conceptualise readiness as dynamic, relational and context-dependent.

Illeris's (2007) focus on interaction, incentive, and content; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) emphasis on relationality; and UNICEF's (2019) wellbeing-oriented framework

collectively indicates a shift towards recognising the interconnected systems that shape children's early experiences. Together, these developments point to a broadening conceptualisation of SR, one that recognises complexity, relationships, and interconnected systems.

2.2.3 Crisis, Disruption and Acceleration: COVID-19, Digitalisation and Early Years Change

The pandemic and related actions impacted children and families. The shift from community spaces to drop-off settings with limited parental contact was significant. Closure of parent groups and community services reduced children's opportunities to engage with peers and communities, affecting their social and early learning development.

As language develops through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), reduced opportunities may have delayed speech, language, and communication during and after the pandemic. Lee & Hwang (2025) found that prolonged pandemic restrictions correlated with lower language scores in pre-school children, and Eisen et al. (2025) reported increased language and socio-emotional delays among children born during this period. Demisse & Pearce (2024) highlight that, especially in socio-economically challenged contexts, high-quality early years provision provided relational and community support, helping to mitigate social isolation and disadvantage.

Part of this infrastructure included the rapid shift to online learning (Erkan et al., 2021). This shift required educators to adapt to new modes of instruction while renegotiating their roles. Mirroring global practice, the SRC adopted digital tools to maintain engagement with parents during the pandemic and sustained many of these communication practices beyond the initial crisis.

The experience in the SRC led to changes in ways of working and expanded family communication through online newsletters, text messages, and short films (Jahareie, 2023). However, this highlighted disparities in digital capacity, with a lack of infrastructure, training, and ongoing support needed for effectiveness (NCES, 2023).

Research highlights that successful digital transformation requires not only access to

technology but also cultural and organisational change. Effective integration depends on leadership, educator competence, and sustained systemic support (Jahareie, 2023). Schools and early years settings are encouraged to move beyond using technology as a supplementary tool and instead embed it meaningfully within relational practice. This is especially important given the additional pressures from COVID-19 requirements and key worker fatigue. During the pandemic, early childhood practitioners faced significant physical, emotional, and organisational demands while maintaining services, leading to increased stress, workload, and concerns about workforce wellbeing (Eadie et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021).

Digital platforms like messaging apps, online systems, and short videos helped sustain existing family connections and ensured continuity between home and setting (Gomes et al., 2021). However, digital tech was less effective for building new relationships, especially where face-to-face contact was lacking. Evidence shows digital engagement decreased as settings returned to traditional practices post-pandemic (Gomes et al., 2021; Weiland et al., 2021).

2.3. Chrono System to Macrosystem

While historical models and moments of disruption reveal how understandings of readiness are shaped over time, they do not operate in isolation. Ideas about development become embedded in broader cultural values, political priorities and policy infrastructures that frame what counts as “ready” at any given moment. To understand how historical assumptions translate into contemporary expectations, it is necessary to move beyond the temporal dimension and examine the ideological and policy contexts through which readiness is defined, regulated and measured. This brings the literature review to the Macrosystem.

2.3.1 The Macrosystem: Global, National and Cultural Framing of School Readiness

If the chronosystem tells us when ideas emerge, the macrosystem reveals whose values define them. The macrosystem therefore influences not only policy formation but also the narratives through which children, families and practitioners are understood, often

privileging certain forms of knowledge and behaviour while marginalising others. From this perspective, debates about SR can be seen as contests over competing values, with tensions arising between developmental, relational and increasingly performative or economically driven understandings of early childhood (Lee & Veale, 2025; Moss, 2014).

2.3.2 Global Frameworks and International Narratives of Readiness

Contemporary global frameworks conceptualise SR through ecological and relational lenses. UNICEF's (2019) tripartite model positions SR as alignment between children and families/communities, foregrounding relational fit and contextual resources rather than children's traits alone. This framing is reinforced by UNICEF's global analysis of pre-primary education, which urges investment in systems, including workforce quality, professional standards, and equitable expansion worldwide, rather than reliance on developmental indicators (UNICEF, 2019).

Across literature, global models reject maturational checklists in favour of holistic, contextual understandings of SR. Ecological perspectives frame SR as an emergent, flexible property of developing capabilities interacting with the environment and with play-rich pedagogy, downplaying fixed thresholds within the child. Similarly, OECD's (2021) workforce and quality evidence foreground the importance of interactions among children, adults and environments as central to early learning quality.

Global policy discourse increasingly recognises the influence of family, neighbourhood, and socioeconomic conditions on SR, cautioning against overreliance on chronological age as a proxy for competence (Snow, 2006). Participation data highlight persistent equity concerns: across OECD countries, enrolment rates for under-threes vary significantly, with Nordic countries and South Korea sustaining high participation, while other contexts demonstrate marked socioeconomic gradients in access (OECD, 2021).

Policy frameworks now include wellbeing and welfare alongside learning outcomes, a contentious development (UNICEF, 2016; 2019). This shift has focused on parental income, education, household conditions, and parenting (Emig, 2000; Lipscomb et al., 2019; Stan, 2014). Studies link access to quality early childhood education to later outcomes (Sylva, 2004; Reynolds, 1998; McCoy et al., 2017), with UNICEF stressing the

importance of play and children's interests.

From an ecological standpoint, SR therefore arises through the interaction of developing capabilities and proximal environments, shaped by broader cultural and structural conditions rather than individual readiness alone.

2.3.3 National Policy Regimes, Accountability and Performativity

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets statutory requirements for children from birth to five, supported by assessment mechanisms such as the Good Level of Development (GLD) and the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) (DfE, 2023). While intended to standardise expectations, these measures have been widely critiqued for narrowing the curriculum and prioritising performative outcomes over holistic development (Kay, 2022), suggesting dual trajectories for children deemed ready and those seen as unready.

Critics argue that GLD and baseline assessments struggle to capture children's capabilities, lived experiences and developmental variability, particularly for children from marginalised backgrounds (Perrott, 2022). Earlier concerns raised by Tickell (2011), who recommended removing EYFS scoring, warned that compliance with assessment frameworks risks distorting early years practice and reducing responsive pedagogy. Similar critiques have been raised in the United States, where standardised assessment regimes have been shown to marginalise socio-economic development and disproportionately disadvantage minority children (CAP, 2014; NIER, 2024). Biesta (2010, p. 130) describes this shift as a move away from questions of educational purpose towards questions of measurement, warning that complex learning risks being reduced to enumerated indicators.

These developments mirror neoliberal policies that emphasise performativity, marketisation, and accountability (Ball, 2003; Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2014). In this context, SR is often treated as a measurable outcome rather than a relational process. Foucault's research (1980) views SR as a governance technology that enables power through surveillance, assessment, and normalisation in practice. Developmental checklists and outcome measures shape expectations for children, families, and practitioners, defining

what it means to be "ready".

Ball (2003) states that performative cultures prompt practitioners to evidence outcomes, but Biesta (2010) warns that focusing on measurable achievement can limit education's purposes. Roberts-Holmes & Moss (2021) argue that SR discourses commodify early childhood, emphasizing standardization, assessment, and future economic productivity over children's current wellbeing, agency, and democratic participation. Thus, SR is both an educational concept and a policy tool that shapes practice, participation, and capacity (Hayward, 2000), shaping certain childhoods as desirable while marginalizing others.

Within this context, the review deliberately seeks practice-oriented indicators aligned with relational and ecological pedagogy, rather than child-level metrics. While international comparisons and accountability mechanisms may offer useful system-level insights, uncritical reliance on such measures risks narrowing pedagogical practice by obscuring the relational, cultural and contextual dimensions of SR.

2.3.4 International and Comparative perspectives on Early Childhood Education

Internationally, early childhood education systems reflect diverse cultural, political and pedagogical traditions. South Korea combines near-universal enrolment with a centralised, achievement-oriented curriculum, while Japan has moved towards more child-centred approaches (Clausen & Ringmouse, 2016). In Chile, participation in early childhood education is associated with improved outcomes for disadvantaged children and is actively promoted by policy (UNESCO, 2024).

Nordic countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are recognised for publicly funded, universally accessible systems grounded in social pedagogy, characterised by strong workforces, low child-to-staff ratios, and play-based curricula (Sousa & Moss, 2022; Clausen & Ringmouse, 2016). By contrast, the United States maintains a fragmented system in which access and quality vary considerably, despite programmes such as Head Start (Kagan et al., 2016).

Research highlights tensions between Anglo-American systems that emphasise

accountability and standardisation and Nordic models that prioritise play, wellbeing and relationships. However, rising global accountability pressures have blurred these distinctions (Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Taneja-Johansson & Powell, 2024). These comparisons underscore the importance of contextually grounded approaches to SR that reflect local cultures, values and communities rather than imported policy models.

2.3.5 Policy Borrowing, Equity and the Risks of Standardisation

UNICEF's (2019) strategy emphasises equity and holistic development, highlighting children's rights. Conversely, the OECD's (2013) PECD framework focuses on measurement and international comparison. Through epistemic governance, these bodies define "quality", often prioritising standardised data over relational practices (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Needham & Ulker, 2020).

Decolonial scholars argue that when global evidence frameworks dominate, they can marginalise local knowledge and undervalue pedagogies grounded in community traditions (Mignolo, 2010; Smith, 2012). This is particularly evident in early childhood education, where play-rich approaches common in Nordic, Māori and Indigenous Australian contexts do not fit neatly within standardised indicators because they emphasise exploration, storytelling and relationship-building, concepts that are difficult to measure.

Therefore, a more equitable system needs balance, for example by using comparative data where helpful, but paired with locally grounded evaluation and policy-making that values play, culture and context as legitimate forms of knowledge and learning.

At the macro-system level, learning is shaped directly and indirectly by what is incentivised, measured and legitimised, with funding and workforce conditions shaping lived experiences. These constructs influence both pedagogical content and motivational climates within early years settings. To understand how readiness is enabled and constrained at the margins of a child's daily life, attention must shift to the Exosystems.

2.4 Exosystem: Structural Conditions Surrounding the Child

Policy discourse alone doesn't shape children's experiences; its effects are mediated through the Exosystem, where ideological priorities influence governance, funding, and regulation. Practitioners and families encounter policy as material realities affecting staffing, access, workloads, training, and resources. Concepts like SR are filtered through institutional structures that can enable or constrain relational practice. The exosystem reveals how power operates invisibly, shaping interactions among children, families, and practitioners, and serves as a key lens to understand how inequalities are reproduced or challenged in early childhood.

2.4.1 The Exosystem: Socio-Economic Conditions, Infrastructure and Direct Influences

Evidence shows that early inequalities arise quickly and accumulate over time, driven by socioeconomic, cultural and institutional conditions rather than child-led deficits (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; OECD, 2023). Consequently, the question is not whether early childhood programmes are effective, but for whom, under what conditions and within which systems. Longitudinal evidence demonstrates that access to high-quality provision is linked to sustained educational, health and social benefits across the life course (Heckman et al, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2016).

These pathways are inherently relational and ecological. Research indicates that universal play-based early childhood education (ECE) that is culturally responsive and integrated with family support is effective in reducing inequality because it addresses both children's everyday learning experiences and the wider structural environment shaping those experiences (Jeong et al., 2021; Osher et al., 2020).

However, the success of such approaches depends on exosystemic conditions, including workforce capacity, funding stability, and organisational cultures that enable educators to practise inclusively, adopt trauma-informed approaches, and prioritise whole-family relational work. These enabling conditions cannot be captured by performative metrics alone (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2012).

Overall, the literature calls for system-level alignment that recognises play-rich

pedagogy, culturally attuned family engagement, and educator agency as essential components of early childhood infrastructure, rather than discretionary enhancements.

2.4.2 Family Engagement: Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness

From a self-determination perspective, family engagement strengthens when parents experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, within SR agendas, exosystem influences such as policy frameworks, assessment practices, and family support programmes can both enable and constrain parental participation. While these mechanisms may build parental confidence and connection with services, they can also subtly shape what constitutes appropriate parental involvement, reflecting broader governance and normalisation processes. Family engagement within the exosystem represents both a source of empowerment and a site where readiness expectations are negotiated. Engagement is discussed further in the Meso and Micro levels as it is a topic that intersects at every level of the ecological system.

2.4.3 Socio-Economic Inequality and Early Intervention Evidence

Socio-economic status (SES) remains one of the most powerful predictors of SR. Children from low-income households are more likely to face barriers such as limited access to qualified early educators, food insecurity, and unstable housing. Weyer (2021) emphasises that broader socio-economic influences, including parental education, employment conditions, and access to quality childcare, shape readiness. Cultural contexts further shape readiness. George et al. (2025) demonstrate that cultural norms surrounding parenting, education, and child development influence how SR is understood and enacted. Similarly, Pelletier & Brent (2002) found that when parents perceive themselves as effective and valued, they are more likely to engage with SR and flourish in inclusive, well-understood environments.

At the same time, scholars caution against overemphasising SES or cultural difference in ways that pathologise communities. Winter & Kelley (2008) warn that deficit-based models risk framing low-income or minoritised families as lacking, rather than recognising the resilience, knowledge, and adaptive strategies often present. Strength-based approaches are therefore essential within ecological understanding of readiness.

The picture is also complicated by evidence that community-level factors influence readiness independently of household SES. Lipscomb et al. (2019) show that variables such as neighbourhood crime, adult health, and maternal wellbeing are associated with early outcomes, reinforcing the need for ecological models that account for local interacting influences across multiple system levels.

2.4.4 Workforce, Funding and System Capacity

Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) exosystem, workforce policy, funding, and organisational capacity indirectly influence children's experiences by affecting early years provision. The recent rise in funded childcare has raised concerns over system capacity, with the Department for Education estimating 35,000 more staff are needed (DfE, 2024). The sector faces ongoing recruitment and retention issues due to low pay, limited career progression, and funding worries (NFER, 2025; Early Years Alliance, 2024). These issues impact staffing, place creation, and quality, especially in disadvantaged areas. As a result, workforce sustainability critically shapes how SR policies are implemented and experienced by children and families.

2.4.5 Digital Access, Technology and Organisational Support

Within the ecosystem, organisational capacity is increasingly influenced by financial pressures, reduced local authority support, and rising costs for CPD and digital infrastructure. Early years settings must use digital systems for workforce management, parental communication, child assessment, and safeguarding, which adds financial and administrative burdens on already stretched budgets. Increased accountability demands more data collection and monitoring, extending organisational surveillance in daily practice (Ball, 2003). Evidence shows funding shortages, workforce gaps, and rising operational costs limit providers' ability to expand and sustain services, especially in disadvantaged areas (DfE, 2024; NDNA, 2024; LGA, 2024). While digital tech can improve communication, efficiency, and safeguarding, resource constraints and inequalities influence their deployment.

In summary, although exosystemic conditions shape the contexts in which families and settings operate, SR is enacted through relationships that span children's immediate worlds. Structural conditions alone do not determine experience; rather, they interact

with the quality of connections among home, early years provision, schools and community services. These interactions form the mesosystem, where alignment, or often fragmentation, between environments becomes visible in children's worlds, transitions and sense of continuity.

2.5 The Mesosystem: Partnership, Transitions and Place-based Readiness

The mesosystem highlights the relational processes through which knowledge is exchanged, trust is developed and decisions are made, underscoring the importance of collaborative partnerships in shaping children's educational transitions.

This section positions partnership work as a central mechanism for enacting readiness. Co-production broadens the conceptualisation of SR, redistributes power, and supports culturally responsive, play-rich pedagogy aligned with an ecological understanding of development. By contrast, partnerships limited to co-ordination risk reproducing institutional priorities rather than responding to the needs of children and families. From this perspective, SR is not simply a characteristic located within the child but is co-constructed through the quality of relationships linking home, early years settings and schools.

2.5.1 Agency, Collaboration and Governance

Partnerships are central to SR and can enable or undermine equity. As discussed earlier, Oregon community analysis shows school economic disadvantage and county factors like childcare, crime, and adult health predict readiness outcomes even after controlling for household socio-economic status (Lipscomb et al., 2019). This evidence indicates the need for effective interventions that target systems and places, rather than children and families alone.

Evaluations of Sure Start in the UK provide further support for the impact of community-level multi-agency approaches. Evidence shows reductions in hospitalisation, accidental injuries, obesity, and behavioural difficulties, alongside improvements in family functioning and home learning environments, outcomes associated with reduced

structural inequality (DfE, 2012; Sibieta et al., 2025). Long-term follow-up studies also report improved educational outcomes and reduced youth offending, confirming that early place-based intervention can alter developmental and belonging trajectories (Catten et al., 2025; Hayre et al., 2025; Carneiro et al., 2025).

Local agencies and intersectional partnerships play a role in shaping environments that support SR. Winter & Kelley (2008) demonstrate that sustained collaboration across health, education and social care can develop into durable support systems for children and families. Comparable models, such as Head Start and Sure Start, similarly illustrate the potential of coordinated provision (ACF, 2019; NESS, 2010). However, the literature identifies the difficulty of establishing shared goals, aligned accountability, and stable funding as a persistent structural weakness within cross-sector early years policy.

While evidence suggests that collaboration, co-location and synchronised routines can improve outcomes, it also indicates that these conditions are fragile and difficult to sustain, with relations strained by the high turnover of staff in these areas (Beaudoin et al., 2023; Peterson et al., 2018). From an ecological perspective, development unfolds over time and across contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), suggesting that SR is better understood as part of a longer developmental trajectory rather than being concentrated at the fixed school entry point. The Oregon Study (Lipscomb et al., 2019) demonstrates that intersectional collaborations fragment due to competing priorities and funding mechanisms, making an argument for more community-driven and locally responsive models that form partnerships addressing both individual experiences and the structural conditions operating across multiple ecological systems.

2.5.2 Collaboration and Empowerment Versus Saviourism and Lacking Narratives

Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystem, the quality of communication and interaction between families, educators, health professionals and other agencies is central to children's experiences of SR. Freire (1970) argues that meaningful change emerges through dialogue, participation and mutual respect rather than through hierarchical relationships in which knowledge is imposed on others. Applied to SR, this suggests that collaborative partnerships should seek to empower families as active

contributors to decision-making rather than positioning professionals as experts who "fix" perceived deficits. Such an approach helps avoid saviour narratives, whereby disadvantaged communities are constructed as lacking and in need of rescue. Instead, it recognises the knowledge, strengths and agency that families bring to the readiness process. Effective mesosystem relationships are therefore characterised by reciprocity, shared responsibility and co-construction, supporting more equitable and contextually responsive understandings of readiness (Freire, 1970; Goodall, 2018).

2.5.3 Place-Based and Co-Produced Approaches to School Readiness

Community-based interventions show promise for improving SR, especially when rooted in local contexts. Peterson et al. (2018) highlight models where families, educators, and community leaders co-create programmes aligned with local priorities, including parenting support, early literacy, and health screening. Liss-Leverson et al. (2020) emphasise that building healthy communities requires ongoing cross-sector collaboration in education, housing, health, transport and urban planning, based on mutual understanding.

The importance of culturally responsive programming is further emphasised by Erkan et al. (2021), who conclude that transitions to school are not the responsibility of teachers alone but require coordinated effort amongst schools, families and communities. Their findings indicate programmes incorporating local language practices and cultural values achieve higher engagement and more positive outcomes, illustrating the limitations of uniform, top-down readiness policies.

Alderwick et al. (2021) identify five domains for effective partnership: 1. Shared Purpose, 2. Relational Culture, 3. Resource Capacity, 4. Governance and Leadership, and 5. Responsiveness to External Conditions. Applied to SR, these values show how community leadership and shared governance situate SR with local values. This suggests that locally place-based co-produced approaches let families and communities define readiness, shape resources, and influence decisions, enhancing relational continuity and relevance.

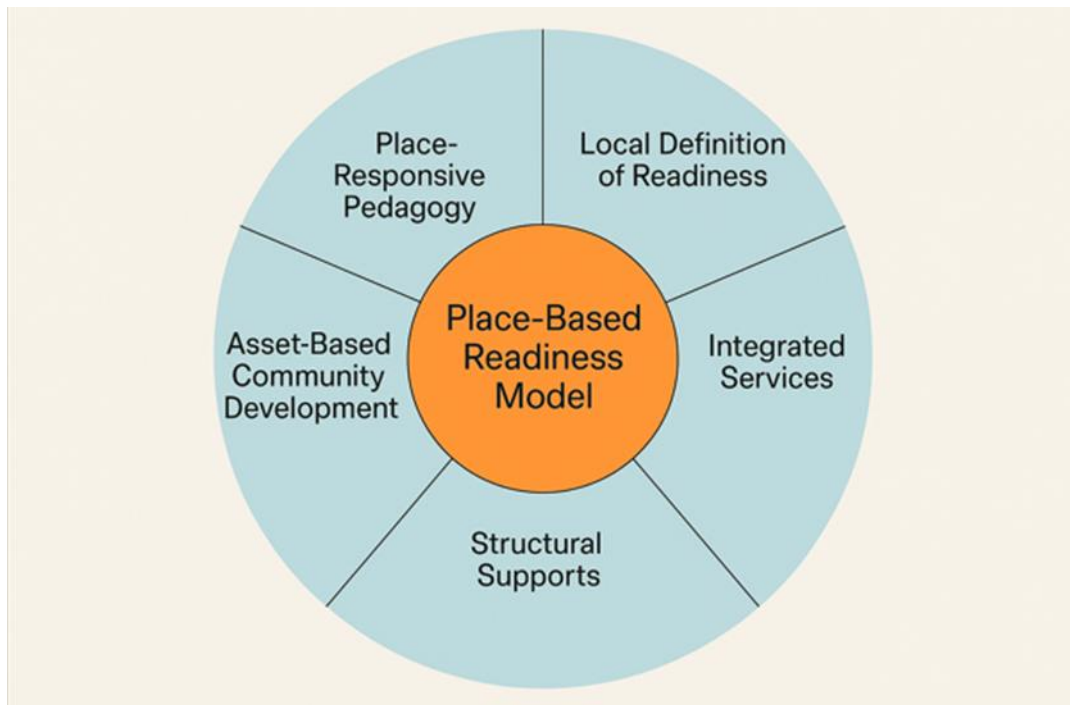


Figure 9 Place-Based Readiness Model

Figure 9 synthesises bioecological, systems-based and community-led perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Liss Levenson et al., 2020; Winter & Kelley, 2008; Alderwick, 2021), illustrating a place-based model of SR that integrates policy, pedagogy, partnerships and lived environments. The model moves beyond a service-mapping approach to foreground how places, relationships and resources interact to shape what is possible for children and families.

2.5.4 Power, Discourse and Readiness

From a Foucauldian perspective, SR is a regulatory construct shaped by discourse, surveillance and normalisation rather than a neutral milestone (Foucault, 1977; 1980). Readiness discourses establish what understandings of the child, family and educator are recognised as legitimate, influencing what is said, valued and enacted in early childhood. Power is relational, operating through everyday practices like observation, assessment and monitoring, encouraging individuals to self-regulate to accepted norms of 'readiness.' These processes are neither fixed nor deterministic, as Hayward (2000) notes that power constrains and enables action by shaping possibilities. Thus, SR is a fluid, negotiated process with children, families, and practitioners exercising agency within, and sometimes against, policy and practice constraints.

2.5.5 Transitions as Mesosystem Events

Contemporary curriculum frameworks increasingly reflect a shift towards inclusive, child-centred pedagogy and emphasise developmental appropriateness and cultural responsiveness. Bredecamp & Copple (1997) argue that effective early childhood education must be grounded in developmentally appropriate practice, which requires educators to understand and respond to children's diverse needs through intentional teaching and curriculum design. Such responsiveness is not static; it must evolve alongside changing social, cultural and community contexts.

Research shows ongoing tension between play-based learning and curriculum policy. Roberts-Holmes (2012) notes conflict during the EYFS rollout in England, where educators balanced child-led learning with accountability demands. This tension persists, as inspection frameworks specify desired outcomes but lack guidance on achieving them, creating uncertainty and inconsistency. Educator judgment and professionalism are vital in mediating these policy tensions during transitions.

Educators are therefore not passive implementers of the curriculum but active agents in shaping learning environments. Bredekamp (2019) emphasises the importance of professional development and protected time for reflective practice to inform decision-making. This aligns with wider calls for teacher empowerment and curriculum co-construction, recognising that effective transitions depend on both professional capacity and structural support (Callender & Douglas-Gardner, 2022).

Transitions into formal schooling are key mesosystem events where relationships among children, families, schools and early settings intersect. Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000) see transitions ecologically, emphasizing relational continuity across contexts, which is hard with a transient workforce. Their model shows successful transitions depend on coordinated relationships, not just individual readiness. However, workforce instability in early years provision continues to challenge this continuity.

Effective transition programmes aim to reduce discontinuities between early childhood settings and primary school. Snow (2006) critiques traditional readiness assessments that position readiness as a fixed threshold, arguing instead for a conceptualisation that

recognises SR as fluid and constructed through interaction. Empirical evidence supports this position. Ladd et al. (2006) show that children who develop positive relationships with peers and teachers are more likely to adjust successfully to school routines and expectations, underlining the relational nature of transition experiences.

The concept of “ready schools” further reframes responsibility for transitions (UNICEF, 2012). Bradbury (2025) and Lee & Veale (2025) argue that schools should adapt to the needs of incoming children rather than expecting them to conform to rigid institutional norms. Bredekamp (2019) similarly advocates flexible curricula and inclusive practices that honour developmental variability, positioning transition support as an embedded feature of school culture rather than a short-term intervention. Notably, during COVID-19, transition meetings were often reduced to form-filling about a child, further limiting time to build meaningful or trusted relationships.

The mesosystem is also evident in interagency SEND meetings, coordinated support arrangements, and parental advocacy, where families and professionals negotiate and maintain relationships. These collaborative approaches can strengthen continuity across services and enhance parental agency in decision-making (Hall and Woolley, 2020).

Within the Mesosystem, SR is enacted through the quality of relational bridges between home, early years settings, and schools, which directly shape children's sense of belonging and emotional safety. While partnerships, governance and transitions create the conditions for continuity, readiness is ultimately lived in children's everyday experiences. The microsystem comprises the proximal environments in which learning occurs through interaction, emotion and engagement. To understand how readiness is activated or constrained, it is necessary to focus on families, classrooms, relationships and pedagogical practices where learning is experienced moment by moment.

2.6 Microsystem: Learning, Pedagogy and Lived Experience

2.6.1 The Microsystem: Children, Families and Everyday Learning

Focusing on the microsystem, where children experience immediate influences, Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) define it as the environment of face-to-face interactions

and daily activities. This includes relationships with parents, siblings, peers, practitioners, and teachers at home, early years settings, and school

If the chronosystem explains when ideas emerge, the macrosystem explains whose values define them, the exosystem explains how structures enact them, and the mesosystem explains how relationships negotiate them, the microsystem reveals how children experience them in everyday life.

2.6.2 Families, Beliefs and Home Learning Environments

Evidence shows a persistent gap between parental perceptions and professional assessments of SR. The Kindred School Readiness UK Survey (2025) reports 90% of parents believed their child was ready, while teachers identified 33% lacking basic skills like listening, sharing, and toilet independence. Similar findings appeared in the USA EdChoice baseline study (2025), which focused on older children. These data highlight the need for clearer communication and shared expectations of SR.

Further UK survey evidence suggests shifting parental expectations regarding responsibility for. Nearly half of parents (49%) do not see preparing their child for reception as their role, relying more on schools to address developmental gaps. The Common-Sense Media Report (2025) notes 20% of parents cite lack of support and involvement as affecting children's mental health. These findings align with research on changing parental roles, expectations, and pressures (Yaffe, Roman & Alt, 2024). Recent studies highlight that parental engagement is influenced by mental health, cultural norms, family dynamics, and parents' educational and socio-economic backgrounds. (Yaffe et al., 2024; Paum, 2024). At the same time, the Power of Play report (Children's Alliance, 2024) positions parents as central to children's play and learning, calling for improved communication with families about play, playfulness, and its developmental value, both now and for future learning.

Research links family engagement to positive outcomes. NCES findings show that parental participation in school activities, including meetings, volunteering, and school-initiated communication, is associated with higher satisfaction and improved academic outcomes. Schools that actively foster engagement demonstrate stronger

developmental progress (Irwin et al., 2023). Parents reinforce this view: surveys across the UK and USA indicate that families regard their encouragement and involvement as key contributors to children's learning (EDChoice, 2025; Parentkind, 2025).

However, this positive narrative is complicated by evidence of communication gaps. The Institute for Fiscal Studies School Readiness Survey (2025), supported by regional teacher reports (North Tyneside, 2020) and the Kindred surveys (2024/25), suggests that many parents lack clear information about what SR entails, with fewer than half reporting effective guidance on developmental expectations. While such findings risk framing families through a deficit lens, sector critiques argue that limited funding, unequal access, and inconsistent support constrain families' capacity to engage rather than a lack of willingness (Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2025).

Recent literature calls for culturally responsive, family-centred approaches. Yaffe et al. (2024) argue that partnerships which fail to integrate families' cultural values risk reproducing inequity. Their work advocates positioning families as partners rather than participants, a stance reinforced by Paun (2014), who demonstrates that parental involvement in governance can shift power dynamics. Together, these studies suggest that without genuinely representative family-school partnerships, engagement risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

2.6.3 Parental Involvement and Self-Determination

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) proposes that human motivation and wellbeing are supported by satisfying three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. In early childhood contexts, autonomy refers to opportunities for children and families to exercise choice and influence; competence relates to feelings of capability and effectiveness; and relatedness concerns the development of meaningful, trusting relationships. These constructs provide an important framework for understanding how SR is co-constructed through interactions among children, families and practitioners. Rather than viewing readiness as a set of skills residing solely within the child, self-determination theory highlights the importance of relational environments that foster empowerment and shared agency. Within the microsystem, parental agency is strengthened when families feel respected, heard and

involved in decision-making, while practitioners can support competence by affirming strengths and building confidence. Relatedness serves as a critical anchor, fostering reciprocal relationships that facilitate collaboration and reduce hierarchical assumptions about expertise.

2.6.4 Children's Developmental Domains and Voice

Children's readiness for school encompasses interrelated cognitive, physical, social, emotional and linguistic domains, each shaping and reinforcing the others. As Tickell (2011) stated, no domain develops in isolation. Despite this, research and policy frequently address these areas separately, creating tensions in practice when holistic development is valued.

Policy initiatives like the 1001 days agenda emphasize early brain development, aligning with EYFS standards and pedagogical practices that foster cognitive growth (DfE, 2025; Draper et al., 2024). Language development exemplifies this link clearly. Pan et al. (2019) demonstrate that responsive adult–child communication enhances vocabulary and synaptic growth, notably in diverse households. Opportunities for phonological awareness, language-rich environments, and skilled scaffolding are vital for early literacy, communication, and SR (Trussler & Robinson, 2015). However, Panjeti-Maden & Ranganathan (2032) warn that excessive screen time may hinder linguistic and emotional development, stressing the importance of balanced digital use. Different perspectives can obscure effective practice and relying on a single source risks misinformation.

For educators, navigating the evidence base is challenging, as research often emphasizes different priorities. Wesley & Buysse (2003) support readiness strategies focusing on social–emotional development and accountability. Conversely, Carlton & Winsler (1999) criticize approaches that isolate readiness within the child and ignore the sociocultural context. The multitude of stakeholders and perspectives can obscure responsibility and create a culture of blame.

This tension directly informs the research questions guiding the study [1.60], which interrogate what counts as SR and how SR aligns with holistic ecological models rather than with fragmented developmental indicators based on specific research.

2.6.5 Inclusion, Diversity and SEND

Individual differences, including temperament, cultural background, lived experience and aspirations, shape children's developmental trajectories. Carlton & Winsler (1999) argue that socio-ecological models of readiness are better suited to recognising these dynamics, as they foreground the interaction between the child and the environment.

Kaiser & Rasminsky (2019) warn against “colour-blind” pedagogies that hide children's identities, urging culturally responsive methods that celebrate diversity. UNICEF (2012) also supports inclusive environments focused on equity and participation. In diverse communities, this shift demands authentic multicultural pedagogies instead of reproducing Western-centric ideologies and curricula.

Evidence highlights persistent disparities in access to nurturing care. Draper et al. (2024) identify systemic barriers affecting boys, children in rural areas, and those in low-income households. Linguistic diversity further complicates SR assessments. Pan et al. (2019) show that bilingual households offer rich language experiences that are often undervalued within mainstream frameworks.

Developmental variability is a normal feature of early childhood, and some children require additional support. Draper et al. (2024) estimate that approximately 8% of children under five have developmental disabilities, yet many lack timely access to appropriate interventions. Early intervention is widely advocated as a preventive strategy (Blair & Ravers, 2014; Tickell, 2011), particularly when grounded in culturally responsive interpretations of difference (Pan et al., 2019).

Much of inclusive education research highlights interdisciplinary collaboration, flexible provision, and participatory models that treat children as active contributors (Bercow, 2008; Pelletier & Brent, 2002). Carlton & Winsler (1999) contend this are hindered by rigid readiness assessments, emphasising the need for a child-centred, adaptive approach. This could include tiered interventions like dialogic reading, small-group language support with families, and communication strategies focused on children's strengths.

2.6.6 Educators, Pedagogy and Relational Practice

Teacher expectations and expertise play a critical role in shaping children's classroom

interactions, instructional choices, transition experiences and longer-term trajectories. They set the emotional climate of learning environments, thereby affecting regulation, safety and wellbeing. When expectations are developmentally appropriate and inclusive, they support engagement and adjustment; when they are rigid or deficit-oriented, they risk undermining confidence and participation, with both pathways having longer-term impacts.

Teacher expectations are influenced by broader ecological factors. Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000) say expectations are rooted in school culture, policies and accountability. Roberts-Holmes (2012) critiques the increasing formalisation of early years education in England, arguing that narrowing academic expectations unfairly disadvantages children from non-normative backgrounds.

According to Snow (2006), readiness frameworks that privilege cognitive benchmarks often reflect adult-centred assumptions rather than children's lived experiences. Thus, Snow warns that educators may unconsciously lower expectations for children from marginalised backgrounds, thereby reinforcing inequality. Longitudinal evidence supports this concern; Ladd et al. (2006) show that children teachers perceive as socially and academically capable are more likely to experience positive peer relationships and sustained engagement.

Maintaining inclusive expectations requires robust support systems. Professional development, mentoring, peer collaboration and reflective practice enable educators to interrogate bias and sustain child-centred values (Bredekamp, 2019; Erkan et al., 2021). Policy alignment that prioritises relationship-building and continuity of transition further supports educators' capacity to respond effectively and grounds expectations in reality.

2.6.7 Relational Pedagogy and Ethics of Care

Relationships in the microsystem go beyond immediate educational outcomes, emphasising a long-term commitment to care as a core early childhood principle. Noddings (2013) states that caring relationships are central to ethics, viewing care as a relational process rooted in attentiveness, responsiveness and mutual recognition. Children thrive when they feel emotional security, trust and belonging in relationships

marked by continuity and concern, fostering confidence, agency, and positive learner identities. Page (2018) introduces professional love, where practitioners show warmth, affection, and emotional commitment while maintaining boundaries. This concept underscores the importance of reciprocal relationships in promoting wellbeing and resilience, especially during transitions. Both Noddings' ethics of care and Page's professional love demonstrate how caring, trusting relationships underpin children's learning, development and SR, emphasising that success is built on connection, acceptance and belonging.

2.6.8 Attachment, Emotional Labour and Co-Dependency

In disadvantaged contexts, relationships between families and early years practitioners may become highly interdependent. Kittay (1999) describes such dependency as arising from mutual need, structural inequality, and emotional labour, and notes that it is also driven in part by differing expectations and mutual confusion. Co-dependency within early years settings emerges from both structural and emotional pressures. Families facing precarious employment, housing instability, and limited access to services often rely heavily on early years provision for support.

Research during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that these relationships can be beneficial when services are locally embedded and responsive, though they also pose challenges regarding boundaries and sustainability (Demissie & Pearse, 2024). Evidence shows that practitioners in under-resourced settings undertake roles beyond education, acting as advocates and providing emotional support. Dickerson et al. (2024) identify emotional labour as a significant feature of early years work, noting that insufficient support contributes to burnout and reduced wellbeing, and that structural under-investment intensifies these pressures.

However, family engagement remains a strong predictor of positive outcomes. Mason et al. (2025) show that collaborative partnerships between families and educators enhance service quality and child outcomes by building parental confidence and competence. Yet, they also emphasise the need for clarity about roles and responsibilities, warning that without a shared understanding, collaboration is difficult to enact.

Partnerships as an attachment-informed practice highlight the value of stable, responsive relationships. Attachment theory emphasises the importance of secure relational bases in early childhood (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978), and contemporary research links early relational health to resilience and long-term well-being (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). However, blurred professional boundaries risk role strain and emotional exhaustion, and can undermine parental autonomy, shifting responsibility onto early years settings (Kittay, 1999). This situation calls for reflective supervision and organisational support (Dickerson, Fenech & Stratigos, 2024; Kittay, 1999).

The literature shows that SR depends on daily interactions among children, families and educators, influenced by relational quality, emotional security and supportive environments. Family engagement, educator expectations, inclusive practices and attachment-based relationships are key in activating, constraining or maintaining learning and SR.

However, these proximal processes do not operate in isolation; wider structural, cultural and policy conditions across ecological systems continuously shape them.

This underscores the need for a framework that can account for both “how” learning occurs in children’s immediate worlds and “why” these experiences vary across contexts. The following section therefore integrates Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bioecological systems theory with Illeris’s (2007) learning triangle to conceptualise SR as a relational, embedded process, linking microsystem learning experiences to broader ecological influences within a coherent analytical model.

2.7 Integrating Ecological Systems and Learning

It is pertinent to explore environmental and empiricist accounts of SR that conceptualise readiness through children's observable transactions with their environments (Sak & Sahin-Sak, 2016). While this approach acknowledges context, it risks narrowing complex developmental processes and normalising distributions of opportunity, particularly within outcome-driven policy regimes (Carlson & Winsler, 1999; Catten et al., 2024; OECD, 2025). Skills prioritised in readiness metrics may reflect access to resources and cultural

capital rather than intrinsic child attributes (Kokalia et al., 2023), thereby privileging children whose ecologies afford broader learning opportunities.

Interpretative practices compound these limitations. Practitioner knowledge and judgements may inadvertently normalise some children as “ready” while marginalising or rendering others invisible (Erkan et al., 2021). Policy discourse also frequently assumes parental capacity for shared reading time and material resources, overlooking the structural constraints many families face (Ongoren, 2021). From this perspective, readiness is not an individual responsibility located within the child, but a socially produced outcome shaped by institutional expectations and the distribution of resources.

Exploring SR via Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model reveals that, despite much research, SR remains conceptually fragmented, with little agreement on core indicators or ecological influences on learning. This leads to varied, sometimes unreliable, approaches among stakeholders, worsening fragmentation. This section incorporates Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), Illeris's learning theory (2007) and Meisels's (1998) critique of fixed checklists, positioning SR as interactional, context-dependent, and socially constructed, aligning with socio-constructivist views (Vygotsky, 1978). It expands on Chapter One's view of readiness as dynamic, ecological and child centred.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological theory places SR within nested systems from the microsystem to the macrosystem and across time via the chronosystem. This ecological approach challenges individualistic views by showing that developmental outcomes are linked to structural, cultural and relational conditions. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes learning as socially mediated before internalization, with language, guided participation and scaffolding in the zone of proximal development playing key roles (Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1991). Based on Tudge et al. (2009), this study uses Bronfenbrenner's later bioecological perspective and PPCT model, viewing development as a dynamic, relational process influenced by interactions among personal characteristics, contexts, proximal processes and time.

Building on this, transactional models conceptualise development as a dynamic

exchange between child characteristics and environmental contexts, asserting that neither can be understood in isolation (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000) extend this logic by reframing SR as a relational construct enacted through the quality of transactions between home, early years settings, and schools. Their work highlights that relational continuity is often constrained by policy pressures and fragmented systems, drawing attention to the structural conditions shaping SR experiences.

As outlined in Section 1.9, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model locates SR across the chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem. This study embeds Illeris's (2007) learning triangle within the microsystem to explain how learning is activated cognitively (content), emotionally and motivationally (incentive), and socially (interaction) within children's everyday context. This integration enables a later analysis of both where readiness is shaped across systems and how learning unfolds within proximal environments.

2.7.1 Integrated Ecological–Learning Model

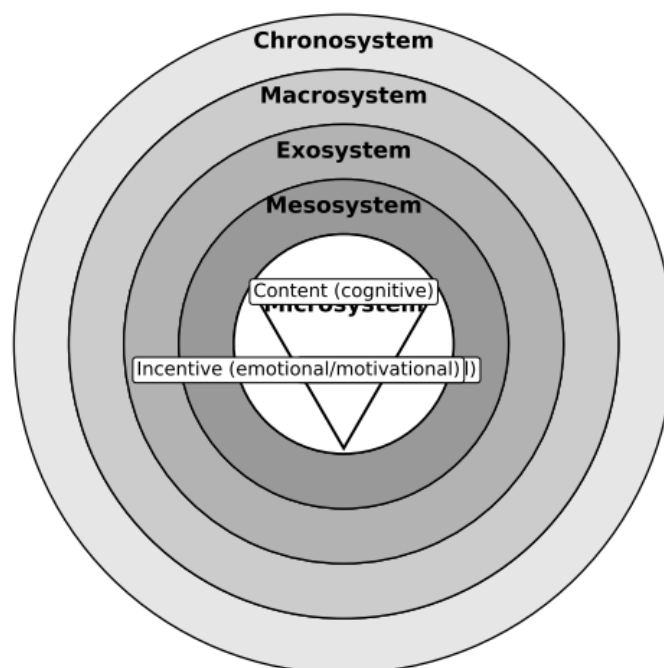


Figure 10 Integrated Ecological–Learning Model (Shippen, 2026)

Placing learning processes within ecological systems clarifies how readiness is enacted through relationships, environments, and emotional security rather than located within children themselves. When viewed through Illeris's (2007) learning theory, sociocultural practices become observable as the activation of content, incentive, and interaction within the child's microsystem, connecting ecological conditions with internal learning processes (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1972; Bruner, 1983).

2.7.2 Mapping Readiness Across Both Models

Having established SR as a multi-layered ecological learning process, it is worthwhile to understand how this integrated framework can be operationalised in practice. Emerging directions in interdisciplinary working, research practice partnerships, and locally grounded innovations offer ways to move beyond linear, siloed approaches and to respond to the complexity of SR across diverse community contexts, using both models to translate research data into manageable, defined outputs.

The integrated model presented in Table 3 brings these perspectives together by illustrating how different system levels shape readiness and how learning dimensions are activated across contexts. Historical and socio-political shifts in the chronosystem shape expectations and equity; cultural values and national frameworks in the macrosystem influence content and motivation; exosystemic conditions such as employment and service access affect family stress and interaction; mesosystem relationships support or disrupt continuity; and microsystem environments activate learning through everyday interactions.

System Layer	Illustrative SR Factors	Illeris Dimensions (2007)	Indicative Data/indicators	Implications for Practice
Chronosystem	Historical policy shifts, curriculum reforms, socio-political changes	All three	Policy timelines, archived documents, longitudinal outcomes	Examine how historical reforms influence SR expectations /equity
Macrosystem	Cultural values, policy frameworks, economic priorities	Content, incentive	National curriculum; funding allocations; cultural narratives	Identify tensions between global benchmarks and local cultural priorities
Exosystemic	Parental employment, community resources, local authority funding	Incentive, interaction	Family SES data; service availability; parental engagement metrics	Explore indirect influences on SR through family stress and resource access
Mesosystem	Home-school relationships, interagency collaboration	Interaction, Incentive	Parent-teacher communication logs; partnership agreements	Assess relational continuity and reduction of transition stress
Microsystem	Classroom climate; peer interactions; educator expectations	Content, Incentive, Interaction	Observations: child engagement scores, teacher interviews	Investigate how proximal learning environments activate Illeris dimensions (2007)

Table 3 Mapping Readiness: integrated learning model applications

2.7.3 Implications for Equity-Oriented, Place-Based Practice

Analysis must go beyond individual children and families to develop equitable, place-based practices. These systems align with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, recognising that development results from interactions between individuals, relationships, environments, and socio-political contexts. Illeris' (2007) learning theory highlights cognition, emotion and social interaction, emphasising learning's connection to lived experiences. These ideas challenge universal notions of development and SR

stressing the importance of understanding children within their unique familial, cultural and community contexts. A place-based approach sees development as culturally rooted, shaped by community strengths, identities, and experiences. This aligns with Freire's (1970) principles of critical pedagogy, which advocate dialogue, participation and empowerment while challenging deficit narratives. Rather than viewing SR as compliance, an equity perspective promotes authentic participation and values children and families as capable contributors. It emphasises identity, belonging, agency and voice, ensuring children experience an authentic childhood where their cultural knowledge and relationships are respected.

2.8 Emerging Direction in Research and Practice

Across ecological systems, emerging research signals a shift away from linear, deficit-based understandings of SR towards more relational, participatory and socially situated perspectives. New understandings highlight the importance of agency, belonging, identity, family partnership and place-based practice, while recognising that children's development is shaped by dynamic interactions among policy, communities, relationships and lived experience. Consequently, SR is increasingly conceptualised as a shared ecological responsibility rather than an attribute residing solely within the child (Tudge et al., 2009; Freire, 1970; Lee & Veale, 2025).

2.8.1 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Learning and Development

Ongoren (2021) argues that interdisciplinary education is essential for preparing learners to engage with complex global challenges. It suggests that interdisciplinary approaches foster critical thinking, creativity and real-world problem-solving, while breaking down traditional curriculum silos across STEM, the humanities and the arts. Such approaches encourage learners to make connections across knowledge domains rather than treating learning as discrete or compartmentalised. There is an opportunity in early education to celebrate interdisciplinarity by learning through play while developing in all areas.

This pedagogical shift requires educators to adopt more flexible roles, moving from delivery to facilitation and co-learning, reflected in continuous provision in early years settings. Ongoren's findings show that interdisciplinary teaching, linking learning to

social and cultural stories, boosts engagement, aligning with place-based narratives (Winter & Kelley, 2008; Alderwick, 2021). For example, combining science with storytelling helps learners connect knowledge meaningfully. In early years, this integration is called holistic practice, echoing traditions of play-based, exploratory and interconnected learning.

However, Ongoren (2021) cautions that interdisciplinary approaches cannot be sustained through isolated classroom innovation alone. Successful implementation requires structural change, including curriculum design, assessment practices, and educator preparation. Without institutional commitment, interdisciplinary work risks remaining fragmented and marginal, limiting its potential to address complex learning needs.

2.8.2 Research Practice Partnerships and Local Innovation

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as a complementary strategy to bridge the gap between educational research and everyday practice. Winter & Kelley (2008) advocate collaborative models in which researchers and practitioners co-design inquiries, interpret findings, and implement change. Central to this approach are mutual respect, shared purpose, and sustained engagement. RPPs position schools and early years settings as sites of inquiry, enabling educators to test, adapt, and refine practice in real time. This model supports evidence-informed decision-making and recognises practitioners as co-researchers rather than passive recipients of external expertise. Winter & Kelley (2008) emphasise that effective partnerships depend on clear communication and ongoing feedback and adaptation.

Recent RPPs emphasise equity and community engagement by involving families, children and local organisations to address challenges and support culturally relevant solutions. This shift from top-down reform to local innovation enables change to be driven by those closest to the learning process. The study combines Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory with Illeris's (2007) learning theory within the microsystem, framing research-practice partnerships as co-constructors among children, families and educators. This supports local, responsive SR that aligns with the community's needs and strengths.

Participatory inquiry and change facilitation position practitioners, families and communities as active contributors to knowledge creation and improvement, reflecting Freire's (1970) commitment to dialogue, critical consciousness and empowerment. Through collaborative reflection and action, participatory approaches aim to challenge deficit narratives and generate contextually meaningful change, recognising those most affected by practice as co-researchers rather than passive recipients of intervention (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Coghlan, 2019).

Communities of practice provide a useful framework for understanding research and learning as participatory processes. Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that learning occurs through engagement in socially situated practices, with individuals developing knowledge, skills and professional identities through participation, dialogue and shared activity within a community of practice.

2.9 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter shows that SR is not fixed or universal but varies with social, political and economic changes. Policy reforms and social shifts intensify the focus on readiness, with definitions shaped by prevailing ideologies and labour market needs (OECD, 2017). A comparison reveals divergent views: Anglo-American systems prioritise standardisation and accountability, while Nordic traditions emphasise play, wellbeing and social pedagogy. Both have strengths but also limitations when applied universally.

Critiques of fixed normative benchmarks, most notably Meisels' (1998) work, raise concerns that standardised measures may misrepresent children's diverse developmental trajectories. This prompts critical reflection on contemporary assessment practices, including the EYFS, GLD and RBA, and on whether accountability-driven measurement risks narrowing the curriculum and obscuring cultural and community variation (Ball, 2003; OECD, 2021).

This chapter aligns Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory with Illeris's learning triangle to conceptualise readiness as relational and situated within ecological systems. It shifts the focus from a child-centred checklist to understanding readiness through relationships, environments and secure learning contexts. Partnerships and cross-sector

collaboration are crucial for enabling or constraining readiness, especially when there are shared goals, trust and time (UNICEF, 2012; 2019). Families, vital to children's learning, influence early experiences through beliefs and practices, but communication gaps and power imbalances remain, calling for families to be co-constructors of SR. Developmentally, the cognitive, linguistic, physical, social and emotional domains are interconnected, requiring inclusive, flexible pedagogy responsive to diversity. Transitions and “ready schools” indicate that system and setting responsibilities, not children alone, determine SR (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Digital technologies offer both opportunities and risks, especially concerning equity and context in the early years.

This review establishes that SR is best understood as locally defined, equity-centred and embedded within families, communities and broader systems. This stance necessitates methodological approaches that capture complexity, nuance and lived experience. Building on these insights, Chapter Three outlines the study's interpretivist case study design and action learning orientation. The two-stage methodology begins with an exploratory mapping of perspectives and contexts, followed by an iterative inquiry into how SR is enacted across domains within a Ready for School Nursery setting.

By reframing readiness as an ecological, relational and dynamic process shaped over time by policy, place and everyday experience, this chapter establishes a robust conceptual foundation for the empirical work that follows.

Chapter Three: Methodology: Designing research collaboratively.

3.1 Research Design Introduction

Chapter Three articulates the research design and methodological traits that underpin this study's examination of SR as a locally situated, relational construct. Advancing the groundwork established in Chapters One and Two, this chapter clarifies the study's relativist ontology and constructivist and interpretivist epistemology. It explains the rationale for adopting an intrinsic case study with an emergent, participatory orientation. The design responds to conditions of possibility shaped by the post-COVID context, institutional cultures, and community needs, prioritising co-construction, dialogic inquiry, and methodological flexibility over rigid procedures. This study integrates inductive and abductive reasoning, multi-method data collection, and a layered analytical strategy that explores Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework and Illeris' (2007) learning triangle within the context of a Northeastern nursery centre, using thematic analysis, triangulation, and reflexive audit trails. This chapter further foregrounds positionality and power, detailing ethical safeguards and my evolving stance as an inquiry catalyst, including planned withdrawal to protect stakeholder autonomy.

This chapter describes designing a context-sensitive, participatory case study to explore SR as a relational, locally enacted concept, aligning with the ecological learning framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It also matches the levels supported by Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2005), who warn that strict methods can limit flexibility and responsiveness. They advise researchers to identify their epistemology and underlying theory before choosing suitable approaches. Springgay & Truman (2017) agree, noting strategies should develop naturally, inspiring ways of thinking or acting. They argue that while chosen methods can improve visibility, they may also constrain creativity.

Rather than fixing on a method first, I positioned choices in epistemology and purpose. At the time I reflected, "Not having to choose a type of research but think about who I am and my approach to knowledge seems easier than working through research types." This

reflexive stance helped align method and aims, participants and context rather than the other way around.

Having positioned this study's purpose and rationale as responsive and emergent, the next section shall detail the philosophical, epistemological and ontological aspects that underpin my research design.

3.1.1 Epistemology and Ontology

A pertinent issue is the philosophical stance behind any methodological decision: what counts as reality in this study, and how I claim to know it. These questions reflect the researcher's internal discourse, since philosophical ideas are ingrained in the research process. Some of this dialogue was explored earlier in Chapter One, in the positionality statement [see 1.4]. I begin with ontology to clarify my perception of SR, before turning to epistemological consequences of that position.

Ontologically, I adopted a principled relativism: SR is locally produced within ecologies, rather than a single, discoverable childhood concept. By unpacking relativism, realism and reflexivity (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), I gained a deeper understanding of my ontological position. I felt drawn to relativism, as it leaves claims open to discussion and encourages ongoing debate. This aligned with both my philosophy and how I wanted to practise in teaching and research. It offers a critical framework to an otherwise realist view, which tends to frame the discourse in absolute terms.

Therefore, this study adopts a relativist ontological perspective, recognising that truth and reality are constructed by participants and shaped within their local context. It acknowledges that external forces influence stakeholders' behaviours, expectations and experiences. Salomon (1991, p.11) discusses the tension between quantitative and qualitative research, a topic that resonated with me as I read it:

"Classrooms, schools, families, therapies and cultures are complex, often nested in conglomerates of interdependent variables, events, perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviours, thus their study cannot be approached in the same way that a study of single events and variables can."

With reality understood as situated and contested, the next step is to specify an

epistemology capable of shaping situatedness through meanings and dialogue.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemologically, I adopt a constructivist–interpretivist stance that foregrounds co-constructed meaning and situated understanding among diverse stakeholders. Considering Crotty’s (1998) distinction between objectivism, constructivism, and subjectivism, alongside Kamberelis & Dimitriadis’s (2005) two-strand model, I reflected on how each position aligns with the aims of this study. While objectivism seeks precision and independence from human experience, and, as Grey (2018) notes, excludes feelings and values, such detachment is incompatible with research centred on lived experiences and relational perspectives. Subjectivism, by contrast, recognises that meaning is shaped by the perceptions and contexts of the participants, as well as by me as the researcher, making it a necessary part of a methodology committed to reflexivity, dialogue and multiple understandings of SR.

In contrast, descriptions of constructivism align with exploring SR, as meanings are constructed through interaction (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) and engagement with the world, particularly when working with diverse stakeholder groups, where each may construct a different meaning, even concerning the same event (Grey, 2018). Epistemologies are often paired with theoretical perspectives, with objectivism aligning with positivist or quantitative approaches and constructivism with interpretivist and qualitative research (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm facilitates an understanding of the lived experiences of children's families and practitioners (Blaikie & Priest, 2017).

I wanted to understand thinking, actions, and dispositions, and I would talk to, observe, and use various interactive strategies to learn about SR. Therefore, I quickly identified as a constructivist who would use interaction to understand and create meaning. Engaging in research and maintaining relationships within it aligns with Darlaston-Jones (2007, p.20), who emphasises that epistemology involves understanding "the relationship between the researcher and reality", and reflects the paradigm guiding the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Teaching in the early years and at university involves constructing knowledge, a process that is often discussed in terms of teaching philosophies, including those associated with Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983). As such, this research design amalgamated new and old ways of knowing. Therefore, this study recognises that truth and reality are constructed by participants and shaped within their local context. It acknowledges that external forces influence actors' behaviours, expectations and experiences. Foucault (1980, 1997) described the constraints and freedoms experienced in the ready-for-school nursery during 2021–2023, naming them "conditions of possibility," a term that questions the boundaries and conditions shaping our understanding of existence and how these limits influence the formation of a subject.

This is particularly relevant because, at the start of the research, the nursery was operating under COVID-19 restrictions, leading to partial closures and limited interactions related to SR. I interpret "conditions of possibility" to mean that both stakeholders and my knowledge as a researcher are constrained by time and historical context, positioning me within the discourse rather than as an external observer. This idea is echoed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model [1.5], which suggests that each person and organisation is uniquely situated and influenced by the systems around them. This means the research itself is not generalisable, as the circumstances, participants, families, and researcher relationships existed within a system that others cannot replicate. However, methods and ideas may still spark insights for a much broader audience.

Having detailed how knowledge is produced with the study participants rather than extracted from them, the next section discusses my positionality and the conditions of possibility that shape and bend shared inquiry.

3.1.3 Researcher Positionality and Conditions of Possibility

Given my embeddedness in early years networks, this research is shaped by both enabling opportunities and potential risks. Reflexivity is integral to the study as an ethical and analytical method, rather than an afterthought. I approach positionality as negotiated in relations, where power shapes research encounters and is best examined at the micro level, with participants, to set terms and expectations rather than presumed

to be resolved by procedures alone (Ayrton, 2024; Thomas, 2024). In this study, I created reciprocal spaces where researchers and participants could co-negotiate terms of involvement, recognising positionality as fluid and performed situationally in what Porisky & Glas (2023) call the stance of a “credible visitor”, enacted through competence and transparency (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Adopting a participatory design foregrounded stakeholder voices and the co-construction of meaning, aligning with relational ethics (Noddings, 2013). However, this approach introduced grey areas in which power dynamics shaped interactions and conditions of possibility (Foucault, 1980). My positionality within early childhood networks offered access and trust but risked reinforcing hierarchical structures. Reflexivity was essential to mitigate these risks and support collaborative rather than extractive knowledge production. This includes acknowledging that attempts at anti-hierarchical relations still involve shifts in agenda-setting and moments of vulnerability (Raheim et al., 2016), especially within economically constrained contexts shaped by institutional rules and accountability (Ayrton, 2024; Ball, 2019).

Working relationally in economically disadvantaged contexts heightened complexities. Geographical isolation and socio-economic constraints influenced both researcher–researcher dynamics and the framing of SR. Families navigating poverty often experience SR discourses as deficit-oriented (Gaynor, 2022), while stakeholders operate under systemic pressures tied to funding and accountability (Ball, 2012). These conditions demand critical interrogation of readiness as a political construct and research designs that foreground equity and agency. Because meaning is co-constructed within unequal relations, the next section specifies the constructivist traditions that inform this analysis to examine what meanings of SR exist and why critically.

3.1.4 Constructivism

Constructivism enables meanings that are constituted through engagement with the world, rather than discovered as pre-existing facts. In constructivism, knowledge is based on the human creation of meaning, not on something waiting to be discovered or limited. Essentially, it is a dynamic process as meaning is formed through our engagement with and interpretation of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Nickerson,

2025). Consequently, diverse perspectives, cultural and social norms, or individual ethnocentrism can lead to different constructions of meaning within the same reality. Constructivism asserts that there is no single absolute truth, but rather multiple truths, all of which can be valid. This is a key difference from objectivism, which claims there is only one truth. As asserted by Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2005, p.14):

"Meaning is a function of our engagement with the world. Meaning is not discovered but constituted or constructed in interaction."

In qualitative research, constructivism requires reflexive transparency and an examination of how my analytical dispositions shape what I notice and how I interpret it (Thomas, 2024; Trundle et al., 2025). Therefore, because meaning is social as well as individual, the next section situates my research within social constructivism to foreground ideas of culture, language and practice.

3.1.5 Social Constructivism

Social constructivism centres on the cultural and linguistic practices through which SR is enacted. Because meanings are built socially and culturally, I treated language and practice as pathways through which the Ready for School Centre (RSC) can negotiate SR, and I worked to maintain credibility across the stakeholders and settings (Porisky & Glas, 2023; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Social activity is vital to social constructivists, as Vygotsky (1978) argued that individuals learn most effectively in groups. This suggests that teaching is a social process, supporting social constructivism. Furthermore, social constructivism emphasises culture and context in understanding society and in constructing knowledge from these perspectives (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). To challenge simple agreement, I critically examined which perspectives are privileged and asked why.

3.1.5.1 Critical Social Constructivism (CSC)

To avoid settling for surface-level explanations, I use a critical lens to explore which voices dominate, whose interpretations are heard, and through what organisational and cultural traditions they gain influence (Thomas, 2014; Trundle et al., 2025). CSC recognises that researchers are producers of knowledge and may represent reality in

specific ways, intentionally or unintentionally, yet with shared aims. Therefore, researchers cannot offer absolutes but only offer glimpses and suggestions within a social narrative. From an ideological perspective, critical social constructivists challenge the dominant ideology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Charmaz, 2014). Hence, it is implicit that CSC is inherently political, as it operates within contemporary values of cultural and historical concepts. Demonstrating how a discourse has changed and that this change may have negative impacts can destabilise or induce change during the analysis stage (Jorgenssen & Phillips, 2002). Because CSC is political and partial, I must also acknowledge its limits and the responsibilities it places on me as the researcher.

3.1.6 Limitations of Constructivism: Researcher Beware!

Constructivist and critical lenses risk over-identifying with preferred narratives; vigilance is required to hold multiple, and sometimes uncomfortable, perspectives in view. Because of this, critical social constructivists can be challenged, especially in a political arena, for promoting a particular viewpoint (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Charmaz, 2014). However, researchers using CSC would argue that multiple perspectives are required to understand an issue, enabling creative thinking and solutions.

With philosophical understandings in place, the next section details theories and approaches that align with my cultural-, historical- and people-centred stance.

3.2 Theory

The following section expands on the relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology by examining how I interpret my research. It includes sections on theory that help make sense of the information, either adding to existing theories or developing new ones.

3.2.1 Interpretivism

Interpretivism provides the epistemic toolkit for understanding stakeholders' worlds; as such, I prioritise situated meanings, interactions, and lived experiences over the predicted or expected. Giambattista Vico famously challenged Descartes' rationalist method, arguing that his search for certainty and clarity was too narrow to comprehend the human and social worlds. Instead, Vico emphasised probability, rhetoric and the historically situated nature of human knowledge (de Santillana, 1950; Grant, 2015). He

notably believed that social organisation and experiences influence perceptions of reality and truth (Costelloe, 2016).

Echoing this emphasis, interpretivist studies show that exploring areas of human life helps us understand the outcomes. Bryman (2016) outlines four main interpretivist approaches: the first is hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1962) which focuses on understanding texts or documents; the second the *verstehen* approach, advocated by Weber (1947), aims to understand or interpret research participants to uncover why something occurs; and the work of Mead (1962) and (1969) offers a third approach, extending these ideas through symbolic interactionism. Blumer's (1969) three core principles are: behaviour is driven by individual meanings; these meanings are formed through social interactions; and they are adapt based on context and experience. The fourth approach, phenomenology, concentrates on interpreting and describing people's lived experiences. For this study, my interpretivism aligns with Weber (1947) and Mead (1962) by seeking to understand participants' perceptions of school readiness, their interactions and how these manifest across various contexts.

To implement this interpretivist stance, the next section details the approaches and strategies utilised and the methods selected to explore them.

3.2.2 Approaches

The methodological approaches guide this study's philosophical dispositions as they align the case problem with analytical possibilities and ethical obligations. Therefore, they were selected after consideration.

According to Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2004), the final two analytical strata are approaches and strategies. Approaches encompass guiding assumptions, strategies and techniques. "Their primary function is to move us along in our attempt to understand the problem that interests us" (ibid., p.18). In contrast, strategies are the specific procedures used to collect and analyse data. The following section identifies both.

It is pertinent to remember the blurred lines that Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2004) describe when they present research as chronotypes and use methodologies as dynamic design features, rather than rigid frameworks. This is relevant to my research study, in which

understanding SR requires methodological flexibility, iterative interpretation, and attention to multiple interacting levels of practice. This flexibility allows for a case study approach to incorporate elements of action research and practitioner engagement to examine SR in depth.

Both Yin (2009/2018) and Stake (1995) offer useful, yet contrasting, perspectives that strengthen the rationale for applying a case study approach to this SR research. Yin (2018) emphasises case studies as a means of investigating real-life contexts. Meanwhile, Stake (1995), in contrast, foregrounds the interpretive, experiential, and situational ideas of case study research. This aligns with SR as negotiated and relational. Taken together, they support a design capable of generating a rich, multi-level, longitudinal understanding of SR.

Given this alignment, a case study provides the best approach for a multi-level, multi-participant, longitudinal understanding of SR at one North Eastern Nursery Centre. The following section discusses case study as an approach, before describing the various methods used to collect data.

3.2.3 Case Study

A single evolving case study allows me to trace SR across micro, meso and macro relations, capturing change over time from COVID to the present. I initially wanted to research using action learning sets. However, participants were less keen, mainly because they saw autonomy and responsibility attached to working in sets. However, some action-learning modes emerged and are seen in the action-oriented inquiry catalyst model discussed in Chapter 5. After meeting with participants, we decided that interviews, focus groups, and observations of practice would support both my research questions and the Centre's practices, since multiple strategies align with a case study approach (Crotty, 2021).

According to Sanborn et al. (2008), a case study can be located at the micro level (person and interpersonal), the meso level (organisation), and the macro level (communities and societies), and can involve one actor or multiple actors. This research is situated at all levels and reflects this by adapting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model

[Figure 2]. Stake's (1995) model was used for a case study across multiple sites [Figure 11]; however, it can also be adapted to explore various stakeholder groups within the same site. It is a useful tool because it shows external influences on SR and reiterates the area and scope of the research questions [1.6].

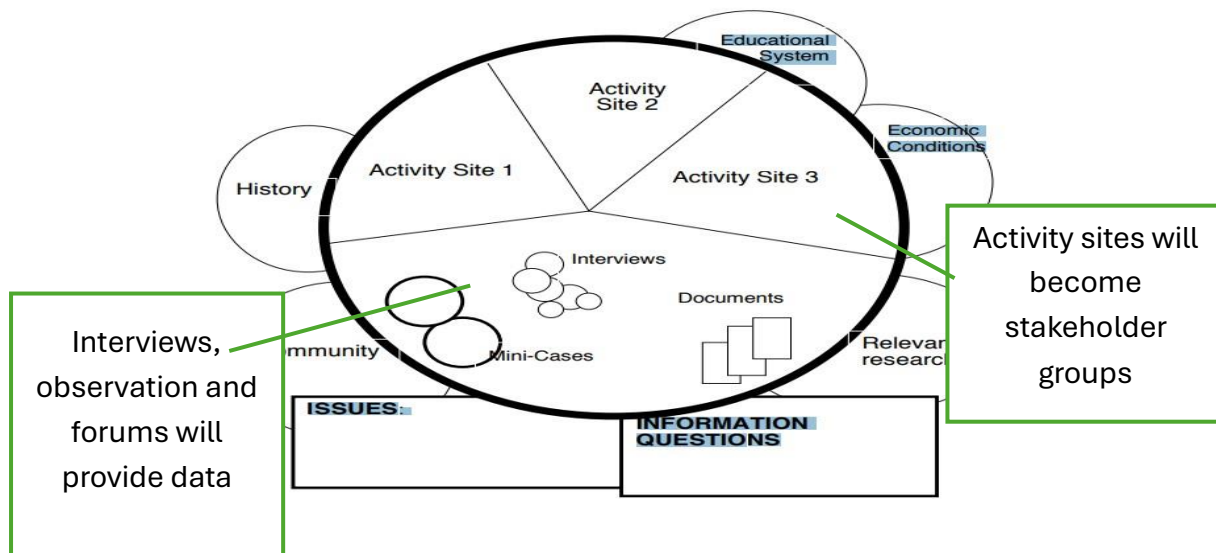


Figure 11 Multiple Site Model Adapted for Multiple Stakeholders (Source: Stake, 1995, p. 4)

While Stake used this model to pose a question across several sites, this research adapts the design to identify the diverse stakeholder groups within the RSC Nursery and how they are connected, or not. Yin (2009) highlights key reasons for choosing a solitary case study over multiple ones, as in Stake's (1995) approach. These reasons include:

1. Making a significant contribution to knowledge.
2. Studying an extreme or unique case.
3. Examining a revelatory case.
4. Conducting a longitudinal study that tracks changes over time

My research combines aspects of types 3 and 4, aiming to illustrate lessons learned within the nursery and provide insights into what happened and its effects. As this research evolved into a longitudinal study, I documented shifts from COVID-19 practices to new methods, including changes in staffing and safeguarding systems, thereby capturing how conditions changed over time. Because the case is conducted with participant stakeholders rather than with them, the next section explains the

participatory realities of the design.

3.2.4 Participatory Case Study

Participation is treated as a study ethic and practice, co-producing questions, data, and sense-making while remaining honest about the constraints and drift possibilities and recognising that pressures such as gatekeeping and fatigue can shape participation (Wulf-Anderson et al., 2021; McAreavey & Das, 2013). I worked by recognising inclusion and exclusion dynamics and by building reflexive checkpoints into the design (BERA, 2024). Participatory Research (PR) has emerged as a powerful method aimed at democratising knowledge production by involving participants, usually as co-researchers.

Throughout this study, participation increased over time, with participants showing greater interest. Although initially inclusive, participation fluctuated between full and limited involvement, reflecting shifts in the underlying ideology throughout the research process. Pain & Francis (2003, p. 46) highlight tensions between academic rigour and authentic participation, emphasising the importance of reflexivity and awareness of institutional limits, stating that "Participatory research is not a fixed method, but a set of evolving practices shaped by context, power, and purpose." Rose (1997) endorses these views, challenging tokenism and recognising power distribution and positionality as key elements of this approach.

When working with children, Karlidag-Dennis et al. (2025) discusses power imbalances and suggests the need for greater creativity and age-appropriate methods to genuinely represent children's voices. Therefore, while PR is appealing, it is difficult to achieve a balance within evolving research practice, with the constant internal questioning and juggling that come with being a researcher. This struggle persisted in this study; both the co-production process and the analytical reasoning required me to continually move between inductive and abductive modes, and between data and theory, as insights took shape.

3.2.5 Inductive/Abductive Reasoning

Induction identifies patterns across varied data, meanwhile abduction proposes the

most plausible explanations, iteratively revised through dialogue and further evidence (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). In line with the idea of emerging participation and the construction of ideas, the reasoning most suitable for this study aligns with both an inductive and abductive framework, as the process was inductive, with data collection preceding theme identification. However, during the study, I observed unexpected findings and paused to consider possible explanations, iterating between theory and data. At times, this back-and-forth occurred intra-personally, and at other times, using dialogue with colleagues for help in sense-making. Iterative movement between data and theory was essential so I treated abductive explanations as provisional and dialogic. I resisted thinking that the number of participants were of the most importance and instead searched for collaborations that were appropriate and effective given the power and privileges at play (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Motulsky, 2021).

Since I started with a question rather than a theory, a deductive reasoning approach was not considered. It is worth considering the limitations of the reasoning frameworks, since inductive reasoning can be influenced by researcher bias that may shape emerging patterns. Even if patterns are observed, they do not necessarily prove causality, and it is a time-consuming way to collect, think about, and analyse data. While abductive reasoning is based on best guesses, it is worth noting the researcher's positionality and expertise as a framework. The researcher needs to consider more than one explanation and evaluate them. Furthermore, during the iterative process, the researcher may need to revisit the problem multiple times before refining it. To keep the inquiry open and non-linear, I complemented inductive and abductive reasoning with a rhizomatic stance that legitimises multiplicity and emergence.

3.2.6 Rhizomatic Inquiry

A rhizomatic approach (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) keeps the analysis responsive to unexpected connections, resisting premature closure and enabling authentic emergence. By adopting a rhizomatic approach both theoretically and methodologically, it supports abductive thinking. It encourages an open mind and the recognition that there is not one truth or one way of viewing things (Strom & Martin, 2017). This aligns with research suggesting that using multiple lenses to examine a problem enables a broader

range of solutions (Trussler, Shippen & McCay, 2024). Similarly, Martin & Kamberelis (2013) argue that this approach is fluid, emphasising multiplicity and allowing for dynamic and authentic knowledge production. Meanwhile, Fox & Alldred (2015) agree that the non-traditional approach highlights emerging ideas and the interconnectedness of the natural world.

3.2.7 Power in Research

Power shapes research through access, analysis, and dissemination, so I made this explicit throughout. A Foucauldian lens helped me recognise how normalising routines and accountability pressures operated in everyday situations and practices (Ball, 2019; Deacon, 2006). Relational reflexivity kept me aware of hierarchies that may be hidden beneath seemingly open dialogue (Thomas, 2024; Trundle et al., 2015). Ethical debates, such as those involving deception and informed consent, demonstrate how principles can clash and require careful, context-specific judgment (Lenza, 2004; McAreavey & Das, 2013; BERA, 2024). Initially, I recognised institutional power in a meeting organised to learn about my research where parents were invited via video link. On the day, I was pleased to find 13 parents interested in SR. However, when asked why they were there, I realised that some did not understand their purpose as participants. The only follow-up question they could answer was, "Have you been asked to come by the centre manager?" Most replied, "Yes." Thus, I identified organisational hierarchy and the hidden pressures behind access to participants.

With the approaches specified, the next section locates this study in a chronotype aligned with conscientisation and praxis before detailing the methods used.

3.2.8 Summary and Chronotype

In summary, a relativist ontology, constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, participatory case framing and a critical reflexivity position this study within a praxis-oriented chronotype. My ontological perspective on knowledge is one of relativism, seeing it as part of a broader landscape rather than a fixed point. Epistemologically, I focused on critically constructing an understanding of social interactions, particularly with children. I utilised case studies and interpretivism to gather and analyse a wide range of data. Using Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2004, p.28) as a framework to examine myself as a

researcher, I was drawn to chronotype three because it encompasses these aspects, situating this study within the context of SR within a community in northeastern England.

Chronotype 3 Conscientization and Praxis (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2004, p 28):

1. Knowledge will be socially constructed and will be intrinsically linked to power relationships. Power in education, due to its hierarchical nature, is unavoidable and will be noted whenever necessary.
2. Truth is produced through dialogue – all the strategies used were connected to dialogue and communication.
3. Subjects and objects are separate but mutually constitutive; this aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system and suggests a relationship between people, environment, time, and political components that affect the day-to-day experiences in the Centre.
4. Language constitutes thought and is a function of existing power relations – here, what is said and left unsaid highlights power, and it is pertinent to note that all participants wielded power through language and deed – see discussion section [3.2.7].

The research design and methods chosen, and those that emerged, demonstrate a fundamental respect for others, aiming to interpret, interrogate, and include, while recognising that the process would require multiple shifts in my thinking and understanding. Writing and thinking about who I am and what I stand for added confidence. As a social researcher, I valued this identity that grew alongside the study's evolving design. Reflexive journaling became more than a record as it was a space where I acknowledged the interconnecting structures shaping SR and my own position within them.

The following section outlines the strategies and methods chosen to explore SR. It emphasises their advantages, drawbacks and explains why they are suitable. It also highlights that multiple methods enhanced the overall dependability of this research, compared to the limitations of collecting a single dataset.

3.3 Strategies: Methods Employed

The strategies were formulated collaboratively with the participants and tailored to address their physical, personal, and educational needs. As already mentioned, this research was an interpretive case study, where the co-construction of understandings and practices concerning SR was central. This section will detail the specific methods and adjustments made to keep participation meaningful and accessible.

A multi-method qualitative design was tailored in-situ to support inclusion and depth, including interviews, focus groups, observations, drawings, journaling and analysing documents.

These methods were appropriate, and within each type, adjustments were made to accommodate all participants. Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) argue that if the methods are already known, they may be framed in such a way as to capture only the evidence required, thereby privileging a particular viewpoint. However, by being immersed in the research, situated within it, and staying reflective and responsive, researchers can shift from simply reporting on a situation to actively engaging with tensions, utilising what are called "live methods" (Back & Puwar, 2012; Pink, 2015). The next section reveals how interviews helped develop rapport and openness with participants to elicit nuanced accounts of readiness.

3.3.1 Interviews

15 adult 1:1 Interviews were conducted and 2 adult/child talk-and-draw interviews.

Interviews are a valuable source of information in case study research (Yin, 2018). They are often conducted as guided conversations rather than strict questionnaires, enabling the researchers to follow a theme or line of inquiry flexibly (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). There are two key types: in-depth interviews that seek facts and opinions; and focused interviews (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990), which are shorter, often open-ended interviews conducted conversationally with set questions derived from the research focus.

I primarily employed a focused approach to foster connections and build rapport with

participants. I asked several questions about SR during our conversations, allowing participants to share as much or as little as they preferred. The aim was to understand each person's experiences, emotions, and words. For this process to be effective, the discussions needed to be open enough for participants to share freely whatever they wished (Demarris, 2004). Where collective meaning-making was desirable, I complemented interviews with focus groups to highlight agreement, friction and understanding.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

This study involved 3 focus groups with 7 participants. Focus groups are regarded as socially constructed safe spaces (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2004), where participants were able to explore their perspectives of SR.

The focus groups in this study were situated within the framework of figured worlds, understood as socially constructed spaces in which identities, meanings and normative expectations are jointly produced, contested and remade (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2004). Conceptualising the groups in this way positioned them as safe dialogic environments that enabled parents/carers to explore and negotiate their understandings of SR. This approach aligns with traditions that emphasise knowledge as socially generated (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and therefore required ongoing reflexive consideration of how interpretations were co-constructed within each forum (Finlay, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

While this study focused on understanding SR, it also aimed to enact social change in its design. The participants were all parents (N=5) and carers (N=2) who used the Centre and whose children attended the 'Ready for School' nursery. Demographically, their ages, marital statuses, employment statuses, and parental roles were diverse, providing a snapshot of society and reflecting the local community.

All participants had volunteered. As the researcher, I posed initial questions and facilitated interaction among the participants. The interactions offered insights and opinions that did not readily emerge from the formal questions. The outputs from each focus group were retained, and I transcribed the conversations after the meetings.

The advantages of this strategy were that the group was comfortable with one another, and their interactions offered valuable insights into their understanding of SR. They also seemed to talk more openly with the support of their peers.

The difficulty I encountered was listening and facilitating simultaneously, whilst bringing the conversations back to SR and ensuring that all participants had a voice. However, I am hopeful that the group is representative of those using the centre.

During the first meeting of the group, it became evident that there were varying levels of literacy, and two of the parents reported not reading. By the second session, the resources had been made visual (using symbols and pictures) and interactive as parents placed the symbols in order of importance, enabling all parents to participate and share their opinions.

To move from espoused accounts to enacted practices, I then turned to observations, beginning with adults in practice contexts.

3.3.3 Observations of Adults (Surveillance Ecology)

Adults were observed 19 times over the two years with children; in each room, three adults were present, and I stayed for a minimum of one hour and a maximum of two hours. Observing full or partial sessions. Additionally, 20 sessions were visited that were adult-only or mainly adult; these varied in length of time and focus. An inquiry might be 30 minutes, while the SEND session and Book Club were an hour.

Additional observations of adults only (agreed observations)	
Book Club (6)	Book Club (4)
First Aid (8)	How to read to children (10)
2 x forums (14)	SEND Meeting (9)
The cooker incident (2)	Informal Interviews (5with parents)
	Inquiry catalyst mtgs 6 x 3 adults (18)
	Community stays and plays (parents) (12)

Table 4 Additional Observations of Adult Stakeholders

Observing adults in context highlighted how institutional scripts, accountability, and skills and knowledge shape everyday enactments of SR. Observations in early years settings and schools are well-established practices as they are frequently used by senior staff and inspectors, including Ofsted, to assess and comment on the quality of education; Ball (2003) alludes to this as a performativity regime. Conversely, EYEs use observations to understand child development or explore reasons for behavioural changes. Indeed, in the early years, observation has been utilised as part of today's surveillance society. While it is a practical and straightforward method for gathering data, it can also be a conflicting tool. If an observer gets too close, they risk compromising participants' natural behaviour (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and from a distance, they risk missing important details.

I approached observations as a reflexive practice in which my presence, field relations, and RSC work ethos co-produced the scene, consistent with ethnographic guidance on access, relations and ethics (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In early years classrooms, observation techniques unavoidably alter the structure of pedagogy and conduct (Ball, 2019; Deacon, 2006). Therefore, my physical position may have potentially affected the observations.

It could be argued that what the eye perceives is already influenced by the researcher's social background, leading them to interpret what they see through their ethnocentric perspective, considering class, location, and educational and workplace experiences, discussed in positionality [1.4]. (Thin, 2024; Harris & White, 2018). Consequently, the researcher influences both how the observation is seen and how it is interpreted. Because adult intentions do not define children's experiences, I observed children to see how learning and belonging emerged in action.

3.3.4 Observations of Children

19 observations were completed over two years:

2022	2023
2 x outside	1 x outside
3 in three classrooms	2 x Leuven and narrative
1 x snack	2 x snack
1 x music session	1 mini movers
1 x community session (with dog)	1 community walk
2 x big box sessions	1 language session
	1 x primary

Table 5 Observations of Children

Observing and assessing children is common in the early years, as it helps to understand their development, behaviour, and individual needs. It provides a foundation for inclusive practices, scaffolding learning, and building relationships in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1978; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Murphy et al., 2024; Cowan & Flewitt, 2021). In recent years, observations have been shared with parents and multi-agency teams to exchange information about children, an approach that is well recognised and accepted within the RSC. Child-focused observations (19) captured engagement, interaction, and the micro-routines through which SR is scaffolded or constrained in the centre. They were organised via parental and classroom leader permissions. I recognised how classroom leaders could support or unsettle the process (Lee & Recchia, 2008; Deacon, 2006).

As a long-term early year's educator, I enjoyed observing the children in the study to understand the practice in the setting, its focus on SR, and employed several techniques, including the Leuven model for enjoyment and engagement scales (Laevers, 1994), narrative observations recording play and interactions, and social observations noting the number of adult-to-child and child-to-child interactions. I observed with the intention of noting routines, activities, and interactions that may influence SR, as defined by Forman & Hall (2005; NAEYC, 2018). Aligned with this study, Forman & Hall (2005, p.2) summarise, "observing children provides us with a key that allows us to enter their

wonderment. Once inside, we must not be afraid to speculate on what they might be thinking". This aligns with a rights-based focus on children's participation and voice in the early years (Sun et al., 2023; BERA, 2024).

To foreground children's perspectives, I complemented observation with talk-and-draw activities that centred their meanings, as detailed in the next section.

3.3.5 Children's Drawings

The talk-and-draw method elicits child narratives in accessible ways, while reflexively acknowledging interpretive limits and ethical care. Scholars promote drawing with children to emphasise their voices and make data collection a friendly activity (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). However, interpretations may be subject to adult and cultural biases, and visuals without commentary may lack clarity (Literat, 2013). Additionally, drawings can be challenging to code and analyse. As the children in this study were young, aged between 2 years and 4 years, we used a talk-and-draw method. They told me what to draw and why it was important. When the children's interest waned, I took this as a sign of reduced assent and finished the drawings when they reached a natural stopping point (Mirabella et al., 2015). The child participants were children of the focus group participants, which allowed me to obtain both parental and child consent and, where possible, assent [see 3.7.3]. I sought verbal permission from the children and their parents to include their work, although by creating the drawing myself, I mitigated some ethical concerns about intellectual property.

My research journal then provided a parallel reflective record of dilemmas, emotion, and evolving interpretations.

3.3.6 Journaling

Journaling functioned as an analytical and ethical instrument, highlighting positionality, tension and decision trails in real time by using journaling as an established qualitative research method rooted in the contributions of Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), and Gibbs (1988), who highlight the role of reflection in understanding issues and incidents and in generating next steps and recommendations (Edwards, 2023). I used journaling as a space to reflect on the research and my thoughts, serving as both a primary and

supplementary data source. It helped reveal challenges, emotions, and cultural viewpoints (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017).

3.3.7 Shared Paperwork

Policy guidance, plans, images and correspondence formed a documentary genealogy of the RSC's readiness ecology. Foucault's (1980) work on genealogy suggests that to understand a society or event, we should consider the artefacts available at the time, as they contribute to the overall picture of what is happening. In this study, the shared papers evidence the legislative boundaries, local authority requirements, and participants' plans for the RSC. During the research, I also shared paperwork with the groups, and this became part of the dataset, as it helped situate the study.

I collected and stored all professional data related to SR to develop and deepen my understanding of how it functions. This included local authority records, educational data, health information, and media posts, photographs, and missives, all of which contributed to the community's perspectives on SR. With methods established, the next section profiles who participated, how they were recruited and what that meant for claims and limits.

3.4 Participants

Participants reflected the RSC's living community, with diverse roles, histories, and needs, and I took care to avoid deficit labels and stereotyping. As such, it feels disingenuous to describe the participant population, as it is easy to label participants, which raises subconscious bias that I had to address throughout the study. For example, one manager labelled the area as disadvantaged and included the participants in that description. If we consider Bandura (1977), people respond to the stimuli they are presented with. If we view people as helpless, we risk promoting helplessness.

The participant group included all individuals and children visiting the centre, such as users and staff. The population is transient due to the rental properties, including newcomers and longstanding residents. Their backgrounds and family circumstances varied, including guardianship, single-parent households, and children with SEND. Some required substantial support from the centre, while others did not.

I avoided deficit framings by considering how labels can materialise in settings and in research. This required careful gatekeeper negotiation to ensure that access did not become consent-by-proxy and that participation remained voluntary and meaningful (McAreavey & Das, 2013; Miller & Bell, 2012). The next section clarifies sampling decisions and their implications for representativeness, depth, and equity.

3.4.1 Sampling of Participants

After introducing myself via social media (through a video shared in the RSC’s newsletter) and holding initial meetings to invite volunteers, I recruited all interested individuals. This meant those who were available and/or interested, recognising that using convenience sampling risks overrepresentation of those available, limiting diversity and introducing possible bias (Grey, 2018). I chose it deliberately because it aligns with my constructivist and participatory approach. As Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) note, sampling decisions shape what can be known, and in this study my priority was to engage with those closest to SR. Consistent with BERA’s (2024) ethical emphasis on meaningful participation, and with early years scholars who position families and stakeholders as active contributors to knowledge (Brooker, 2008; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007), this approach supports the aim of this study to be situated and produce representative claims.

In this case, the participants shown in the grid below [Table 6] represent different types of Centre users. During recruitment, I met as many stakeholders as possible in a deliberate effort to recruit a cross-section of centre users. The participant grid below represents the Centre's demographic profile, notably a strong gender dynamic.

3.4.2 Grid of Participants

The participant grid [Table 6] illustrates the study's relational strategy, detailing who contributed, how, and at which system layers.

Participant Type	Strategies Used		Participant Type	Strategies Used
P1	Focus groups and observations		CM1	Interviews and observations
P2	Focus groups and observations		CM2	Interviews and observations

P3	Focus groups and observations		CM3	Interviews and observations
P4	Focus groups and observations			
P5	Focus groups and observations		HV1	Interview
EYE1	Interviews and observations		ST1	Interviews and observations
EYE2	Interviews and observations		TA1	Interviews and observations
EYE3	Interviews and observations			
EYE4	Interviews and observations		CC	Observations of distinct types
EYE5	Interviews and observations		CI1	Drawing and talking
FSW1	Interviews and observations		CI2	Drawing and talking
FSW2	Interviews and observations		C13	Drawing and talking

Table 6 Grid of Participants

Parents (P)	Health Visitor (HV)
Early Years Educator (EYE)	School teacher (ST)
Family support worker (FSW)	Teaching assistant (TA)
Centre Manager (CM)	Children's class (CC)
	Children's Individual (CI)

Table 7 Key for Grid of Participants

All stakeholders worked with the children and parents attending the Ready for School Centre in the Northeast of England. Participants are distributed by stakeholder group as follows: four managers (including one area manager); two qualified early years teachers; eight parents; seven early years educators (including two family support workers/early educators); one health visitor; and two children's interviews. And classroom

observations of children attending sessions in the centre (32).

Table 8 shows the stakeholders' roles, key responsibilities observed during the study, and their observed identities:

Stakeholder Group	Role Summary	Key Responsibilities	Professional Identity
Centre Managers	Experienced professionals from the private nursery sector who manage a local authority Centre focused on two-year-olds.	Curriculum oversight, resource allocation, staffing, multi-agency meetings, inspection preparation and family engagement.	Advisor, advocate, educator, carer, manager.
Early Years Educators (EYEs)	Nursery-based staff deliver the EYFS curriculum and support children's learning and care.	Curriculum delivery, child development support, parental engagement and adapting post-COVID practices.	Educator, carer, community connector.
Family Support Workers (FSWs)	Community and Centre-based staff support families through targeted interventions and modelling.	Parenting support, behaviour management, sleep routines, play modelling, referrals and community engagement.	Facilitator, educator, advocate.
Early Years Teachers (EYTs)	Qualified teachers contribute to curriculum planning and pedagogical development.	Curriculum planning, learning assessment, pedagogical strategy and collaboration.	Curriculum leader, reflective practitioner.
Parents	Primary caregivers offer insights into children's	Sharing perspectives, participating in activities and	Co-educator, partner, learner.

	development and SR.	engaging with staff.	
Children	Young learners were observed and interviewed to understand their readiness from their perspective.	Participating in interviews, playing-based learning, and demonstrating development.	Active learner, agent of development.
Health Visitor	Health professional contributing developmental insights and referrals.	Developmental checks, referrals, and multi-agency collaboration.	Health-education bridge, early intervention specialist.
Researcher	Participatory researcher acting as a critical friend and reflective practitioner.	Data collection, observation, facilitation and practice development.	Collaborator, challenger, reflective practitioner.

Table 8 Stakeholder Roles & Responsibilities

With the who now explicit, the next section addresses how ethical safeguards protected the participants throughout the research.

3.5 Interview Schedule

Interview schedules were purposefully built to accommodate post-COVID meeting constraints and valued participant preferences as to venue and use of digital technology.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, which I found beneficial as it allowed me to read emotions, interest and comfort levels during the interviews. Some interviews were held online, which proved more challenging to assess. The schedule followed Margaret Bearman's (2021) approach, which provides space to respond reflexively while structuring key ideas by identifying core events or phenomena to explore, sequencing questions, using open-ended questions, including probes and follow-ups, and organising queries from general to specific.

RQ.1. What is the stakeholders' concept of SR, as experienced by one NE Centre? (in Micro, Meso and Macro systems)

RQ.2. How far does the centre in the NE practise SR as defined by Government policy

Sub Questions:

RQ.3. When are, and what strategies are used to enact SR?

(across both Illeris learning triangle)

RQ.4. How far are strategies of SR equitable (including SEND)

RQ.5. Who is involved in SR?

RQ. 6. What should be achieved during the SR stage of education?

RQ.7. What are the benefits, to whom, and why?

RQ.8. Effects of policy on local SR enactments and indicators

The observations of practice followed the interviews and were used to confirm the information provided in the interviews and to gather additional details about practices that could be considered as preparing a child for school. Observation schedules complemented interviews by situating accounts within the environmental and relational practice contexts.

3.5.1 Observation Schedules

Observation schedules balanced structure and responsiveness, identifying a focus while simultaneously allowing phenomena to lead the way. Observations allow researchers to understand phenomena in their natural context. This method requires researchers to identify and record what occurs without interfering with or manipulating the environment being observed (Younas et al., 2022). Mulhall (2003) illustrates that observations encompass the physical environment alongside people and activities. The context in which people behave is important during the process. Although it is recognised that a new adult in the room can change the dynamics, atmosphere and sometimes the actions of those being observed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), it was helpful to accept this natural influence and adopt participatory observation, where I became part of the environment and activity within the Centre (Gold, 1958). The advantages of observations are their flexible technique, which can be adapted quickly; they do not require the

participation of others; and they are a quick way to understand both activity and environment. However, it can be perceived as subjective, requiring observational skills and can take time (Younas et al., 2022). The reason for selecting observations in this study was to provide a means of understanding children by watching their play and learning, since their age and development stages rendered most other data collection methods ineffective.

I employed various types of observation, depending on the information I was trying to gain or verify. I was able to utilise observational skills developed over the decades through observations of practice with children and families in early years and social care settings, noting the environment, activity and space systematically.

To ensure observational quality, a pre-study checklist was used to facilitate standardisation and reduce bias. Additionally, an after-action review was conducted to identify areas for improvement, limitations of observation, and to inform future observations. Group dialogues via parent forums further socialised sense-making, while paying attention to consent, equity and voice.

3.5.2 Parent Forum Meetings

Parent forums created a shared space for deliberation in which consent, confidence and equitable contribution were actively supported. As discussed, the ethical considerations for the focus groups included informed consent; with the groups I worked with, this also meant informed understanding, as some parents initially gave consent before fully understanding what the research was about. This was partly because they had already taken part in research at the RSC. For example, one parent commented, *"We love being interviewed; we are happy to talk to anyone!"*

Confidentiality in the focus group was more difficult to ensure, as participants could hear one another's contributions. I always started by emphasising that the group was confidential and that anything said would stay within the group, reminding participants that their names would not be used in any subsequent research or papers. I also reminded everyone that they did not have to answer every question and could leave the group or conversation whenever they wanted.

I adopted ongoing consent, offered opt-outs, and actively facilitated quieter voices, following BERA's (2024) guidance and case-based ideas of negotiating participation and dissent (Govaerts & Fensham-Smith, 2024; BERA, 2024). At times, it was not easy to ensure equal participation, as some participants were more confident than others. I also did not know whether reticence was a person's standard mode or a result of the research. As I got to know the participants, I drew them into conversation by highlighting that their voices remained equitable. This section has discussed an ethical approach to the research study, one that is both considered and dynamic, planned and reactive to the nature of the community and conversations heard, as well as activities observed. With data gathered, the next task is to show how the analysis honoured emergence while maintaining systemic rigour.

3.6 Analysis Framework

Analytically, I combined abductive reasoning with systematic thematic procedures to maintain openness and rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I iteratively tested abductive conjectures against data and theory, with reflexive notes documenting decisions and uncertainties (Nowell et al., 2017; Motulsky, 2021). This section justifies the use of thematic analysis before detailing how themes and codes were developed, managed, and analysed at scale.

3.6.1 Thematic Justification

Thematic analysis aligns with this study's aim to capture patterned meanings of SR across multi-sourced, diverse data while remaining theory sensitive. Using abductive reasoning to analyse the data, I first identified patterns, contradictions, and noteworthy points. I then sought theoretical insight to explain what was happening. This was achieved through an iterative refinement process, going back and forth between the data and theory, using this type of reasoning creatively to make sense of, support, and develop new theories about SR in the early years. Essentially, what works for whom and why.

3.6.2 Analysis: Themes and Words

Themes were meaningful insofar as they highlighted the research problem, not merely their frequency or ease of coding. Thematic analysis was used in this study to identify

patterns and themes emerging from each dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method enabled interpretation of meanings (Crowe et al., 2015). During the process of reading and re-reading questionnaire responses, reflecting on observations, and reviewing the ongoing journal, I expected numerous themes and patterns to emerge. Some themes were common across all stakeholders, while others seemed specific to a particular stakeholder group. Themes were considered important if they addressed the research questions and were explored further for power dynamics and meaning (Nowell et al., 2017; Thomas, 2024). However, Braun & Clarke (2006) argue that a theme only becomes important when it captures something central to the research study itself. Inductively, the themes emerged from the dataset. In contrast, Muir & Cochraner (2006) suggest using a template developed from the research questions and theoretical frameworks to define the data. I now outline the practical workflow for handling large datasets without losing nuance. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes the dataset in rich detail and often interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data were analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process [Table 9]. After coding all interviews, I collapsed codes into themes representing the significant findings (Creswell, 2014) in individual thematic tables; I then combined these tables into a stakeholder group table. Finally, I combined all the tables to create a final thematic table. The final themes emerged not linearly, but after moving back and forth between phrases, codes, and themes, evolving my understanding of the data (McLeod, 2024) so I could give the themes character and categorise them.

	Phases	Description of the analysis process
1	Familiarising myself with the data	• Transcribing data • Re-reading the data and noting initial ideas
2	Generating initial codes	• Coding interesting features of the data systematically • Collating data relevant to the code
3	Searching for themes	• Collating the codes into potential themes • Gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing the themes	• Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts. • Checking if the themes work in relation to the entire data set. • Reviewing data to search for additional themes • Generating a thematic “map” of the analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	• Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story that the analysis tells. • Generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing the report	• Selection of vivid, compelling examples • Final analysis of selected extracts • Relating the analysis to the research question and previous literature

Table 9 Phases of Thematic Analysis (Source: Braun & Clarke 2006)

The analysis describes patterns and critically examines how institutional priorities, relational dynamics, and sociopolitical forces shaped practices in the RSC. Convergences highlight shared commitments to children's emotional security, independence and cross-directional partnerships. At the same time, divergences expose competing paradigms: mechanical versus holistic interpretations, relational versus data-driven approaches, and empowerment versus control. I will use this dichotomy to present findings in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.6.3 Working with Large Amounts of Data

With a documented timeline, collation, interactive reading, codebooks and audit trails, I kept the analysis transparent and reproducible, supporting dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). I used Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step model [Table 9] to code the data (Gray, 2018) and identify five themes. I first

gathered all the data into a single area/folder. I then read and re-read the data and revisited the initial report on SR associated with the Centre.

The research questions and the theoretical models discussed informed the development of codebooks with clear definitions for each code. I understand that SR is conceptually present in the classroom, at home, and in the community, and is politically driven. Therefore, employing the models to support data analysis helped make sense of the data.

3.6.4 Triangulation of Data

To strengthen claims and surface tensions rather than smooth them away, I incorporated planned triangulation. Triangulation is a strategy that boosts research credibility and depth by integrating multiple data sources, methods, theories, or investigators (Bhandari, 2023). It's valuable in qualitative research and applicable in mixed and quantitative studies. Denzin (1978) identified four types: data, investigator, theory, and methodological triangulation. This study used data triangulation, collecting data from different times, places, and people to ensure generalisability (Bhandari, 2023). Triangulation cross-verifies findings, such as observing practice after interviews for richer insights into educators' and children's experiences. It reduces bias and captures complex phenomena (Hassan, 2024). Though resource-intensive and sometimes conflicting, such data prompts deeper analysis.

In summary, triangulation supports robust, reliable and nuanced research outcomes. To link findings to the conceptual core, I read the data through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems and Illeris' (2007) learning dimensions.

3.6.5 Bronfenbrenner and Illeris

The ecological-learning synthesis, which located evidence across system layers while specifying proximal processes, content, incentives, and interactions in the microsystem, was introduced as a frame for discussion, and I started thinking about its impacts as I first analysed using Braun & Clarke (2006).

As such, using Illeris's (2007) dimensions of content, incentive, and interaction as distinct elements within the microsystem in which the child is nested provided a way to discuss the environment, functions, emotions, and communication observed in the

classroom. This complemented Bronfenbrenner's (1979) nested systems, which helped me discuss how the systems relate to each other and highlight areas of tension, development, and alignment.

I focused on data aligning with the chrono, macro, meso, miso, and micro levels and the learning environment across three areas: content, incentive, and interaction. This framing, combined with trustworthiness practices, ensured the audit trail made ecological and learning processes traceable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics here is infrastructural, not procedural. I focused on design, access, data collection, and dissemination to protect dignity, agency, and trust, following UK guidance that recognises power differentials and inequalities in educational research (BERA, 2024; BERA, 2018). This involved planning for ongoing consent, transparent communication, reflexive monitoring, and strong gatekeeper relations (Miller & Bell, 2012; McAreavey & Das, 2013).

Following best practices (Resnik, 2015; Lahman, 2018; Anderson & Cornell, 2017), ethical approval was secured before starting this research. My desire for clarity and brevity challenged the university's ethics committee, as balancing participant letters to satisfy approval and participant needs created tension. This section covers prevention from harm, consent, assent, openness, and data protection.

3.7.1 Harm

Potential harms were social and institutional rather than physical. To address this, throughout their time at the centre, it was essential to check in with participants. I also refrained from chasing those who stopped attending or appeared reluctant to attend.

Consistent with power-conscious approaches to research (Ayton, 2024; BERA, 2024), safeguards were put in place to mitigate coercion, dependency, and unintended circumstances. Although there was no potential for physical harm, the group could be perceived as vulnerable in various ways (Shneidman et al., 2013). Participants may have felt less likely to receive help if they did not support the research, suggesting they may

perceive participation as beneficial (Decker et al., 2014), which may have diminished their right to self-determination. The power imbalance arose at enrolment, between centre staff and parents, and between managers and early years staff. Being made to participate could have caused distress. To reduce any sense that participation was expected, I addressed this openly with a light personal analogy and humour, while reassuring participants that, just like their identities, their attendance and level of involvement were entirely confidential, to ease any anxieties.

Participant personal data was minimised by only using computers with current antivirus software. Data was regularly backed up on the university's password-protected OneDrive. The diversity and volume of data, including that from a reflective journal, involved ethical considerations. My journal includes abstract thoughts, spider diagrams, and reflections rather than a narrative that could reveal participants' identities.

As it is a small team, there is a risk that stakeholders will be able to recognise each other in the final written thesis; to mitigate this and increase privacy, I have purposefully not attributed quotes to individuals but to stakeholder groups, a decision made collaboratively.

3.7.2 Informed Consent

Consent was a continuous, dialogic process, revisited and sensitive to gatekeeping and power dynamics (Paulsen, 2025; McAreavey & Das, 2013). Rogers (1987) stressed the need for clear, honest, informed consent highlighting study benefits and confidentiality measures. Favaretto et al. (2020) underlined shared responsibility among ethical policies, committees, researchers, gatekeepers, and supervisors. All participants received transparent information sheets (Check & Schutt, 2012). A video was also created for parents to discuss the study and improve accessibility. Consent was ongoing, reviewed, and discussed throughout, involving participant feedback (Decker et al., 2011).

Local authority consent was obtained through a series of meetings. As the Director of Children's Services had commissioned this research, I was introduced via Teams meetings to the lead on Children's Services and to the area manager responsible for the RSC as part of her portfolio. Following these initial meetings to discuss the research and

obtain approval, I worked with the area manager and the centre manager, holding online meetings before meeting in person to obtain consent.

For children, this extended to assent and authorship, requiring age-appropriate explanations and co-constructing meaning as detailed below.

3.7.3 Assent

Assent practices respect children's rights by balancing expression with protection and by clarifying ownership and use (Mirabella et al., 2025). Accordingly, assent was treated as evolving and negotiable, with explanations tailored to developmental ages and opportunities to dissent throughout. I drew on a rights-based approach to consent (Fielding et al., 2023; ERIC/Child Ethics, n.d.) and on recent work on assent in play settings (Mirabella et al., 2025).

There were specific ethical dilemmas around consent and assent, as children may not have fully understood how their drawings would be used. Who owns the drawing: the child who created it or the researcher who collects the data? Similarly, using the child's work without their permission could infringe their rights. There was further concern about interpretation, which was addressed by listening to child-led explanations to co-construct meaning. The children and the name of the school they discussed are anonymised to maintain confidentiality. Transparency also required honesty about my institutional ties and perceived authority, a deception I needed to pre-empt and undo to form a true relational research base.

3.7.4 Avoiding Deception: My Position

I made my affiliations, intentions and limits explicit to counter assumptions of influence and sustain relational trust, recognising that power circulates through institutional ties, not through researcher intent (Aryton, 2024; Thomas, 2014). The initial meeting at the Centre was very welcoming. Both the area manager and local manager were pleased to host me as a researcher. They highlighted the key activities the Centre offered during the discussion and tour of the building. I recognised that knowing the director of services to some extent could influence how I was perceived and so realised after this meeting I had some preconceptions to untangle! Being open and honest about my connections within

the Council helped, as it provided me with access to an area I was interested in researching. However, it also hindered me because I was unknown to the area and the local manager(s). Therefore, the onus was on me to offer an honest appraisal of the study (Denscombe, 2010) and to continue building on this by being transparent and deliberate in all my dealings with the participants (Cresswell, 2012).

3.7.5 Privacy and Confidentiality

Confidentiality protocols, pseudonyms, secure storage and minimal identifiability were matched with clear participant-facing explanations. By following the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2024) guidelines, concerns regarding confidentiality and data storage were addressed prior to the study's start, and appropriate procedures were established. I ensured that the anonymity and confidentiality of all contributors was maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Pseudonyms were employed as well as the processes for storing and disposing of data were explained to participants during the consent process.

3.7.6 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was approached as an ongoing reflective practice rather than a fixed end point. I worked to strengthen credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability through transparent decision making, triangulation across stakeholder accounts and continual reflexive engagement with my own position as a researcher. Mirroring ideas from Lincoln & Guba (1985) about the openness of the inquiry process and willingness to question personal assumptions. This approach ensured interpretations were grounded in data and open to alternative explanations.

For reliability, the wide range and depth of the data collected supported data and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Bhandari, 2023). Whereas trustworthiness, according to Skirtic (1985), is just as important since it focuses on transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Lincoln & Guba (1994) agree and suggest that research is strengthened through a conscious effort to establish accuracy in interpretation and a thoughtful fit between descriptions and explanations. Davies & Dodd (2002) added that the research practice itself needs to be honest, open, empathetic, sensitive, respectful, and engaging.

In this research, the difficulty with transparency lay in the fact that, while participants shared their worlds with me, my voice could potentially make events sound patronising, othering, or, indeed, tokenistic. Moreover, their voices may identify them to others which potentially created a tension around trustworthiness. The dichotomy between keeping their identities confidential and unveiling their experiences needs to be real and not tokenistic. With methodological coherence established and limits acknowledged, the next section summarises the chapter and signposts how the analysis opens into findings.

3.8 Chapter Conclusion

In summary, the research design establishes methodological coherence between theoretical commitments (ecology and learning), practical feasibility in a post-COVID landscape with workforce limitations and ethical integrity. The case study frame permits situating understanding; the emergent design accommodates change; and the multi-method strategy enhances credibility, dependability and confirmability through data triangulation, member reflections and a reflexive journal. Recognising that knowledge here is co-produced, the study explicitly attends to institutional and interpersonal power dynamics, mitigates researcher reactivity (e.g. inquiry catalyst withdrawal), and treats trustworthiness as a continuous, practice-based endeavour rather than a checklist. Limitations (e.g., single-site sampling, convenience sampling, uneven quantification and COVID-era disruptions) are acknowledged and addressed through thick description, transparent process tracing and theoretically anchored interpretation. This methodological frame positions the study to show how SR is defined, negotiated and enacted in practice, as well as to identify what works, for whom and why in this specific community.

The next section presents the first tranche of findings, mapping how stakeholders' approaches to SR differ and collide across roles and contexts. It identifies tensions and divergences among early year educators, managers, family workers, health visitors, primary teachers, parents and children, including contrasts between checklist-performativity logics and relational, play-based pedagogies; functional skill priorities and identity-centred aims; and institutional risk and efficiency and community-anchored inclusion. To support analytic clarity, perspectives are synthesised through

the study's interpretive lenses: mechanical, political, holistic, family and power, practice and pedagogy, while situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems and Illeris' (2007) dimensions. This sets the stage for a granular account of convergences, where partnerships and practices align, as well as divergences, where values, capacities or power dynamics pull apart, establishing the empirical foundation for the action-oriented changes discussed in Findings Chapters Four and Five.

Chapter Four: Findings Part One: Stakeholder points of convergence and divergence.

4.1 Introduction to Findings

This findings chapter examines how stakeholders within the RSC understand, enact, and contest SR. Adopting an interpretivist stance, the analysis recognises that findings are situated and partial. Participants' roles, institutional expectations, local history, and post-COVID conditions shape them. Foucault (1980) and Hayward (2000) describe these as “conditions of possibility” that delimit what can be seen, said and done in practice. Working across interviews, observations, and artefacts, the chapter maps of convergence and divergence. To organise this landscape, the analysis presents five cross-cutting themes: Mechanical Child, Holistic Child, Political Child; Family and Power; Practice and Pedagogy and locates them within the study's theoretical anchors [See Appendices 2,3,4,5,6], Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Illeris (2007), alongside the broader literature on transitions and equity.

Direct quotes are used and attributed to stakeholder groups; however, they are not always attributed individually to ensure privacy.

4.1.1 The Structure of Findings & Discussion

The structure of the findings and discussions that follow mirrors this study's chronological design.

Part One of the Study

Chapter Four: Findings. Part One presents the findings following all semi-structured and planned interviews, initial observations, and field notes. This chapter includes all stakeholders and identifies the emerging themes. Each finding section is followed by a corresponding discussion that explores themes and reflects on their significance in relation to the literature, highlighting how stakeholders perceive and practice SR in the centre and community.

Part Two of the Study

Chapter Five: Findings Part Two explores stakeholders' stories of change, presenting the changes made in the RSC following the initial findings and stakeholder discussions, often driven by researcher inquiry and collaborative reflection. These changes reveal work toward SR and a new conception of the Child in the RSC. This chapter presents chronological stakeholder stories that identify the practice, inquiry, and changes made. It further highlights my participation as an 'inquiry catalyst' by integrating my roles as research companion, challenging colleague and professional mentor.

4.1.2 Data Analysis Approach

I familiarised myself with the data collected from interviews, observations and notes before coding and identifying themes, rationalising these into five main themes. The themes that emerged showed stakeholders understood SR across Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model; they noted political and cultural impacts, referenced the past, discussed links to other agencies and their work with families and children. Practice included Illeris (2007) dimensions and as the stakeholders co-designed new ways of working, they considered their intentions (incentives), found cooperation, communicated strategies with parents (interactions) and implemented curriculum and skills that were important to this RSC (Content). Both frameworks thread implicitly and explicitly throughout the findings.

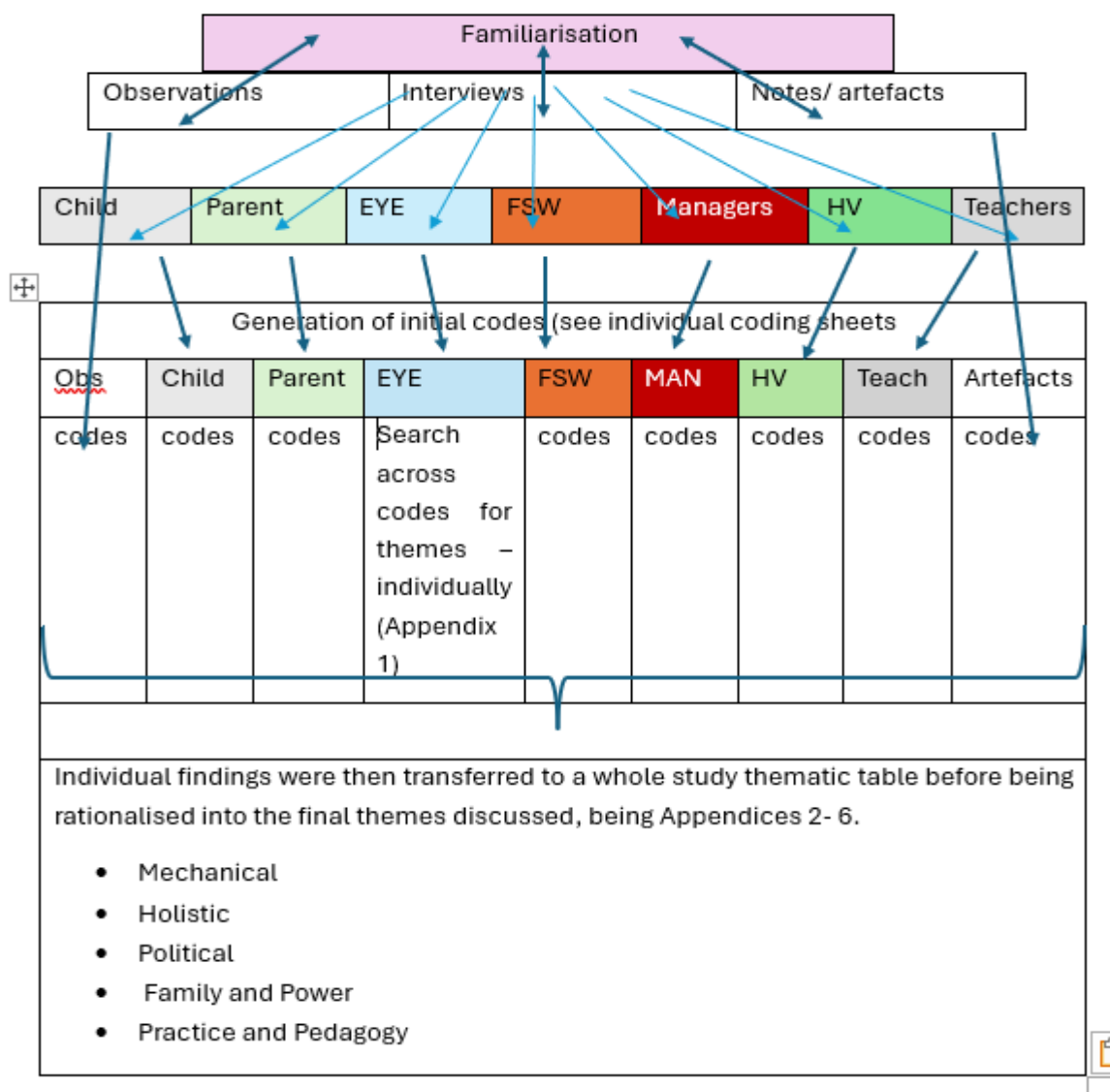


Figure 12 Data Analysis Process

4.2 Overview of Results

A full data set thematic table [Appendix 1] supported understanding of each stakeholder's priorities before the stakeholder set. Before analysing what was said, I reviewed the emerging codes, themed them and examined the occurrence rates; this helped organise the data and understand what was important to this centre. This also helped me address any preconceptions I might have.

4.2.1 First Coding and Occurrence Rates

Coding the occurrence rates showed that all stakeholders were interested in practice and pedagogy, aligning with research questions RQ1 and RQ8 on how SR was enacted. In the

theme of Family and Power, the children did not mention this prominent theme, but the EYE, Managers, and HV all discussed their work as family-focused, addressing RQ5 and RQ7 on who was involved and what the benefits were. All groups addressed political, structural and evaluation processes under the auspices of Political Child, and because COVID sits within this theme, it significantly increased the occurrence rate; this theme addressed RQ2 and RQ8. All stakeholders, except the children, discussed function and practical needs, which is themed as Mechanical, and answered RQ3 and RQ6. The theme, Holistic Child, drew the biggest contribution from the children; interviews emphasised the importance of play and the need for play to be available in recognised ways in both the setting and school. All stakeholders contributed to this theme and, in doing so, answered RQ4 and RQ6.

Theme	Occurrence Rate
Practice and Pedagogy	400
Family and Power dynamics	317
Political Child	172
Mechanical Child	158
Holistic Child	55

Table 10 Coding Block Occurrence Rate [See Section 4.2.3 and Appendices 2 – 7]

Table 10 identifies the occurrence rates in interviews where the themes were alluded to. This exercise helped guard against perceived researcher bias and checked what was discussed most. The following discussion shows what was most discussed and what caused tension in the interview process.

4.2.2 Emerging Themes Description

Mechanical Child: represents the mechanical functioning discussed by stakeholders and is important before transitioning to school. Codes that supported this theme included Functional Skills, Self-Care, Toileting, Routines and Structures. Such themes addressed the child as a functioning being [Appendix 2].

Holistic Child: represents seeking to educate inclusively and value individuality. Codes that supported this theme included Curiosity Play, Emotional Development, Sharing and Kindness,

Sense of Self, and Confidence in New Surroundings [Appendix 3].

Political Child: represents the child as a conduit to political ideologies and as moving through a prescriptive agenda. Codes alluded Resources, Statutory checks, COVID, Social Care, Local authority, Staffing and Training [Appendix 4].

Family and Power Dynamics: concerns how the centre viewed children and families and how it saw its role with ideas of co-dependency, parenting, autonomy and learned helplessness. Codes in this theme included Community Health, Working with Parents, Family First, Educating Parents, and Home Learning [Appendix 5].

Practice and Pedagogy: this theme emerged during interviews when staff described their work and when parents commented on practices they saw. Children were pivotal in this section, describing what they thought was necessary for school. Codes included Interactions, Interventions, Speech and Language, Collaborative Approaches to Learning, Pedagogy, and, of course, Practice [Appendix 6].

4.2.3 Outlying Themes

Although these themes were identified less frequently across the dataset, they remain important, as outlying themes may indicate emerging issues or areas that warrant further exploration. These included concerns relating to staff roles and reduced opportunities for professional development (identified by two participants), the concept of the “future child” (raised by one stakeholder), and the experiences of dual-role professionals (identified by two participants). While these themes did not achieve the prominence of the main findings, their presence highlights the diversity of perspectives within the data.

The relative prominence of each theme was calculated using the mean frequency of references within each participant group and is represented in the pie charts below.

4.2.4 Stakeholders' Input to Themes

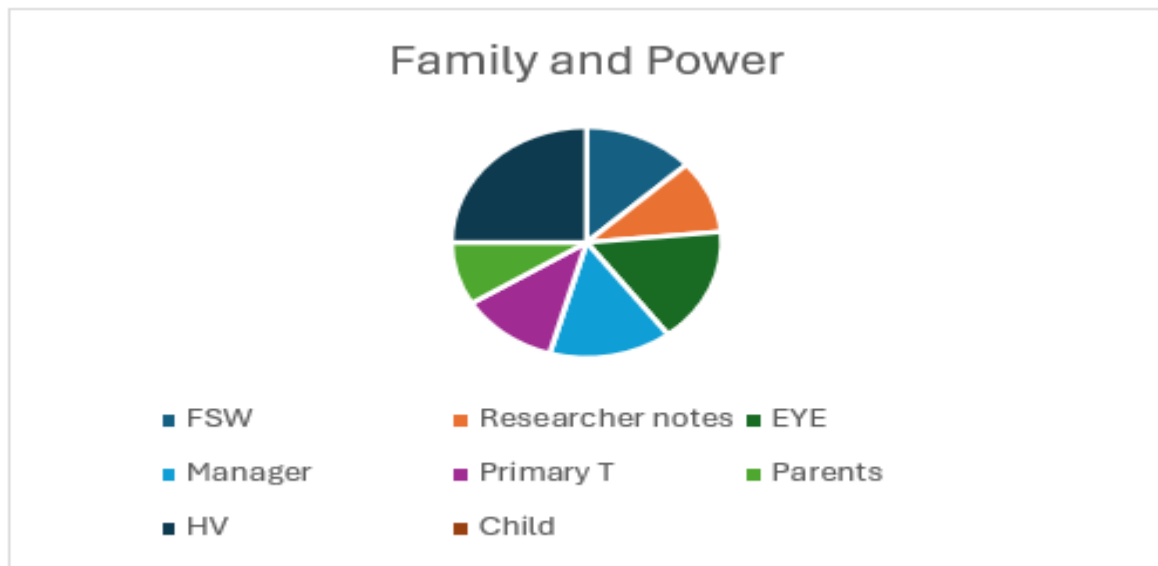


Figure 13 Stakeholder Representation: Family and Power Theme

It is not surprising that the children did not discuss family or power. However, it is also not surprising that the HV in the study discussed families and working with them in response to most questions. Both the early year workers and family support workers identified an alignment with their work in the centre as working with families.

Practice and Pedagogy.

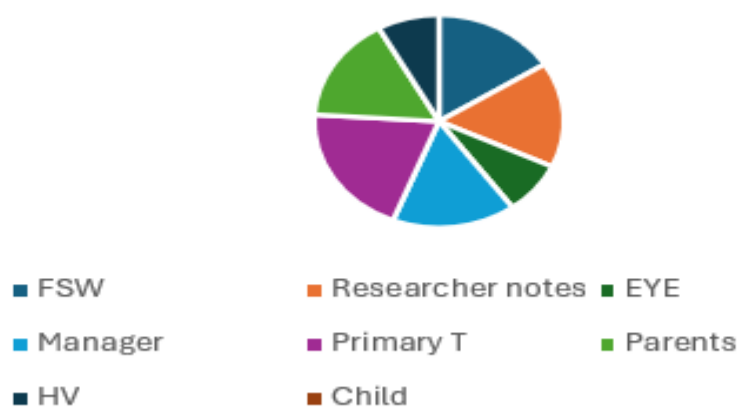


Figure 14 Stakeholder Representation: Practice and Pedagogy

The children had a lot to say about play, and a point of interest in this section was that the EYEs did not contribute as much about play as expected, while their managers discussed

it frequently.

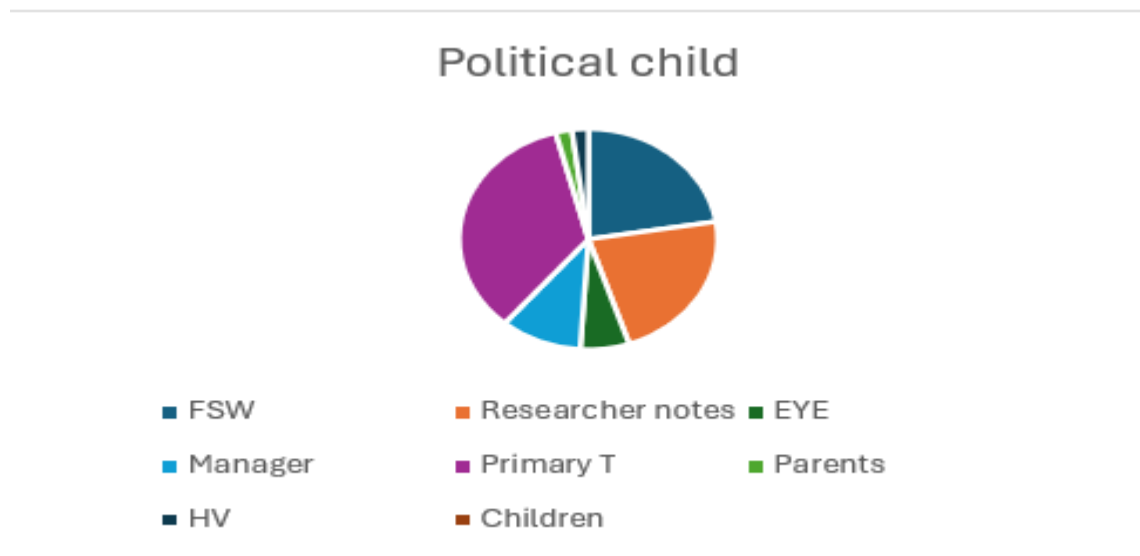


Figure 15 Stakeholder Representation: Political Child

The primary teacher talked the most about political structures, assessment and curriculum, whereas the HV, while noting statutory requirements, did not discuss systems or local policy. One of the children mentioned waiting to see if he would be going to the same school as his neighbour and I interpreted this as a systems issue.

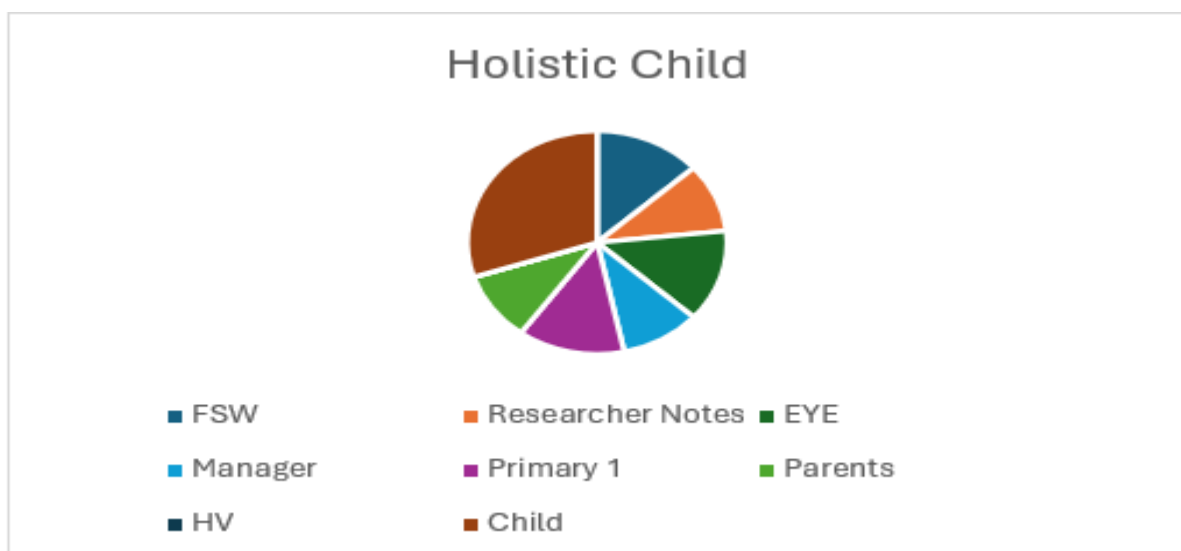


Figure 16 Stakeholder Representation: Holistic Child

There was an even distribution for discussion regarding holistic play. In their talks and

drawings, children described play as sensory, outdoor, pretend, and symbolic, and their actions demonstrated their priorities.

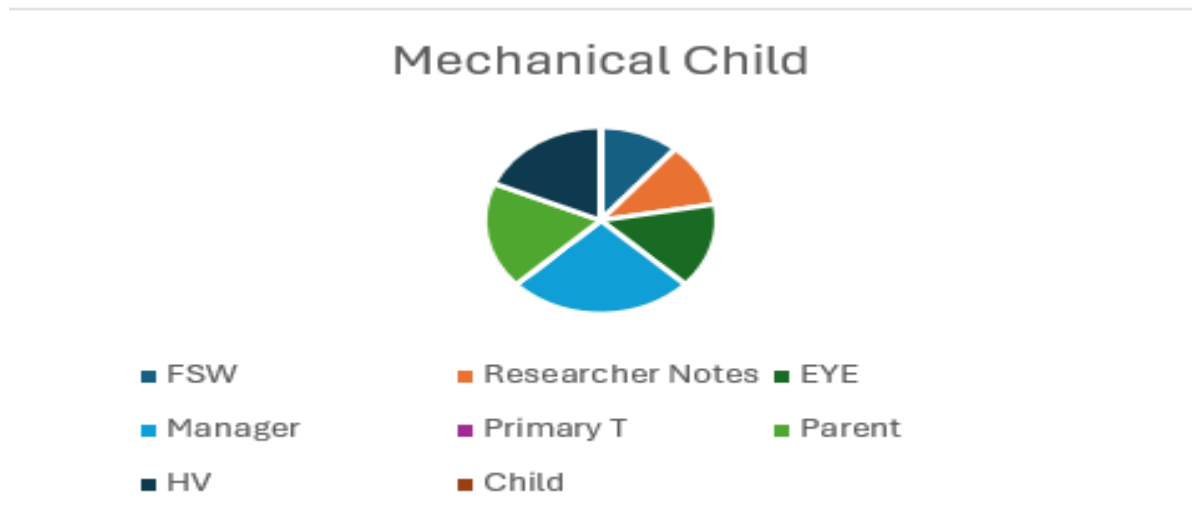


Figure 17 Stakeholder Representation: Mechanical Child

All stakeholders discussed the Mechanical Child theme. All noted the requirement to address functional skills, with the FSW and HV discussing this in terms of home and centre work practice.

The following section analyses the interview content, drawing on stakeholder comments, the literature and researchers’ interpretation. It uses points of convergence and divergence to understand how stakeholders across the centre understand, enact, react to, and justify SR in the centre.

4.3 Thematic Findings

4.3.1 Mechanical Child Findings

4.3.1.1 Representation

The Mechanical Child theme emerged strongly across interviews and observations, representing a view of SR as the mastery of discrete functional tasks rather than holistic growth. Stakeholders emphasised physical routines and compliance, reducing learning to what can be described as “operational efficiency” that mirrors mechanical

applications. For example, one educator asserted that readiness means "*being able to sit alongside other children*" while a manager described it as independence through task completion by "*encouraging children to put their own coats on, do their own fastenings, toilet training*", extending even to "*scrape their own boards...pour their own milk*". These portrayals construct development as a sequence of technical skills rather than relational or experiential processes.

Parents echoed this functional lens, with one parent noting, "*X would only go to the toilet that way (...) he would not sit on the toilet if he wanted a poo.*" Therefore, toileting was perceived as a technical challenge rather than an emotional milestone. Other parents reinforced the importance of structured routines, indicating a mechanistic notion of predictability and control: "*The fact that there is a routine to each part of the day is important.*"

However, some parents described this control as necessary because of their Child's SEND needs. Health professionals adopted similar ideas as a Health Visitor (HV), describing readiness as the ability to "*sit for short periods of time and to be task orientated*", stressing that "*routine is really important to school readiness*". These perspectives construct the Mechanical Child as a system of functions, sitting, toileting, fastening and listening, where progress is measured by operational efficiency rather than holistic development, which is discussed later in this chapter.

The ability to carry out functions that support a stress-free transition to school was often couched in terms of what was better for the school, the teacher, and the parent, rather than in terms of children's maturity, individual needs, and autonomy. With the primary teacher suggesting:

"Within a school there are certain expectations, sit in a group for 10 /15 minutes, use the bathroom independently, early writing, reading, and numeracy" (PT)

While the representation of the Mechanical Child highlights a focus on measurable skills and compliance, the analysis of perspectives reveals both alignment and resistance to this view. The following section explores these points of convergence and divergence, showing how systemic pressures shape practice yet leave room for contestation.

4.3.1.2 Points of Convergence

Schools and some managers emphasised functional independence and compliance with routines:

"We expect children to be able to toilet independently, sit still, hold a pencil correctly, and know some numbers" (School Transition Document); and *"If they can't sit for 20 minutes, they will struggle in Year 1"* (Primary Teacher).

These convergences highlight measurable, data-driven outcomes that are accepted as essential for the transition to school structures. While schools may argue that these skills reduce transition stress, that is only if the schools expect all children to be the same. This reductionist approach risks a trickle-down effect that narrows pedagogy and marginalises children who develop at different rates or whose strengths lie in creativity and social integration. This approach aligns with neoliberal accountability cultures, where readiness may become a tick-box exercise because it exposes children to early failure at a time when educators and stakeholders should focus on building a sense of self and identity.

4.3.1.3 Points of Divergence

Parents and nursery educators resisted the reductionist framing of SR, advocating instead for approaches grounded in curiosity, resilience and relational development. A nursery manager suggested that readiness *"shouldn't be about sitting for 20 minutes or writing your name. It's about curiosity and resilience"*. This challenges the notion that compliance and technical skills define preparedness. Parents echoed this sentiment, asserting that *"readiness isn't a tick box exercise; it's about confidence and relationships"*, and prioritised the love of learning over early literacy benchmarks, *"I don't care if he can write his name yet, I want him to love learning."* Children voiced, *"I like playing with blocks, not sitting still"*. Therefore, showing play and agency in early development. These considerations lead me to consider how much agency children have and how they can or cannot influence their learning environments.

4.3.1.4 Mechanical Child Discussion

The mechanical framing of SR reflects an environmentalist orientation, echoing statutory readiness (Anderson, 2025), and privileges skill acquisition and functional independence over developmental diversity. Schools argue that skills such as toileting, sitting still, and pencil grip are prerequisites for curriculum engagement. Or there seems to be a hidden discourse suggesting that this is what schools expect.

However, this assumption risks marginalising children who develop at different rates or whose strengths lie in creativity, problem-solving and social integration. For instance, a child thriving in exploratory play may be labelled "not ready" despite demonstrating advanced cognitive ability and resilience. Such reductionist interpretations (Wrigley, 2017) echo the nativist and environmentalist categories in Meisels' (1998) frameworks, which conceptualise readiness as a set of measurable competencies rather than a relational and contextual process.

Defining readiness so narrowly carries consequences for the Child. Children may experience early failure, diminished confidence and disengagement from learning which perpetuates inequalities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who often have less exposure to formal routines. This aligns with Grimmer's (2018) critique that SR is a socially constructed and politically mediated concept rather than a neutral development benchmark. Instead of focusing on the holistic needs of children and families Grimmer argues that readiness discourses often serve institutional imperatives, such as inspection regimes, accountability cultures and funding mechanisms Ofsted's (2014) own review of good practice warns that gaps in achievement are "clearly established by the age of five" and that narrow interpretations risk reinforcing disadvantage. UNICEF's (2012) multidimensional perspective on readiness that encompasses health, emotional security and family context, seems to contrast with the compliance-driven model observed in the Mechanical Child theme. When readiness becomes a checklist, it neglects the complex interplay of ecological systems that Bronfenbrenner (1979) identifies as shaping child development. Children's experiences within microsystems, family and Nursery, alongside their interactions with ecosystems, policy, local authority and multi-agency structures, profoundly influence their preparedness for school.

Therefore, ignoring these layers reduces SR to a technical exercise rather than a holistic journey.

Children begin their educational lives feeling inadequate, excluded and disconnected from normative expectations (Neaum, 2016). Those living in cramped conditions, experiencing frequent transitions, or navigating adverse conditions may lack the opportunities that readiness frameworks assume. Measuring them against standardised benchmarks risks eroding their sense of self, resilience and belonging. From a neuroscientific standpoint, evidence reinforces the urgency of ensuring that early experiences in cognitive development and emotional pathways are purposeful (Blair & Raver, 2015). Since 90% of the brain is developed by 5 years, this means that important pathways of attachment, agency and identity are already forming and will underpin lifelong learning. So, suppose professionals fail to immerse themselves in children's ecological realities, to understand what life is like for them and what readiness needs to be. In that case, we continue to teach compliance over critical thinking, and worse, diminish children's capacity to value themselves.

The Mechanical Child theme raises the fundamental question of SR; whether standardised or individualised? Meisels' (1998) framework provides a starting point but requires expansion to incorporate political, relational and ecological frameworks. Readiness cannot be disentangled from power, policy and practice. As this study shows, when readiness is framed mechanically, it narrows pedagogy and amplifies inequities. A shift towards context-sensitive, relationally grounded approaches more aligned to UNICEF's (2019) holistic vision, Grimmer's (2018) critique of a political construct, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is essential to ensure that readiness supports inclusion, agency and authentic learning rather than compliance and control.

4.3.1.5 Section Summary

This mechanical framing reflects an environmental approach that prioritises skill acquisition over developmental diversity. While schools argue that these skills are prerequisites for curriculum engagement, such expectations risk marginalising children who naturally develop at different rates or whose strengths lie in creativity and social integration. For example, a child who thrives in exploratory play may be labelled "not

ready" despite having strong problem-solving skills. These considerations move me to question the idea of measuring children, its uses and its limitations.

While the Mechanical Child theme foregrounds compliance and technical mastery, it does not capture the full spectrum of developmental needs. In contrast, the next theme, Holistic Child, offers an alternative view, highlighting emotional security, social interaction and curiosity as integral to readiness. This shift reveals the tension between narrow benchmarks and inclusive child-centred approaches.

4.3.2 Holistic Child Findings

4.3.2.1 Representation

The Holistic Child theme can be viewed as a counterpoint to the Mechanical Child view of SR, representing an inclusive, child-centred approach that follows a child's interests and values individuality, emotional well-being, social development, independence, and confidence. Stakeholders described readiness as *"a holistic process"* and a *"well-rounded approach"* (Manager), noting that preparation for school extends beyond functional skills to encompass relational and emotional domains. Educators articulated this through curriculum design, for example *"We do have a curriculum, ...mainly focusing on those prime areas...making sure that the family are involved in that learning"* (Manager). This reflects EYFS statutory guidance that promotes holistic development through the prime areas of learning (DfE, 2025).

Emotional development was repeatedly discussed as foundational, *"being emotionally ready at that point they are ready to leave mum, is a major thing"* and *"children, when they start understanding their emotions and how to use them, they do need somewhere to practise it"*. Primary Teacher recognised that *"children have emotional intelligence really young"* whilst noticing parental anxieties through their work. A Manager concurred, *"the anxieties that parents tend to have come from their own mental health and how they are feeling"*. Social development seemed to be prioritised, *"relationships with parents are paramount to build trust"* and *"we have seen those friendship groups form...which I guess benefits the children as well as the parents, who have more of a social circle"* (Manager). These perspectives align with Birth to 5 Matters guidance (2021), which frames everyday

experiences as opportunities for holistic growth.

Independence and confidence were also central to holistic readiness, confidence being described as *"being quite confident, resilient, is also associated with personal skills, like blowing their own nose"*(Educator). It was also supported through targeted activities, *"Mini movers would probably be a really good way to start being more confident. Gives children something to aim for"* (Manager). Finally, educators related curiosity and personal interests as crucial: *"we provide lots of rich opportunities -age-appropriate activities"* (EYE); *"seeing their brains ticking over and making connections.....continuing with that real curiosity"* (Manager). These insights construct SR as a dynamic relational process grounded in emotional security, social interaction and experiential learning.

The Holistic Child is portrayed as curious, relational and emotionally secure, a stark contrast to the Mechanical Child framing.

4.3.2.2 Points of Convergence

Stakeholders broadly agreed that readiness should prioritise emotional and social development, independence and confidence. Parents reinforced this view:

- *"...that's how we do learn, by coming here... that's where they learn to share, at this pre-school"*
- *"Sharing and being kind, maybe that would go with understanding the behaviours expected of them"*

Educators echoed these principles:

- *" Being emotionally ready at that point where they leave mum... is a major thing"*
- *"Children very often are resilient, as long as they have the right people around them"*

Managers also emphasised emotional security and relational learning:

- *"Children need to feel safe and secure, or they aren't going to be ready to learn"*
- *"We understand about putting those foundations in for future learning and later life"*

These shared perspectives align with the EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2025), which promotes holistic development through the prime areas – personal, social and emotional

development, communication and language, and physical development. These perspectives also relate to UNICEF's (2012; 2019) multidimensional approach to readiness, which includes health, emotional security and family contexts.

4.3.2.3 Points of Divergence

While stakeholders agreed on the importance of holistic development, they differed in their interpretations of readiness, expectations and the amount of support required to achieve holistic goals.

Parents contextualised through emotional cues. Parent 1 reflected, *"sharing should be a bit further down, do you not think, because some of them are only two years old"*. Parent 4 observed, *"he just doesn't see danger at all"*. These comments suggest a more child-led, flexible view of development and recognise parents as educators. In contrast, Family Support Workers leaned towards structured independence, stating, *"We expect more from them, more independence, new faces"* (FSW). Health visitors focused on social structure, *"being confident to meet new people, new teachers, new faces"* (HV). Health visitors further highlighted the associated challenges of social and communication development, *"there are kids that are not really talking, and socially they are struggling, and we do work with parents on routines"* (HV).

Children expressed imaginative and creative expectations such as *"I will go as a superhero, do you like superheroes?"* (C) and *"I will do painting when I am there"* (C). These comments highlight the importance of creativity and play in children's perceptions of readiness and draw attention to their positive outlooks. I was struck when talking to the children with their lack of anxiety and their curious and trusting nature about school, it was vastly different to their parents' views. Their parents, who had been part of the focus groups, expressed anxiety about their babies moving out of the RSC and to the *"big school"*. In addition, managers described family centred and outdoor learning approaches such as, *"we sent out packs for them to do not only for the children but for the family too"* (Manager). Additionally, *"Forest schools' sessions... to role model and capture positive experiences outside"*.

4.3.2.4 Holistic Child Discussion

The Holistic Child framing of SR resonates strongly with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, situating child development within nested systems, microsystems (family and Nursery), mesosystems (connections between home and school) and macrosystems (policy and cultural norms). Readiness, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation as interactions across these systems shape it. For example, emotional security within the family microsystem influences confidence in the classroom, while policy imperatives at the macrosystem level can either support or constrain holistic practices (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Illeris' (2007) learning triangle complements this perspective by showing the interplay between content, incentives and interactions within the classroom itself. Holistic practices activate all three dimensions: content through rich, age-appropriate activities; incentives through fostering curiosity and resilience; and interaction through strong relationships with peers, educators and family (Alliance for Children, 2024; BredeKamp, 2019). This multidimensional engagement contrasts with mechanical approaches.

However, observations revealed a tension: the very stakeholders who celebrated holistic practices also, at times, prioritised mechanical and functional processes. This duality reflects the complexity of satisfying multiple demands, such as smooth transitions, parental expectations, adhering to statutory guidance, and preparing for Ofsted inspections, all in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted early years provision and exacerbated developmental concerns among young children (Hardie et al., 2025; House of Lords Library, 2023). Stakeholders, especially the educators, were navigating competing priorities. At the same time, their profession was being perceived as *"a jack of all trades but master of none"* (EYE), a role stretched beyond the classroom into family and community engagement.

Contrasting approaches to children were evident. While diversity in practice can help children accept differences, very young children require a degree of consistency to understand social norms and their belonging to a social order. This raises questions about the balance between flexibility and uniformity in early years pedagogy (Arott, 2021). Furthermore, hidden yet visible tensions emerged among stakeholder groups. It was

found that expectations from private daycare were often projected onto the RSC which as a local authority settings received less revenue investment. As such, multiple stakeholders, using multiple practices and multiple ideological approaches, risked eroding the holistic ideals so strongly advocated for in interviews.

Global frameworks such as UNICEF's (2012; 2019) SR model and Birth to 5 Matters (2021) caution against narrow definitions of readiness. However, the lived reality for the RSC stakeholders seemed one of negotiating competing priorities. Ofsted's (2024) recent guidance reinforces the need for clear curriculum sequencing, explicit teaching of behaviour and purposeful assessment, while acknowledging the lasting impact of COVID-19 on children's development. These findings suggest that readiness is a relational, dynamic process embedded within ecological and social contexts as well as a contested space where ideals and practicalities collide. Holistic approaches remain aspirational unless systematic alignment and resource investment support their consistent implementation.

4.3.2.5 Section Summary

Despite strong advocacy for holistic practices, the realities of early years education are deeply entangled with systemic and political forces. The third theme, Political Child, reveals how readiness is mediated through policy frameworks, funding mechanisms and accountability cultures. This perspective moves the discussion beyond pedagogy to interrogate the neoliberal ideologies shaping early childhood education and the work in the centre.

4.3.3 Political Child Findings

4.3.3.1 Representation

Stakeholders rarely identified political agendas explicitly, aside from references to an upcoming Ofsted inspection, funding gaps, or staff retention. One practitioner referred to assessments being linked to RSC income, but overall political discourse was implied rather than overt. However, observations and interviews indicated that the RSC and early years more broadly operate within a highly political landscape.

The political dimension seemed often invisible to children themselves. For instance, one

Child expressed a desire to attend the same school as their peers, believing that proximity would guarantee admission. At the age of four, he could not comprehend the complexities of school admissions and allocation, nor the reality that attending the “*school around the corner*” was not a certainty. This illustrates how structural and policy-driven processes shape children's experiences in ways they cannot perceive and show the RSC within broader political networks.

The Political Child theme captures how readiness is mediated through systemic pathways, policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, inspection routines and performance metrics, rather than on the development needs discussed as critical by all the above. Stakeholders described readiness as a construct shaped by statutory requirements and accountability cultures where compliance rather than relational priorities often drove interventions and practices. For example, FSWs highlighted the tension between informal practice and formal expectations; “*if we don't do anything, it's how do we say..... or we stand on it, we stand up to people, and we say don't measure*” (FSW). This reveals the pressure to evidence progress even when developmental trajectories resist qualification. Similarly, managers linked curriculum planning to statutory frameworks; “*We do have a curriculum...mainly focusing on those prime areas ...making sure that families are involved in the learning*” (Manager). Such examples highlight how policy shaped pedagogy design within RSC.

Health professionals reinforced this systemic framing, “*we have some checks that we have to do, the new birth one, which is 10 – 14 days and then the 6 – 8-week check, then the one year and the two years, they are the statutory visits we have to do*” (HV). These mandated assessments position readiness within a regulated timeline. Meanwhile, COVID-19 adaptations highlighted how safeguarding protocols intersect with policy compliance, for example “*a lot of the visits were being done over the phone because we aren't allowed to see people unless like it needs ...*” (FSW). Funding constraints and performance pressures were evident in comments such as “*speech and language are being hit hard with referrals*”. Intimating that intervention that might prevent (a referral) is preferable to a referral, therefore, framing readiness as an intervention to satisfy accountability/threshold agendas.

Overall, stakeholders' implicit references to inspection regimes and funding pressures indicate tension between pedagogical ideals and systemic requirements. While educators strive to prioritise holistic development, their work is embedded in accountability and resource constraints shaped by political influence. These findings show that childhood education is not a neutral space.

Collectively, these perspectives show the Child as a conduit for institutional priorities where readiness becomes a metric used by governments. Therefore, the Political Child is a construct deeply embedded in policy discourse and accountability frameworks. Moving beyond representation, the following analysis examines how these forces influence readiness practices and shape educator decision-making.

4.3.3.2 Points of Convergence

Stakeholders broadly accepted early intervention and structured monitoring as necessary for equity and compliance, viewing these practices as integral to meeting statutory expectations rather than optional enhancements. While some questioned the time and resources required, few challenged their necessity. This indicated how deeply policy imperatives shape everyday practice in the RSC. For example, one FSW reflected, *"We have identified something with speech and language ...that could be done better by doing it more regularly..."* (FSW), signalling how intervention frequency is framed as a compliance issue rather than choice. Another showed how relational strategies were adapted to maintain accountability during covid restrictions, *"we still stay in contact with all of our parents... created family activity packs"* (FSW). A local authority officer reinforced this systemic framing; *"funding is tied to outcomes; we have to show progress."* This explicitly highlights the link between readiness practices and performance metrics. Collectively, these convergences reveal that readiness is both a developmental concern and a politically mediated construct where interventions and monitoring serve as instruments of governance, aligning local practice with national accountability agendas.

4.3.3.3 Points of Divergence

Despite the consensus on the necessity of compliance, divergences were noticed regarding the impact of measurement and policy on authentic learning. Professionals

questioned the adequacy of formal assessments; *"Baseline assessments don't tell you how a child feels safe"* (Teacher). Meanwhile parents voiced concerns about data-driven priorities; *"I feel like they care more about numbers than my child being happy"* (Parent). Children themselves resisted the compliance narrative, simply saying, *"I don't like the big test"*. These counterpoints expose tensions within the RSC itself and suggest neoliberal ideas pushed up against pedagogy and development. Educators echoed this ethos; *"it's very family friendly... very comforted and cushioned here... I don't think that you get a lot of that in school."* This contrasts the relational practices in the centre with policy-driven environments in formal schooling. These divergences imply the need to explore readiness further as a political construct.

4.3.3.4 Political Child Discussion

The Political Child theme exemplifies how neoliberal ideologies permeate early years education and the practices within the RSC. As such, reframing SR as a mechanism for governance and future economic productivity rather than developmental milestones. Neoliberalism operates through policy pathways of performativity, marketisation and accountability (Ball, 2012), embedding readiness within a culture of measurement and competition (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017). This is evident in stakeholder concerns about evidencing progress, *"we stand up to people and say we do not measure (FSW) and in funding linked performance pressures, "funding is tied to assessments and outcomes"* (FSW). These dynamics view readiness as commodified (Kay, 2018; Brown, 2024).

From a political economy perspective, the readiness discourse serves as a framework for institutional pathways, inspection regimes, funding and workforce accountability. This aligns with Grimmer's (2018) critique that readiness is politically mediated and designed for the economic agenda. For example, statutory checks and baseline assessments, while framed as safeguards to ensure no one 'falls through the gap', often function as surveillance. Therefore, further exacerbating deficit narratives about disadvantaged families, drawing attention to inequities (DfE, 2025; Foundation Years, 2025).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides a lens to understand political dynamics, showing neoliberal policy operating at the macrosystem level, shaping exosystemic structures such as local authority directives, within the RSC, the

multi-agency approaches, and these then intersect with microsystems in the Nursery and homes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fisher & Lombardi, 2025). These systemic pressures create tensions between relational pedagogy and compliance-driven practices, placing competing demands on centre stakeholders as they bend to multiple drivers, including EYFS statutory guidance, Birth to Five Matters (2021), Ofsted inspections, and local authority compliance (North Tyneside Council, 2020).

Linking back to SR frameworks introduced earlier [1.5], Meisels' (1998) nativist and environmentalist categories fail to capture these political dimensions, focusing narrowly on developmental competencies. The Political Child theme extends these frameworks by situating readiness within neoliberal governance structures, in contrast to UNICEF's (2019) multidimensional model, which foregrounds equity, emotional security and family engagement. Similarly, Birth to 5 Matters (2021) cautions against "narrow definitions of readiness" that ignore socio-political contexts, advocating for a play-based relational learning.

A critical implication of framing readiness through a neoliberal or political frame is that it risks reducing education to a technical exercise of compliance and measurement, eroding professional autonomy for educators. Finally, it highlights structural inequalities and privileges families who can navigate policy expectations.

4.3.3.5 Section Summary

Beyond systemic pressures, readiness is further negotiated within intimate relational spaces. The fourth theme, Family and Power Dynamics, explores how hierarchical structures, saviour narratives and vulnerability intersect to shape parental engagement and children's experiences. This theme foregrounds the social and ethical dimensions of readiness by revealing how power relations influence participation and agency.

4.3.4 Family and Power Dynamics Findings

4.3.4.1 Representation

The theme Family and Power Dynamics emerged as a determinant of SR, characterised by vulnerability, complexity, and deprivation. While it can be considered a developmental construct, it is shaped by hierarchical structures and labelling practices that influence

both power and participation. Within the Family and Power dataset, a subtheme of diverse approaches emerged that revealed revealing how children and families were perceived and how other stakeholders viewed them at the RSC. Discourses introduced during interviews included those of co-dependency, parenting the parents, autonomy and learned helplessness, as well as reflected some tricky relational approaches, diverse outlooks and expectations.

Educators identified family-centred practices and empowerment; *"we work with the whole family"* (EYE), *"We can give the children a head start"* (EYE), and *"relationships with parents are paramount to build trust"* (EYE).

These statements heed the complexity of family engagement and the need for relational approaches. However, observations and interviews revealed subtle tensions embedded in language and everyday interactions, prompting reflexive consideration of ethnocentric assumptions. For example, one manager framed parents as *"needing parenting"*, and when posed with a parent who said they had no cooker (it was broken) *"I will get you one, don't you worry"*, without asking the parents what their solution might be, invoking ideas of dependency and learned helplessness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This lens highlighted patterns of saviour narratives and echoes of colonisation (Freire, 1970) within the RSC. Moreover, it may indicate the work carried out and how the Centre was used in past iterations.

Analysis under this theme revealed discourses of disadvantage, dependency, valuing and devaluing, and resistance to change, all of which altered the shape of interactions and practice. These findings suggest that readiness is not developmental but socially negotiated and entangled in power relations and systemic expectations.

Representations of family involvement reveal complex power relations, in which vulnerability and saviour narratives coexist alongside aspirations for partnerships. Hayward (2000) discusses this in terms of capacity and collaboration. In contrast, Foucault (1980) attributes power relations to the conditions of possibility. Both scholars emphasise that some voices may be more powerful or heard within family work, with the role of professionals to reflect on this dynamic. The following section unpacks these dynamics and shows how they affect agency and participation.

4.3.4.2 Points of Convergence

Across stakeholder groups, trust and partnership were identified as critical for supporting families and preparing children for school. Educators articulated shared responsibilities, noting that *“we can’t get the children ready for school on our own. It’s a partnership with parents”* and *“Mental Health is a big issue, especially post-COVID, so we have to remember what everyone has been through”*. HVs echoed this, identifying vulnerability and complexity, *“there obviously been a lot of maternal mental health”* and *“Families want the best, but life gets in the way”*. They further reinforced empowerment as a goal; *“It’s about empowering parents to be able to support their children”* (HV). Parents also expressed aspirations for their children and reliance on the centre and staff; *“I know I can come here if I am in trouble and get help, I can find someone to give me a hug... and sometimes someone to tell me what’s what and sort me out”*. FSW’s described inclusive practice through home-based activities; *“Lots of different activities for families, word searches, colouring in, and things for the whole family to do in the home”*.

4.3.4.3 Points of Divergence

Despite efforts toward partnership, some parents reported feeling disempowered. One stated, *“sometimes it feels like they are judging us, not helping us”* and *“I didn’t want to say no because they’re the experts”*. An observation showed the tension in this partnership when a parent knocked the door as she had heard her child crying, an educator answered and said, *“he’ll never settle if he knows you are outside the door.”* The parent left and then said to me, *“She’s probably right.”*

Hierarchical structures and labelling practices contributed to these tensions. For instance, deficit-based narratives, such as labelling a child as *“delayed”* without contextualising family circumstances, risk reinforcing feelings of inadequacy. Parents negotiated their roles and responsibilities within these systems. As an example, one parent stated,

“I know my opinion matters, but what I’m saying is it like there’s different ways of doing things... after sighing but well, he’s had to get into their routine now”.

I further observed one parent suggest their going to a session depended on the worker’s

compliance, *“you better be providing us with tea and biscuits, we came last week, and you forgot.”* This suggests that, at times, the power and expectations were interchangeable.

Families and community workers positioned the area as needing sustained intervention through activity-based support. The community worker described how certain schools are deliberately targeted because they are a *“bit more deprived”*, while nursery staff noted *“they didn’t get an awful lot of time”* to deliver activities. Viewed through a hierarchical lens these accounts reveal how decisions made higher up about targeting, staffing, and resource allocation, constrain front line workers capacity and unable to meet local need

My observations indicated that the language used by stakeholders framed SR as a relational endeavour, with multiple forms of relationship shaping everyday practice. Supporting relationships emerged where professionals sought to scaffold parental confidence through guidance, modelling and encouragement, echoing the principles of partnership working embedded in the Birth to 5 Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021) and the relational care ethics highlighted by Noddings (1984) and more recently, Professional Love, a concept about warm ethical reciprocal relationships (Page, 2018). In contrast, need based relationships reflected moments when families approached stakeholders (workers) for immediate, often crisis driven assistance, aligning with findings from Wesley & Buysse (2003) that readiness work frequently intersects with wider social needs. A third category, dependency orientated relationships were also evident where some parents appeared to rely heavily on the centre for decision making about parenting matters, this dynamic resonates with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model which emphasises the interdependence between systems can shift boundaries of influence and authority.

These relational patterns suggest that relational closeness, strengthened through home visits (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007) and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge within families, pertinent in this study as the centre has been used since the 1990s, can build trust and collaboration. These dynamics offer a bridge to Family and Power, where questions of authority, dependency, professional expertise, and parental agency become central to understanding the reach of SR.

4.3.4.4 Family and Power Dynamics Discussion

The Family and Power themes demonstrate that SR is not a neutral state; rather, it is socially shaped and negotiated through unequal power relations that influence how families are perceived, supported, or subtly controlled. While stakeholders emphasised partnership and empowerment, the data revealed contentious tensions, including saviour narratives (Freire, 1970), implicit expectations of compliance, and practices that risk fostering dependency rather than autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These dynamics expose gaps between relational intentions and hierarchical realities, in which professional authority may overshadow parental voice, or parental voice may overshadow stakeholder voice, echoing Foucault's (1980) view that power circulates through everyday interactions. Current readiness discourses often fail to recognise the structural conditions that shape vulnerability (Hayward, 2000). These findings suggest that readiness should critically engage with sociopolitical forces that shape agency and participation, as well as with families' experiences within systems.

4.3.4.5. Section Summary

Overall, findings relating to Family and Power Dynamics highlight that SR is politically charged and understood differently by families, simply because families are uniquely different, highlighting the requirement to build in relational time to get to know what works for them and why.

Finally, the analysis turns to the operational realities of early years practice in the RSC. The Fifth theme, Practice and Pedagogy, examines how educators navigate competing demands, systemic constraints and relational priorities in their daily work. This theme provides insight into the practical strategies and tensions that underpin readiness, offering a bridge to the broader theoretical analysis that follows.

4.3.5 Practice and Pedagogy Findings

4.3.5.1 Representation

The operational realities of the RSC during the research period were shaped by systemic pressures including staff shortages, high SEND prevalence, pandemic-related disruptions and persistent resource constraints. These factors influenced the day-to-day

running of the centre and ultimately children's educational experiences and trajectories. Practitioners described how these challenges often redirected priorities from relational engagement and creative learning towards compliance and crisis management: *"Sometimes the nursery workers don't get an awful lot of time to do those sorts of activities"* and *"you need the gear really and the stuff to make it happen for them... we've done separate stations, teachable moments."*

COVID-19 increased these pressures, reducing opportunities for play-based learning and family engagement. A Manager explained, *"COVID changed everything, children missed out on play, and parents lost confidence."* In response, staff adopted compensatory strategies such as bespoke interventions and resource packs for example *"lots of different activities for the family"*, and *"we posted videos weekly."* These adaptations highlight a pedagogy of care that prioritises emotional security and holistic development over narrow definitions of readiness. Other stakeholders distinguished; *"It's about supporting the children... so they can be ready to not have to go through all that settling in."* *"School readiness is having the skills to move on... speech and language is key"*.

As shown, representations of practice foreground adaptability and relational care, yet systemic constraints often dictated the rhythm of daily routines. The following analysis considers how educators reconcile these competing demands in their work.

4.3.5.2 Points of Convergence

Stakeholders agreed on the pandemics profound impact on developmental trajectories particularly in speech and language and communication for example, *"nationally...speech and language skills have been hit really hard by COVID"*. This was accompanied by a noticeable shift in everyday relational routines; *"before COVID we saw parents every day at drop off and pick up, they don't stay anymore because they got used to not talking to us"*.

Stakeholders, especially the EYE's noted a marked change in relational practices usually supported by daily contact, such as face-to-face updates at drop of and pick up, as families became accustomed to reduced interaction during COVID 19 restrictions. This highlighted the developmental consequences and the steady reduction in relational

practices, previously supported by communication.

4.3.5.3 Points of Divergence

Differences in transition practices and parental engagement were stark. As one educator noted, *"some schools do brilliant transition work; others send a leaflet and expect parents to cope."* These inconsistencies seemed to leave families navigating fragmented systems. A child's comment, *"I want to go to nursery"*, underlined the emotional dimension of these transitions, contrasting with institutional approaches that often prioritise efficiency over relational continuity.

Staff perspectives on readiness tasks also varied. Educators emphasised shared responsibility, *"We can't get the children ready on our own... it's a partnership with the parents"*. These statements reflect a commitment to relational pedagogy. Nevertheless, my observations revealed that systemic constraints and COVID-related changes repeatedly disrupted this. Reduced parental presence at the drop off and pick up, once a cornerstone of everyday relationships, forced educators to reconstruct channels of communication.

4.3.5.4 Practice and Pedagogy Discussion

Findings from the RSC demonstrate strong relational practice despite systemic constraints. Staff prioritised children's emotional security and continuity during the COVID pandemic, adapting through bespoke activities and video-based engagement. These strategies indicate a pedagogy of care and adaptation, aligning with holistic principles embedded in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2023) and echoing the literature's emphasis on ecological and relational approaches to readiness (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Illeris, 2007). Such practices challenge mechanistic interpretations of readiness, critiqued by Meisel (1998), and advocate for developmental appropriateness and contextual sensitivity.

However, sustaining relational pedagogy under systemic strain proved challenging. Staff narratives suggested time constraints reduced play-based learning and deep relational work. These findings resonate with critiques of neoliberal policy frameworks, which call for increased standardisation, data driven metrics and SR as an economic investment,

often at the expense of relational priorities (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017). This aligns with tensions previously discussed in this chapter, that readiness discourses often emerge during periods of political and economic upheaval, therefore reinforcing performativity and managerialism in practice (Ball, 2003; Neuam, 2016).

Divergences in transition practices, ranging from "brilliant transition work" to tokenistic leaflet distribution, highlight the fragmentation of systems. Practice theory offers a lens to interpret how educators negotiate competing demands through situated improvisation rather than linear implementation (Kemmis, 2010). However, without structural reforms addressing workforce capacity and funding, these negotiations remain constrained and perpetuate disparities. This echoes the OECD's (2023) warnings that early inequalities, if unaddressed, can place children on divergent paths with long-term consequences.

The relational turn in pedagogy is not without critique. Hinsdale & Lundblad (2023) warn against romanticising relationships without interrogating power dynamics and positionality. Findings from this study reveal that dependency and co-dependency risks arose when pedagogical practices blurred professional boundaries.

4.4 Practice Implications: Applying the Frameworks

Across leading frameworks, there is a consensus that readiness involves systemic, relational and developmental factors. UNICEF's (2019) model discusses shared responsibility, while Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory situates readiness within interconnected systems that highlights poverty and policy alongside microsystem interactions. Illeris (2007) adds a learning lens, stressing cognitive, emotional and social dimensions often overlooked in traditional readiness discourses. Grimmer (2018) critiques the school-centric definition, advocating for play-based, holistic approaches that value agency and family voice. Similarly, Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta (2000) identify continuity and trust during transitions, bridging home and school contexts. While these frameworks converge on rejecting a purely cognitive view, they differ in emphasis: UNICEF (2019) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasise structural and policy contexts; Illeris (2007) and Grimmer (2018) specify learning processes and holistic development; and Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta (2000) prioritise transitional relationships. Together, these perspectives inform practice by promoting strength-based engagement, multi-agency

collaboration and culturally responsive pedagogy, ensuring readiness is achieved by partnership rather than unilateral intervention. This suggests that, in Family and Power Dynamics, multiple perspectives are needed; rather than disrupting SR's ideas, they intersect to offer a new way of viewing readiness, using multiple frames and views to understand why things happen as they do. The following table [Table 11] summarises this study's themes, identifying their key characteristics and the relevant frameworks to which they relate.

Theme	Key Characteristics	Relevant Frameworks
Mechanical Child	Functional skills, compliance, operational efficiency	Meisels (Nativist/Environmentalism), EYFS
Holistic Child	Emotional security, social development, and curiosity	Bronfenbrenner, Illeris, UNICEF, Birth to 5 Matters
Political Child	Policy-driven, funding, and accountability pressures	Political economy, Bronfenbrenner macrosystem
Family & Power	Hierarchies, Savior narratives, and co-dependency	Critical pedagogy, feminist theory
Practice & Pedagogy	Relational approaches, systemic constraints	Illeris, OECD guidance

Table 11 Overview of Themes and Frameworks

4.5 Chapter Conclusion

This study confirms that SR is not a fixed benchmark but a multidimensional, socially constructed process. Stakeholder perspectives revealed overlapping yet divergent priorities, exposing gaps between national policy frameworks, local practices and developmental theories. While readiness agendas reference established models, none fully aligned with the lived realities observed in the RSC, therefore underlining the need for renewed dialogue and locally adaptable frameworks.

The findings strongly support Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, situating

readiness within interconnected systems: family, Nursery, policy and community. Complementary theories such as Illeris's learning triangle (2007) and UNICEF's (2012; 2019) holistic vision reinforce the importance of emotional security, relational continuity and play-based learning. In contrast, rigid benchmarks like the EYFS (2023/25) "Good Level of Development" risks oversimplifying trajectories and perpetuating deficit discourses, particularly for children navigating socio-economic disadvantage or SEND.

4.5.1 Complexity of School Readiness

The data shows that there is no consistent agreement on SR, but rather multiple, diverse understandings that engage partially with the frameworks discussed above. The findings can be summed up by Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp (1995, p.20), who noted the difficulty in defining SR as "individual child performance is multidimensional, highly variable across dimensions, episodic, and culturally and contextually influenced, so the establishment of any fixed readiness threshold is misleading and dangerous." While in agreement with this sentiment, Corsaro (1997, p. 39) added further concerns by asking, "How will we know?" Essentially, is there a way of readiness that avoids labelling or stigmatising children? Finally, would pre-school teaching become distorted if they teach to the test? Both ideas of interest were developed as I started working with early years children, parents, and partners in 1993, and show that the study adds to 30 years of school-readiness discourse.

4.5.2 Findings are Socially Constructed

It is worth emphasising the subjective nature of the findings as they are shaped by the interplay of personal ethnocentricity, professional values and standards as well as the historical, geographical and environmental contexts in which the RSC operates. Participants were simultaneously powerful and powerless, able to influence practice while constrained by systemic structures and discourses. This duality notes the complexity of SR as a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in networks of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1977; Hayward, 1998). If so, the SR defined in this study is meaningful to this centre and not necessarily transferable to others. However, the research approaches may be, highlighting the need for further locally situated studies in SR.

4.5.3 Identifying the Tensions Between Contrasting/Opposing Themes

This chapter has highlighted the tensions that influenced the delivery of SR in practice and found that some tensions were in conflict. For some stakeholders, the conflict was about which approach took precedence. I further observed tension enacted between stakeholders who valued one approach above another, placing stakeholders in opposing camps about SR in practice.

The following section rationalises the tensions in the centre at the time of the research;

1. Holistic ideals vs rigid standards
2. Relational ethics vs political and marketised drivers
3. Developmentally appropriate practice vs performativity cultures

4.5.4 Mechanical vs Holistic Approaches

The Mechanical Child view of readiness often emphasises functional skills such as toileting, dressing, and sitting still, presenting these as prerequisites for a smooth transition to school. While these skills are practical and necessary, an overemphasis risks reducing readiness to a list of competencies, overlooking socio-emotional development, creativity and relational dimensions that support lifelong learning (Pramling-Samuelsson & Bjorklund, 2023). In contrast, Holistic Child approaches place readiness within a broader developmental context, encouraging play-based learning, child-led exploration and intentional scaffolding (Bruner, 1983). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model reinforces this view by highlighting the importance of proximal processes within microsystems, such as family interactions and peer relationships, as well as mesosystem connections that foster trust and community engagement (Morris, 2006). International frameworks, including UNICEF's (UNESCO, 2024) Global School Readiness Framework, advocate for integrated models that include health, emotional security and family engagement, challenging reductive interpretations of readiness.

4.5.5 Holistic Development vs Academic Benchmarks

The Holistic Child theme prioritised personalised learning opportunities delivered through play-based experiences that foster curiosity, creativity and social-emotional development. This aligns with the principles outlined in the Early Years Foundation Stage

(DfE, 2025) and Birth to Five Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021), which emphasise relational engagement and experiential learning. However, the growing reliance on measurable outcomes creates a paradox as educators must balance exploratory, child-led learning with accountability frameworks that focus on quantifiable progress. This tension fosters what Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes (2017) describe as a "performativity culture," where learning activities are designed to meet assessment criteria rather than nurture intrinsic motivation. For instance, educators may stage activities to demonstrate literacy or numeracy for inspection purposes, compromising the authenticity of play and limiting the curriculum. Internationally, Scandinavian curricula and New Zealand's Te Whāriki challenge this trend by integrating democratic participation and cultural responsiveness. Such findings reinforce the need for context-sensitive approaches that resist reductionist tendencies.

4.5.6 Developmentally Appropriate vs Rigid Standards

Normative benchmarks, such as GLD, depict an idealised view of child development. These standards assume progress is linear, age-related and universally achievable, while ignoring the dynamic, nonlinear nature of development shaped by individual trajectories and contextual factors (Wood, 2013; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Embedding rigid benchmarks into policy frameworks positions SR as a fixed state rather than a relational and ecological process (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). While many children meet these expectations, there is a perpetuating deficit discourse (Gaynor, 2022) where some children are viewed as "behind", particularly those facing socio-economic disadvantages, SEND or cultural diversity. These framings trigger additional interventions and shape children's self-perceptions and identities as learners and community members. As Kagan et al. (1995) warn, fixed readiness thresholds are "misleading and dangerous," given that child performance is multidimensional, episodic, and culturally shaped. Furthermore, GLD acts as a governance tool by aligning local practices with national accountability agendas (Ball, 2012), which reinforces a culture of performativity that diminishes pedagogical autonomy.

4.5.7 Responsive and Relational vs Political and Marketisation Drivers

Stakeholders demonstrated a strong commitment to relational practices, including

home visits, family engagement and community-based initiatives. These findings reflect an ethic of care and partnership (Noddings, 2013). These practices align with frameworks such as Birth to Five Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021), which advocate co-production and trust-based relationships. However, these ideals operate within a political and economic landscape that increasingly portrays early childhood education as an instrument of governance and marketisation. Successive policy agendas have aligned pedagogy with economic outcomes (Biesta, 2010), positioning children as future human capital rather than active agents. Funding mechanisms tied to measurable outcomes risk turning authentic partnerships into transactional exchanges, thereby undermining trust and professional autonomy (Giroux, 2024). These dynamics echo neoliberal policy technologies that prioritise efficiency and accountability over relational ethics (Sims, 2017). The rise of family hubs highlights this tension, while tendering frameworks contrast sharply with Sure Start's universal, community-based ethos (Glass, 1999; Kay, 2018). These conditions emphasise the need to critically interrogate readiness as a political construct and to develop policy frameworks that value relational continuity over performativity.

4.5.8 Ready Child Framework: Relational and Authentic

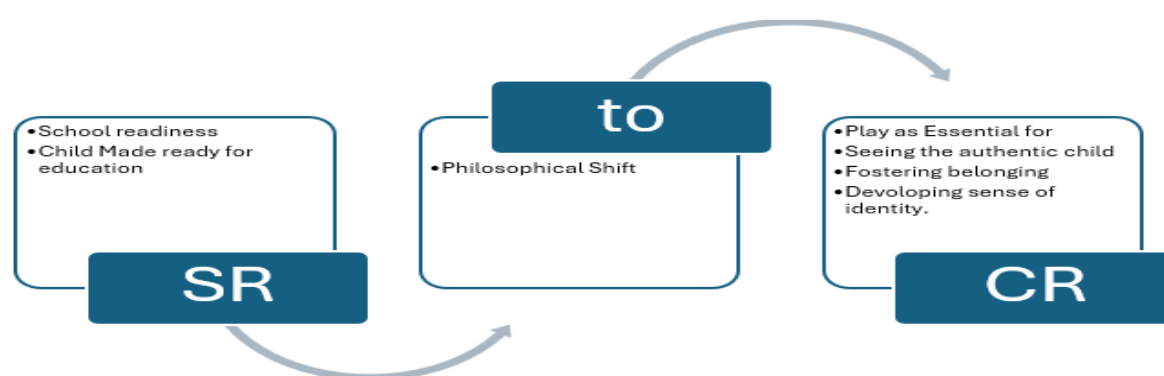


Figure 18 School Ready to Ready Child Banner

To move from critique to change, readiness must be reconceptualised as a "Ready Child Framework": a dynamic, relational journey that prioritises agency and equity over compliance. The following Ready Child Framework operationalises this shift:

1. Policy Review and Reform: Advocate flexible, developmentally appropriate standards that resist rigid thresholds and deficit framings. Prioritise cultural responsiveness and relational ethics over performativity.
2. Practice Alignment: Embed holistic, play-based pedagogy supported by multi-agency collaborations and authentic co-production with families to strengthen continuity across transitions.
3. Capacity Building: Invest in workforce development, reflective practice time and resources to sustain relational pedagogy under systemic pressures, including post-COVID recovery and high SEND prevalence.
4. Research and Evaluation: Extend participatory inquiry to interrogate readiness as a political construct and generate locally adaptable frameworks that identify what works, for whom and why.

These recommendations aim to shift SR from a compliance-driven agenda to an approach that has the child at the centre. Moving to a child-centred approach that ensures equity, agency and authentic learning for all children and families.

Overall, Part One of the findings demonstrates that SR in this context was plural, negotiated and power-laden rather than singular or static. Stakeholders converged around the importance of emotional security, communication, independence and trusted relationships. Yet they were found to divert over what counts as evidence of readiness and whose needs are paramount (the child, the school, the family or the system). The analysis documents how performativity pressures (tick lists, inspection logics, resource constraints) pull practice toward reductionist interpretations (the Mechanical Child). Meanwhile, lived pedagogical commitments and family partnerships emphasised relational, play-based, and context-responsive work (the Holistic Child). Simultaneously, political and organisational forces seemed to shape what was locally possible (the Political Child) and everyday interactions at classroom doors and in family support revealed the frictions of power, dependency and agency (Family and Power Dynamics). Within this shifting terrain, educators' craft was characterised by adaptation and care (Practice and Pedagogy), but seemed exacerbated by workload, staffing and

transition inconsistencies across schools.

Taken together, the findings justify a practical turn in this study by moving from mapping tensions to testing local solutions that protect relational capacity while meeting legitimate accountability duties. This sets the stage for Part Two, where an inquiry catalyst stance supported co-designed, in-situ improvements alongside evaluating “what works, for whom, and why” in real time.

4.5.8 Transitioning from Research Findings to Changing Practice

The diagram below shows a clear, purposeful juncture between the case study findings and the study's subsequent collaborative action phase.

Figure 19 illustrates the move towards the Inquiry Catalyst Model, adopted in the second part of the research study. This cyclical framework transforms collaborative research findings into actionable systemic change. The process begins by gathering insights from diverse stakeholders, then uses them to spark action research focused on reflection and co-design. These efforts lead to tangible shifts in policy and practice, ultimately producing impacts such as improved communication and stronger partnerships. The process is anchored in the principles of the Ready Child Framework, which emphasise identity-centred and place-based approaches. Throughout, a feedback loop ensures that stakeholder voices and ongoing evaluation drive continuous adaptation and new inquiries. This visual guide shows the journey from initial discoveries to sustainable professional practice.

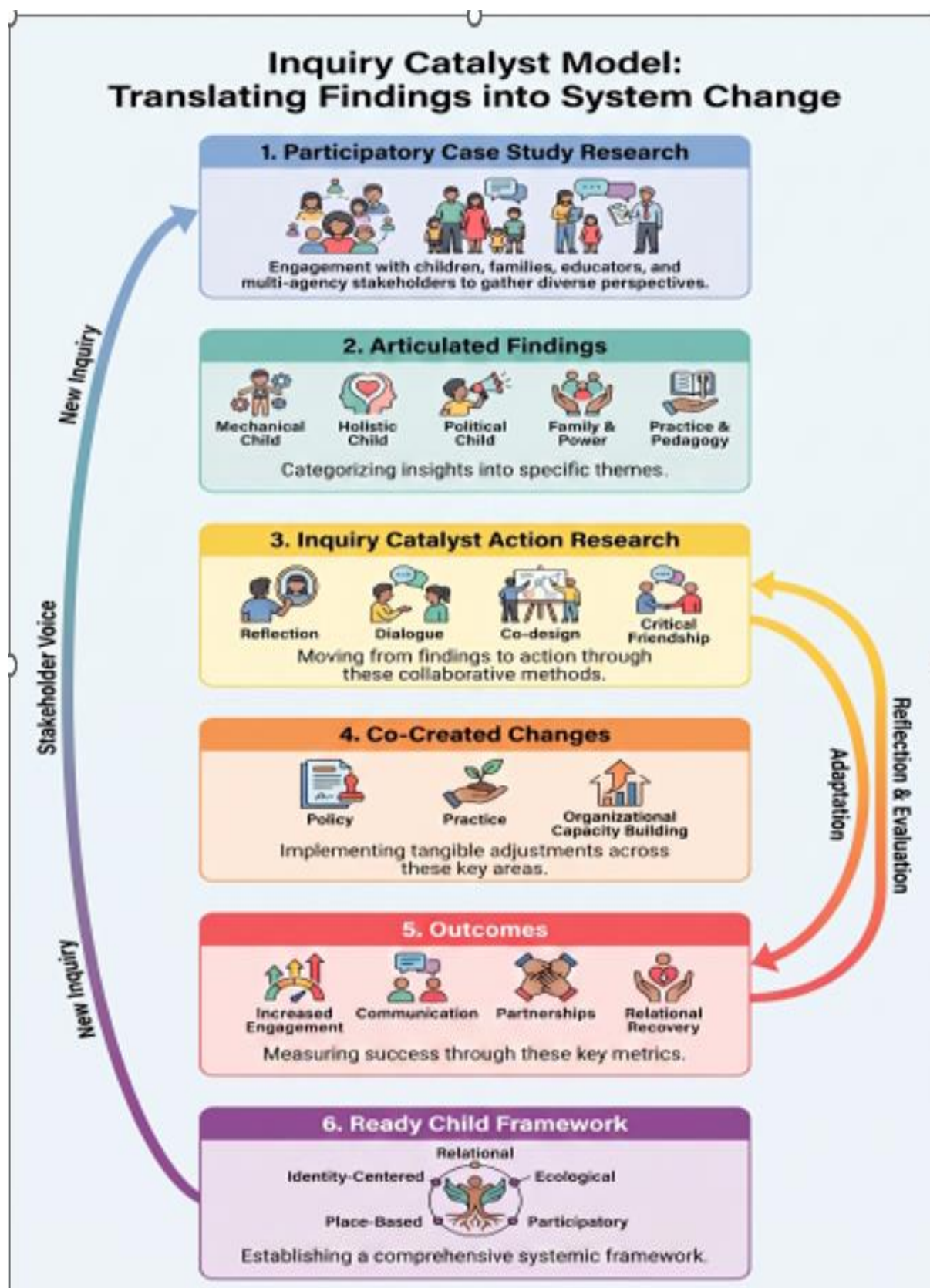


Figure 19 From Participatory Case Study Research to the Ready Child Framework: An Inquiry Catalyst Model of Stakeholder-Led Change

Chapter Five: Findings Part Two: Stakeholder Stories of Change.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter advances the study from mapping tensions (see Chapter Four) to enacting and examining change. Following the interim report to the local authority and the co-created action plan, this study entered an implementation phase in which I worked iteratively with stakeholders to translate findings into knowledge-based solutions and identify actions aligned with each theme. The chapter shows how, after discussions about SR findings, stakeholders planned changes to their SR approaches, which developed into a collaborative inquiry that produced stories of change.

This process celebrated stakeholder capacity to create new knowledge (Meredith, 2020). Methodologically, this phase highlights my shift from observer to inquiry catalyst, as I focused on co-construction, dialogic reflection, and planned withdrawal to safeguard participants. Practically, this chapter documents how the RSC reframed SR as a relational, place-responsive construct through actions across policy, practice, research, evaluation and capacity. The analytical lens remained anchored in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems and Illeris (2007) learning triangle, situating observed changes within nested contexts while attending to the cognitive, emotional, motivational and social-interactional dimensions of learning.

5.2 Implementing Change

Figure 20 represents the co-created flip chart initial “relational” action plan from the first part of the research and records the ideas stakeholders put forward. We discussed these ideas, and stakeholders suggested actions that address the findings. One Educator said, “We could start going out for walks again; we always used to” One manager said, “I could contact all the schools again to look at transitions”. A family support worker added a family reading session, and the group also agreed on language sessions and movement programmes [see Figure 20 below].

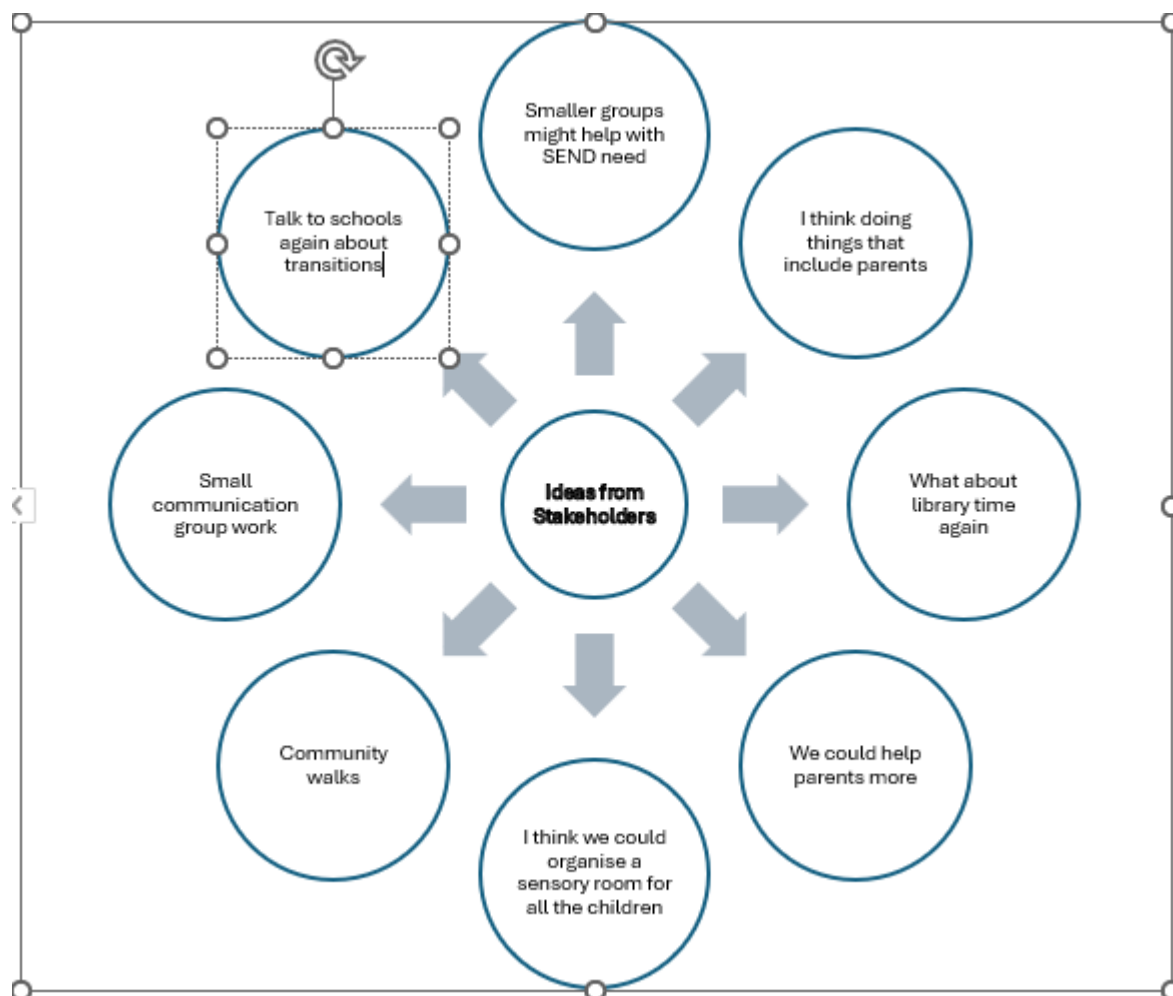


Figure 20 Stakeholder Co-Construction of Intentions for Change Through Collaborative Inquiry

Figure 20 illustrates the intentions for change generated through stakeholder discussions, focusing on rebuilding relationships, during the Inquiry Catalyst phase of the study. Using the findings from the participatory case study as a stimulus for reflection, stakeholders collectively identified practical actions to support children, families and practitioners. Suggested developments included strengthening transition arrangements with schools, reinstating home visits, introducing family reading groups, providing small-group language support, expanding community-based activities, enhancing SEND collaboration, and increasing opportunities for family engagement. The central concept of "Intentions" reflects how stakeholders moved beyond reflecting on existing practice to co-constructing actionable strategies for change. These intentions subsequently informed the implementation and evaluation phases of the Inquiry Catalyst Action Research process.

All ideas were added to a large chart and later articulated in the overview below:

Policy Changes	Practical Changes	Further Research	Workforce Changes
Policy Review and Reform – Advocate flexible, developmentally appropriate standards that resist rigid thresholds and deficit framings: prioritise cultural responsiveness and relational ethics over performativity. Note: Deficit training Protected time for collaboration	Practice Alignment – Embed holistic, play-based pedagogy supported by multi-agency collaborations and authentic co-production with families to strengthen continuity across transitions. Note: Transition toolkit	Research and Evaluation – extend participatory inquiry to interrogate readiness as a political construct and generate locally adaptable frameworks that identify what works, for whom and why.	Capacity Building – invest in workforce development, reflective practice time, and resources to sustain relational pedagogy under systemic pressures, including post-COVID recovery and high SEND prevalence. Note: Expand speech and language support programmes.

Table 12 Co Created Action Plan

In response to the initial research findings [Chapter Four], from Year 2021 to 2022 stakeholders implemented local strategies to facilitate SR [Table 12]. Stakeholders influenced the environment, practices and intentions regarding SR, and the trajectory of change was bottom-up (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The following highlights the various changes that were enacted from this study into SR at the RSC:

Policy Changes:

- They designed a school readiness intention document and ethos.

- They implemented new transition procedures with surrounding schools.
- They discussed and prepared for Ofsted inspection.

Practical Changes:

- They started small group speech and language sessions with the children.
- Recognising socio-historical spaces and practices.
- Flexed the curriculum, environment and resources.
- Started to think about relational recovery.

Capacity Building

- They started interagency SEND meetings with parents.
- Reconfiguring job roles to include the family support role and early educators.

5.2.1 The Research Process: Putting it into Practice

The first part of this study's findings [Chapter Four] set out to determine what SR meant to the stakeholders using the RSC. The findings mirrored the diverse perspectives found in the literature and, importantly, showed that practice was made difficult by the opposing tensions discussed. While some oppositional views were expected, the systemic saturation of tension was surprising.

The recommendations formed part of an interim report to the local authority and were shared with the staff team. They also formed the basis of the second part of the research, the action part. An action identified in the centre was shared:

“Externally and internally, with all stakeholders, there was an agreement that the current transition processes for children from Riverside could be improved; this was supported strongly by parents' complaints. "We are not even allowed in the building" (Parent 3).

After the interim report, my position as a neutral researcher shifted to that of an ‘inquiry catalyst’ [3.2.6]. Every time I visited, I was asked to observe new practices, discuss new ideas and reflect with stakeholders. During these conversations, I took a stance like

motivational interviewing (Finlay, 2002), where I listened, reflected, offered additional ideas from my experiences, and relayed decisions back to the staff team.

This way of working emerged through trust, time and willingness to address SR locally. This methodology continued to fit within the parameters of case study design. It used the stakeholders' and my own interpretations of the research to support real-time changes. This research, along with my curiosity and the stakeholders', drove the change at the RSC.

5.2.2.1 Research Process Map

During the stakeholder collaboration process, the following approach emerged as a key way of working, offering a process map that supported organisational change and stakeholder autonomy. It identifies the stakeholder/researcher roles and the responses that supported autonomous change from within the centre.

Inquiry Catalyst (IC)

- Exploration Phase – state of inquiry

Each week I visited, I might observe and draw attention to, or the team might have an idea or issue to discuss, sometimes based on research, or on local authority advice – note there was no agenda.

- Identification stage – Prioritising areas for improvement.

The areas emerged from practice, incidents, and discussions of current topics, and the researcher supported the identification of the point of change by offering critical perspectives.

Collaboration Inquiry phase – joint exploration of the topic

During this phase, the use of motivational interviewing techniques supported discussions and focused on solutions being led by the stakeholders. The research actively probes, questions, reflects, and motivates.

Researcher or inquiry catalyst withdrawal phase

It is important to withdraw at this point to allow participants autonomy in their decision-making and action phase.

Decision and action phase

Carried out by stakeholders in the organisation/setting

Reflection phase

On my return, often two weeks to a month later, stakeholders' groups would share their changes, and discuss changes they had observed, the IC role is to listen and actively reflect.

Sustainability phase

Staff shared how changes were working and identified practices for long-term effectiveness

Figure 21 Inquiry Catalyst Process

5.3 Stakeholders' Stories of Change

5.3.1 Policy

They designed a school-readiness intention document and ethos.

In a discussion about preparing for Ofsted, I discussed with one of the managers about the diverse approaches towards child development and SR in the centre. I asked what their approach was and what their intentions were for getting children from this distinct community ready for school. One responded, *“we work toward the EYFS standards”*. My reply, *“what does that mean? What should I expect to see and hear?”* Before my next visit, I received an email from the manager explaining that they had a team meeting to think about what they wanted to do, their approaches. Then they produced a document that articulated their intentions for the coming year: to come out of COVID measures and meet the needs of the cohort of children currently enrolled in the RSC.

The document was co-produced with stakeholders and highlighted the centre's beliefs, values, and approaches to supporting children's learning. It also discusses how they might implement learning, including additional interventions and peer coaching. For pedagogy, the first intent showed a respect for children's autonomy and right to play and learn: *“Practitioners watch and listen to what children are doing before intervening”* then adding what a child should experience, *“my person will take time to get to know me and my interests”* (Intention document, 2022, pp 1 & 2)

5.3.2 Practical Changes

They implemented new transition procedures with surrounding schools

The centre's staff reached out to surrounding schools to revisit transition expectations and build relationships with primary teachers. After listening to parents' experiences of transitions to school, such as *“we never even got to look around the school”*, and showing a list (tick list) from another, my researcher discussion on the topic of transition became heated, as shown in the following quotes from parents (purposefully not identified):

- *“Have you seen the list we have been given, this school doesn't want to meet us, they just want us to fill out a form about the child”*

- *“It doesn’t even ask about what they like”*
- *“I think it’s terrible”*
- *“At least another school does visits”*
- *“But they are not really here long enough to get to know the children”*

Consequently, the managers discussed what a good transition might look like, what they wanted for the children, and, importantly, what they could offer schools. They then started a series of meetings with schools in the area. A manager explained, *“we probably won’t get exactly what we would like, we will have to compromise, but at least we will have the conversations.”* (Manager). By reflecting and listening to parents' experiences, the managers were able to have focused conversations on ways to improve transitions for children and parents; linked to this, they invited a SEND parent network worker into the centre to discuss transition to school for children diagnosed or likely to be with SEND, showing a proactive move towards positive change. Working towards an action plan supports this work - see recommendations [6.4].

5.3.3 Small Group Speech and Language Sessions with the Children

I observed a small-group phonological awareness session where a group of the children attending the centre were accompanied by the deputy manager to a small room. The children listened to a story and took part in three activities about it involving sound recognition, vocabulary, recall and understanding. The activity was short and robust, and the children engaged happily. When they were escorted back to the classroom, other children asked if they could go too.

The educator explained that the intervention included all the children, although there were some that she called for more often. She was targeting them as their language and communication skills were not age or stage appropriate. She explained that all the early year’s settings used resources to support speech and language as it was low across the county, recognising some of this was *“the COVID effect”* (EYE).

5.3.4 Recognising Socio-Historical Spaces and Practices

All the children and their parents/carers were invited to go for a walk with the early educators. The staff walked with parents and carers to the sea and marina, where the

children pointed out ducks, boats and trees. As a large group, they looped around what had been a busy fishing port. A parent said, *“I’ve never been here before; I didn’t know all this was here.”* During the walk, staff chatted to parents, encouraged children to walk and pointed out areas of interest and places to visit with their children. For example:

“Can you see the ducks?” (EYE)

“Can you count them?” (EYE)

“Wow, look at all the boats!” (EYE)

One parent pointed out when we went under a bridge, *“There’s normally rats down here.”*

At the end of the walk, the staff brought everyone together on a green while some of the children ran around. The staff made up impromptu races and games, both modelling play and keeping children entertained until the group was together again.

One educator said, *“We always used to go out for walks; I’m not sure why it stopped. It wasn’t just COVID.”* (EYE)

For some children born during COVID and staying very close to home, or in their learning bubble, spending time together outside was a huge life event. For parents who may have formed habits out of protection, it was a way of opening new spaces and experiences while situating themselves within the history and sociology of their home.

5.3.5 Flexed the Curriculum, Environment and Resources

The environmental changes were the most obvious each time I visited, and the atmosphere (hard to quantify) felt different. I would describe the change as an energy shift, but the changes I observed included the following...

A redefining of the classroom spaces, reducing them in size but also in number in some areas. For example, two large areas became three smaller areas, and the children moved into smaller groups within them. Mirroring family-sized groupings, I observed differences in children’s engagement and enjoyment. I used Leuven’s (1994) Involvement Scale to note this. In the smaller groupings, more children were engaged in purposeful play, and their demeanour suggested they were happy.

Researcher Analysis of Observation (Date 14th Jan. 2022):

“Overall, the Leuven observation on 7 children indicated that children’s wellbeing and involvement was consistently higher outdoors, where clear features and opportunities supported play: bikes, balls, kitchens, water. Indoors, several children showed lower levels of involvement, with wandering, watching or uncertainty about how to use resources suggesting a greater need for modelling and scaffolding. The pattern of stronger engagement when adults were nearby for Child 1, 6 and 7 highlights the importance of relational security and familiar adults in supporting deep-level learning. Variability in well-being, especially for child 3, also show how context shapes emotional comfort. Taken together, the observations suggest enhancing outdoor learning, strengthening adult-guided interaction indoors and attending to children who rely on adult proximity would improve overall well-being and involvement for this cohort.”

A repurposed outside classroom and outside area meant all internal classrooms had access to external play areas. These were revisited and redesigned as outdoor classrooms, with additional points of interest introduced by workers. These offered children the opportunity to choose where to play, indoors or outside, therefore extending their choices. I used narrative observation here.

The outside play area was updated, and the space was cleared. Wooden areas and flooring were checked for safety and replaced if necessary. Renewing and refreshing the area addressed educators' voices, who, in their initial interviews, had noted that the outside area needed addressing. The new impetus around the intentions helped articulate the importance of the outside play areas to children; the local authority listened by sending out teams to refresh the area.

A new routine for snack time, focusing on social and independence skills, was introduced. Instead of adults serving the children and policing the eating of milk, cereals, and fruit, snack time was re-envisioned as an interactive, positive, social time where staff and children are together. Smaller utensils, milk jugs, etc. encouraged the children to serve themselves and their peers, and they peeled and chopped fruit. After the snack, children scraped and washed their plates, then left them to drain. This change was crucial for educators as it encapsulated their new intentions.

Two new spaces were created in the RSC to support the widening participation agenda. The first was a designated private space to talk to parents, out of sight of other parents and staff. This answered parents' request for a confidential space. The room had chairs, a table, some toys (as parents often have a child with them), water, tissues, and information leaflets and signposting materials. The managers explained that sometimes a parent would want to talk about an issue and be put off by the constant stream of people past the fully windowed office. Hence, reusing a storeroom as an interview room changed the space and the centre's professional uses.

The second space found through reconfiguration was a sensory area. The staff used resources and imagination to turn a storeroom into a calming sensory room. They aimed to use it with the high number of SEND children using the RSC and to support parents in playing with and safely stimulating their children.

5.3.6 Started to Think about Relational Recovery

5.3.6.1 Open-Door Policy

The first change in relational recovery was when the centre opened its doors and encouraged parents into the classroom. This was a change for some parents who had only ever known a closed-door handover process [3.3.6]. However, for staff, handing over with little face-to-face contact led to quicker, less messy handovers, meaning they could attend to other duties, including tidying up and setting up for the next day. The open-door policy added more emotional labour to staff members, with some enjoying the partnership role more than others.

5.3.6.2 Mini Movers

Inviting parents to sessions in the RSC, such as 'mini movers', added to relational recovery and supported child-adult dyad communication and play. The local sports centre sent staff over to organise a 20-minute physical activity session. Children threw beanbags into hoops, ran around a miniature obstacle course, played corners and were supported in each game by a parent. I observed a fun, interactive session that built playful bonds with children and their carers. Such activities encouraged physical development and promoted family access to the sports centre close to the RSC [3.3.3].

5.3.6.3 Reading Together

Every week, parents were invited to a library session to pick a book for their child to take home. They also listened to a story together, which gave the worker a chance to model storytelling using no-word books, books with words, props, and talking about the story. All skills were especially practical for parents, especially new parents, and research shows that letting children know you and your parent/carer are working together respectfully supports the child's stability and engagement. For example, the OECD (2022) found children who had stories read to them daily by their parents/carers were 20% more likely to achieve age-related literacy benchmarks.

One manager noted that sharing ways of reading with parents had received good feedback, and one parent shared that they had avoided reading together until seeing it done (modelled) as part of the spiral curriculum offer. Reading stories together, as part of collection routines.

5.3.6.4 Shared Curriculum

The shared curriculum came from the discussion of intentions. The staff found opportunities to learn about the children and incorporated home-learning ideas into the centre. For example, I observed a large box that was used to build a Metro train with the children, as many of them used the Metro to visit other family members. One educator brought in tickets collected from the station to support the role-play. "*I visit me nana*," one child told me. The children acted out the parts of the driver, as well as people getting on and off the train, using the tickets to enter. This highlighted role-playing real life and making sense of their worlds with others.

5.3.7 Capacity-Building

5.3.7.1 *They Started Interagency SEND Meetings with Parents.*

I observed a session with parents and staff, as well as a visiting parent, that discussed pathways for parents whose children may require additional support due to their educational needs. The session was informative, supportive, and friendly. The parents were able to ask questions, and at times, centre staff also asked questions in an advocational way.

5.3.7.2 *First Aid Courses: Organised by Parents*

After one of the focus meetings, parents discussed safety more broadly and decided they would benefit from a first aid course to keep their children safe. They spoke to the

manager about a room, booked a day, arranged a first aider (one recommended by me), and attended a training session. The session covered childhood injuries, illnesses and CPR. While it was not full certification, it was an awareness-building session. One parent said, *“I have always been scared that I wouldn’t know what to do, I feel more confident now”*, whereas another on hearing that CPR may break bones, *“I couldn’t do it ... but I could tell someone else (and laughed)”*. Another shared with the group her concerns about her child not seeing danger, *“I am always worried he is going to hurt himself; I only don’t worry when he’s her, but then I stay in the building!”* (P).

5.3.8 They Discussed and Prepared for an Ofsted Inspection.

Each time I visited, the team were preparing for an Ofsted inspection and working through evidence files, using their intention document and ways of working that they shared with parents and workers on a working information board. Some of our inquiry catalyst meetings discussed inspection. it was good to see that some of them appeared in the Ofsted report of June 2023, including:

- incisive supervision sessions, with mentoring and training opportunities.
- the implementation of focused activities (SLCN).
- meaningful partnerships with parents – suggesting parents are inspired to give their children rich experiences outside of nursery.
- the newly established snack routines were also commented on as allowing children to be independent for their ages.
- The in-depth knowledge of SEND and the support given were also seen as very good
- The way the curriculum was organised
- And importantly, supporting sense of security and wellbeing noted.

The RSN centre received **Outstanding** and had moved from Good.

5.4 Analysis of Findings Part Two

Implementation yielded visible, multidimensional shifts. Policy and intent were consolidated via a SR intentions document and renewed transition dialogues with receiving schools. Practice changes included small-group speech and language sessions, environmental redesign, social snack routines to scaffold independence and

family-facing spaces. These changes support inclusive practice and language development discussed by scholars who call for a sociocultural constructivist communication pedagogy as an interactive process that incorporates modelling, shared book experiences, dialogue and collaborative engagement, adding that learning is an active participatory process in which children co-construct meaning with others (Vygotsky, 1978; Roggoff, 1990; Bruner, 1983; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Trussler & Robinson, 2015). Through role-play, group activities and other forms of joint participation, children drew on the language tools and cultural practices of peers and adults, which laid the foundations of their language development.

Relational recovery was supported by open-door practice, mini movers, weekly library sessions, modelling reading and place-based walks that reconnected families to local socio-historical spaces. Capacity was strengthened through interagency SEND meetings and parent-initiated first-aid training, thereby aligning advocacy with practical support. Across these actions, stakeholders converged on an equity-centred, context-responsive model of SR. Yet, divergences persisted around school tick-list performativity, workforce emotional labour, resource fragility and guarding against paternalism.

5.4.1 Points of Convergence

Stakeholders converged on a place-based, relational model of readiness, as reflected in targeted communication support, environmental redesign, and renewed school partnerships. Managers moved beyond the expected *“we work towards the EYFS standards”* to co-create a readiness intention document that pulled together EYFS, community and individual needs, therefore showing a shared purpose and direction for the centre. Additionally, staff agreed to start discussions about transition procedures, *“we probably won't get exactly what we would like but...”* This evidences a move towards relational recovery post-COVID and advocates for the nursery children. Staff and parents aligned on the importance of visiting schools and developing relationships: *“we never got to look around the school.”*

Early years educators implemented small-group speech and language sessions (Trussler & Robinson, 2015) in response to perceived post-COVID communication needs. The children well received this action. Staff framed their work as part of a national strategy

“across the county and country”. Moreover, the managers and educators made multiple changes to the classrooms and outdoor classrooms and introduced social snack routines that became self-service. These changes aligned around a common theme of increased engagement, independence and social competence.

Furthermore, stakeholders collectively reframed open-door practice as essential to rebuilding trust following the pandemic, while acknowledging that closed-door handovers had become *“quicker”* and perhaps more convenient, but less relational. Similarly, shared experiences that built community included mini movers and the library story session. These were valued as visible enactments of partnership and modelling, *“the worker... the model, talk about the story”*. Another strategy, the walking excursion, reintroduced families to local spaces, prompting discovery, *“I’ve never been here before... I didn’t know this was here,”* and offered informal learning moments, *“can you see the ducks?”*

Structured SEND dialogue observed in the interagency SEND meetings with parents was experienced as *“informative, supportive, realistic and friendly”* and *“I feel I can ask questions and not feel stupid here.”* This demonstrated a commitment to inclusive planning and advocacy and empowered parents to ask what they wanted.

5.4.2 Points of Divergence

Expectations seemed to differ between schools and the RSC’s values. Staff expressed dissatisfaction with schools that reduced transition to tick-lists; *“this school doesn’t want to meet with us ...they just want us to fill out a form.”* This appeared to contrast with the centre’s relational philosophy that prioritised children’s interests.

5.4.2.1 Resource Dependence & Workforce Capacity

While there was agreement on what “good” looks like, execution revealed uneven capacity in creating the new spaces (parent room and sensory room), as it required engagement from all staff and additional resourcing. Thus, raising questions about sustainability, especially if investment in the centre fluctuates.

Additionally, staff noted that open-door practice increased the emotional load and reduced time to redress the room. Speaking to parents was seen as beneficial for some

practitioners, while burdensome for others, therefore highlighting divergence around comfort and capacity.

There appeared to be differences regarding perceived risks as parental safety perceptions were tested: *“there’s normally rats down there”*, whereas educators promoted social learning opportunities. Moreover, there seemed to be a risk of tokenism without embedding changes. For example, while the new sensory provision and SEND processes indicated inclusion, divergences caution that impact may be reduced if practices are not sustained. Alongside the risk of tokenism, there seemed a risk of a saviour narrative. Instances such as the immediate offer to *“get you a cooker”* without first eliciting the parents’ solution illustrate how well-intended help could slide into dependency framing and reduce agency. This is supported by parental deference vs stakeholder authority: a parent’s admission, *“I didn’t want to say no because they are the experts,”* revealed a power struggle that potentially suppressed alternative preferences (Hayward, 2000).

Boundary tensions at classroom doors, such as *“he’ll never settle if he knows you are outside the door”* (EYE) followed by the parents’ resigned statement *“she’s probably right”* (P), display subtle pressure of expert judgement in live practice, even when parental emotion is present (child was crying).

5.4.3 Section Summary

Convergences cluster around relational recovery, context-responsive pedagogy and proactive partnerships. Stakeholders coalesced to translate post-COVID needs into concrete actions, including speech and language support, open-doors practice, library sessions, refreshed outdoor areas, intentional transitions and the definition of local readiness intentions (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Bruner, 1983; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Trussler & Robinson, 2015). In contrast, divergences revealed the work still to do, including negotiating uneven school practices, managing emotional labour and workload within the centre, resisting deficit framings, inadvertent paternalism and sustaining inclusion beyond symbolic spaces through consistent resourcing and CPD.

5.5 Findings Part Two Discussion

The introduction characterised SR as conceptually muddled, an empty signifier marked by mixed messages on aims, responsibilities and success criteria. It is regarded as a contested space, with different start points ranging from birth to reception year (Snow, 2006; Britto, 2012). Positioning readiness locally is consistent with the literature reviews' ecological stance, which situates development within nested systems and relational dynamics rather than fixed child traits (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000).

Points of convergence: the findings above align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem and with Illeris' (2007) learning triangle, where interaction, incentive, and content are all activated in meaningful ways for children and families. Illeris's model (ibid) supports the view that learning is multi-dimensional, involving content (cognitive), incentive (emotional), and interaction (social) (Illeris, 2007). When benchmarks ignore these dimensions, they risk undermining learning. The stakeholders in the study focused on the microsystem using Illeris' (2007) triangle.

Whereas Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem analysis shows that a lack of synergy between settings can disrupt continuity and relational trust (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Policy recommendations emerging from this tension include co-designing transition frameworks and readiness models that reflect local contexts and stakeholder input (DFE, 2025; UNICEF, 2024).

5.5.1 Local Intent

Managers moved beyond generic EYFS compliance to co-create a school-readiness intentions document following whole-team discussions, intending to support a post-COVID cohort. Staff also began proactively engaging with receiving schools. These moves align with Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem emphasis on strengthening connections between settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and with UNICEF's triadic model that frames readiness as child, school, family and community readiness (UNICEF, 2012)

Staff implemented small group speech and language sessions in response to post-COVID communication needs. Concurrently, the learning environment was also

reconfigured, with smaller group areas, refreshed outside areas, and social snack routines. These actions activate Illeris' (2007) learning dimensions by enriching cognitive content via structured language tasks, emotional incentive via confidence and autonomy, and social interaction via collaborative routines. They reflect EYFS prime areas and a play-based, holistic orientation consistent with Birth to 5 Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021)

5.5.2 Relational Recovery

Re-opening classroom doors is portrayed as essential for rebuilding trust, even though closed doors are quicker. Mini Movers and Library Book Club sessions involved workers “modelling” and strengthening joint participation and parental involvement. Place-based excursions foster discovery and dialogical learning, with such activities corresponding to ecosystem levels (Lenhof et al., 2022) and relational pedagogy (Page, 2018).

Inclusive capacity-building was a recurring theme across interagency SEND meetings that parents described as “informative and friendly”. This atmosphere of openness supports a shared commitment to inclusive planning and echoes UNICEF's (2016) position that effective provision relies on supportive values. Broader literature also highlights the importance of multi-agency working for children with additional needs. It is a key principle in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), which attributes responsive provision and coordinating structures to better outcomes (Hall & Woolley, 2020; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory reinforces coordination across systems (including health, education and homes) and highlights the strength in cooperation rather than isolation (Tudge et al., 2009).

Taken together, these patterns suggest that the RSC is moving towards a more relational and place-responsive model of SR. This shift was enacted through targeted communication, intentional environment design and proactive partnership building, all mechanisms that distribute responsibility across systems/stakeholders rather than locating it with just the child and family. This approach resonates with literature on shared responsibility and transition (UNICEF, 2012; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and supports Illeris' (2007) and Vygotsky's (1978) earlier view that learning or change emerges

through careful interactions between individuals and environments. Furthermore, contemporary work on inclusive childhood systems (Needham & Ulkuer, 2020; UNESCO, 2024) highlights that sustainable readiness is achieved when settings cultivate collaborative cultures and adapt to the needs of their communities.

5.5.3 Performativity, Power and Uneven Capacity

Stakeholders observed differences across schools; for example, “*some schools do brilliant transition work,*” and others “*just want... a form*”. These observations echo this study's critique of neoliberal performativity, which judges practice by tick-lists and standardised displays (Ball, 2003; Robert-Holmes, 2012). This narrows pedagogy and disrupts relational continuity. Power relations also surfaced at the classroom door: “he’ll never settle if he knows you are outside the door”. These power tensions resonate with methodological reflections on positionality and relational ethics (Noddings, 2013) and with this study's recognition that insider research must continually interrogate power and its use. Such interrogation acknowledges that the capacity to participate may be curtailed, therefore minimising choices (Hayward, 2000; Foucault, 1980; Sikes & Goodson, 2003).

5.5.4 Paternalism and Agency

Well-intentioned help occasionally slides into dependency framing, “I will get you one, don’t you worry,” and “I did not want to say anything as they are the experts”. The literature cautions against deficit narratives and tokenistic inclusion (Early Years Coalition, 2021; Draper et al., 2024). Readiness work must avoid reproducing saviour dynamics and sustain co-production.

5.5.5 Sustainability and Resources

New spaces and resource reconfiguration raised questions about sustainability if investment in the centre fluctuates. Therefore, this aligns with OECD (2023) policy findings on funding workforce and capacity and further suggests that structural conditions translate into relational opportunities and consistent practice (Sousa & Moss, 2022).

5.5.6 Methodology

This study's emergent case-study design and participatory orientation explain how changes were identified, co-designed and iteratively refined. After the interim report, my stance consciously shifted to inquiry catalyst, observing new practices, facilitating dialogue and reflection, and offering ideas, then withdrawing to preserve participant autonomy and ownership. This study's constructivist epistemology and interpretivist approach prioritised sense-making and co-construction of meaning (Crotty, 1998; Weber, 1947; Mead, 1962). The chosen case study (Yin, 2009) and participatory research principles (Pain & Francis, 2003; Rose, 1997) legitimise multiple strategies, including interviews, focus groups, observation, and inquiry-led reflection, within a design responsive to community conditions and post-COVID constraints.

5.6 Chapter Conclusion

The implementation phase covered in this chapter shows that locally specified, co-produced change can translate contested SR discourses into workable routines, spaces, and partnerships that enhance engagement, independence, communication, and trust. My inquiry catalyst stance embedded in a participatory case study enabled iterative sense-making and real-time adaptation while protecting stakeholder stories and ownership.

5.6.1 Key Points to Note

Policy & Intent:

- A living intentions document clarified local purposes and practices, moving beyond generic EYFS compliance toward place-responsive pedagogy and mesosystemic alignment.
- Transition dialogues replaced unilateral tick lists with negotiated expectations, partial gains were achieved, and conditions for future frameworks were established.

Practice & Environment:

- Small group phonological awareness sessions addressed post-COVID communication needs, activating Illeris (2007) content and interaction dimensions.

- Smaller learning areas and refashioned outdoor classrooms increased observable engagement.
- Family spaces widened participation and supported high incidence SEND

Relational Recovery:

- Open door practice re-humanised daily exchanges but increased emotional labour; newly instigated activities visibly rebuilt trust, belonging and dialogue.

Capacity & Inclusion:

- Interagency SEND meetings were explicitly experienced as informative, supportive, realistic, and friendly, consolidating inclusive planning and parental advocacy.
- Parent-led first aid signalled agency and co-production, strengthening safety literacy and confidence.

Divergences/Tensions:

- School performativity clashed with the centre's relational philosophy
- Workforce capacity and resource dependence identified sustainability risks; open door policies increased time requirements and increased emotional labour load unevenly across staff.

Paternalism/tokenism risks require guardrails.

5.6.2 Conditions for Sustainability

Protected relational time, budget lines for environmental refresh, and SEND interagency time, joint CPD, supervision for emotional labour and practice audits to prevent drift into performativity or paternalism

Overall, the change stories within this chapter indicate that convergences clustered around relational recovery, place-based pedagogy and inclusive partnerships. Meanwhile, divergences exposed pressures of performativity, emotional labour, paternalism and resource fragility. Taken together, the RSC is reframing readiness as a locally defined, equity-centred construct in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) nested systems and UNICEF's (2012) shared responsibility model. Sustaining this trajectory will

depend on consolidating intent, protecting relational capacity, resourcing inclusion and strengthening links with schools.

Moving on, the conclusion synthesises Parts One and Part Two, drawing the thesis to a close by answering the research questions explicitly, consolidating the operational definition of local SR and stating the contributions to knowledge, practice and methodology. It integrates the tension mapping in Part One with the stories of change in Part Two, demonstrating how an inquiry catalyst within a participatory case study can respecify readiness as a relational, equity-centred, place-responsive and practice-based practice. The conclusion sets out SMART goals, clarifies trustworthiness and limitations, names sustainability conditions and proposes future research. Essentially, it shows how readiness becomes a byproduct of working collectively toward a Ready Child/Authentic Child embedded in family, community and culture rather than just a tick-list to be met.

Chapter Six: The Conclusion: From School Ready to Ready Child

6.1. Introduction

Chapter Six concludes this research by exploring the influences and perspectives on school readiness (SR) across a multi-agency nursery centre in the northeast (RSC). This chapter addresses the research questions [1.6] by highlighting key contributions to theory and practice while situating the findings within the post-pandemic SR landscape [2.2]. The research was carried out in two parts: first, an exploration of how School Readiness was understood and enacted by multiple stakeholders in one north east nursery centre, noting points of convergence and divergence. [Chapter Four], followed by an examination of how the study's stakeholders shaped and enacted SR for the benefit of the children and community using RSC [Chapter Five]. This concluding chapter aims to bring together perceptions of SR, address opposing tensions across differing perspectives and highlight the strategies used to support an inclusive and purposeful SR pedagogy [Chapter 2]. This Chapter synthesises the two empirical research phases of this study, showing how SR is negotiated locally and what that means for theory, practice and policy in a post-pandemic landscape.

6.2 Discussion: Drawing the Two Parts Together

Chapters One and Two explored how SR is recognised locally [1.3] and how it is understood and presented in existing literature (Peckham, 2017; Grimmer, 2018; Bradbury, 2025; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Kay, 2024). The literature review locates SR through historical [Table 1], geographical [2.3.4] and theoretical perspectives [2.6] to understand historical developments, identify where theories, policies and practices have evolved or been borrowed and examine how they translate into SR work at the RSC. This translatable stance, aligned with an interpretative case study design [3.1; 3.2.3], is justified by the theoretical, contextual and methodological discussions [2.6; 2.7; 2.8; 3.2.3; and summarised in 2.9; 3.2.4]. I do not claim direct transferability and recognise that the emergent participatory methods may not transfer to other RSCs. However, I claim

that this study's empirical findings offer contributory propositions about readiness that may provide insights and relevance to practitioners in other settings by focusing on local needs, collaborative practices and the importance of relational strategies, thereby developing innovative readiness.

These initiatives emerged from an in-depth case study analysis of 17 stakeholder interviews and 24 months of observations [Chapter Four], complemented by an action-oriented inquiry method [3.2.6] co-designed with stakeholders to support SR recovery and change over time [Chapter Five]. Chapter Three details the methods employed [3.3] and underscores Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as key to this study's success. To support the findings, a thematic summary table [Appendix 1] was developed to capture key insights from this study's initial phase.

The emerging themes supported the observation, reflection and inquiry of the second part [see Table 11].

- Mechanical Child | Functional skills, compliance, operational efficiency
- Holistic Child | Emotional security, social development, curiosity
- Political Child | Policy influences, funding, accountability pressures
- Family & Power | Hierarchies, saviour narratives, co-dependency
- Practice & Pedagogy | Relational approaches, systemic constraints

Three strands integrate the study's theoretical framework, themes gravitate toward Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems, and that stories of change align with Illeris' (2007) learning framework.

6.3 Three Strands That Fuse Case Study Findings and Theory

6.3.1 Strand 1: SR is Distributed Across Systems and is Ecological and Negotiated

Readiness is distributed across various systems, including home, setting, school, and community, rather than residing solely within the child. This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model [2.1] and subsequent relational and transactional theories [2.1 –2.3.2.4]. Global and national frameworks also describe SR as a multilayered

construct influenced by family, school and community ecologies, most notably UNICEF's tripartite model [2.2.1]. This aligns with Ongoren's (2021) and Kays (2024) emphasis on the importance of home and school environments, as well as Hall et al.'s (2000) account of community influence. Findings from Chapters Four [4] and Five [5.5] demonstrate that concerns regarding SR are enacted across all systems, structurally, culturally and in daily routines, therefore showing how SR discourse becomes embedded and difficult to disentangle [Chapter 2]. SR negotiation begins with children's proximal processes, a theme developed empirically in Chapter 5 and theoretically through Illeris' (2007) dimensions of content, interaction and incentive [1.5, 5.5]. This theoretical strand reinforces SR as a co-constructed practice.

6.3.2 Strand 2: SR is an Identity-Centred Rather than Skills Checklist-Driven

Stakeholders emphasised belonging, communication, curiosity, independence and trust as foundations for continuity and well-being. This contrasts sharply with the reductive, data-driven metrics critiqued in the literature [2.3.3; 2.9], where GLD, RBA and other outcome-based tools are shown to narrow SR into performative indicators (Kay, 2022; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). The broader view presented here aligns with critiques of maturationist and checklist-driven definitions [2.21] and with the socio-ecological argument for recognising SR as multiple, diverse and situated (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Neaum, 2016). This study has emphasised that all perspectives have a place in SR but should be balanced and, importantly, respond authentically to the identity needs of the children (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2019; Page, 2018) in the community they serve.

6.3.3 Strand 3: SR is Co-Produced through Participatory Local Design

Children, families, educators, health visitors and primary teachers collaboratively co-produced a local operational definition and a living intentions document [5.5.1], reflecting the partnership-based conceptualisations [see 2.6.6–2.8.1] outlining practices such as small-group learning and transition dialogues, evidenced participation as crucial in designing practical examples of SR, therefore aligning with research on relational continuity and ready schools [2.8.2].

6.4. Research Questions Answered

RQ1. What is the Stakeholders' Concept of School Readiness in One NE Centre?

In this case, SR is understood as a relational, place-responsive capability that is co-produced by children, families, educators, schools and services [see Figure 10], rather than a checklist of pre-pandemic skills. It privileges belonging, communication, curiosity, independence and trust, which is enacted through co-designed routines and environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Illeris, 2007; Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). One manager explained it as *“encouraging children to put their own coats on, to wash hands after going to the toilet, to scrape their boards, and pour their own milk”*; an idea supported by the introduction of new snack routines [4.3.1.1]. Across the dataset, SR was framed through the foundational qualities of belonging, communication, curiosity, independence and trust, as noted by the Ofsted inspection [5.3.3], rather than predefined pre-pandemic skill sets. These emphases align with identity-centred and holistic SR models discussed [2.3.1; 2.7] and contrast with reductive GLD/RBA and wider datafication practices. One example came from an HV who stated, *“we have checks we have to do”* [4.3.3]. Kay (2022) critiqued this stance in the literature, suggesting that GLD may narrow the curriculum [2.3; 2.9]. SR remains complex and contested, framed both mechanically and holistically, and mediated by policy and resource conditions [4.3.1-4.3.5].

RQ2. How Far Does the NE Centre Practise SR as Defined by Current Government Policy?

Findings indicate that the NE Centre is fully compliant with statutory requirements, including the EYFS framework (Early Years Coalition, 2021) mandated Health Visitor Checks. For example, one HV noted that *“new birth, one yr old and two yr old checks shaped their assessment timelines”*, reflecting the embedding of national pathways into local practice [4.3.3.1]. Other protocols included safeguarding, early intervention pathways and developing transition continuity [2.2.2; 2.5; 2.6; 2.7]. In this sense, the centre meets the procedural and regulatory definitions of SR embedded within Government policy. The RSC extends these expectations by interpreting statutory duties through a relational, ecological and community-responsive lens, echoing calls for SR to

be understood as contextual and co-constructed rather than checklist-driven [[2.9].

A divergent perspective emerged when a local authority manager discussed the relationship between funding pressures and outcomes, suggesting that some relational work is not about what is best for the family but about meeting funding thresholds and keeping the centre running [4.3.3.2]. This was not the only instance of policy pressure as both managers and teachers asserted that Ofsted and baseline assessment [4.3.3.1 -3] were difficult and discussed them in terms of a narrowing process that leads to readiness to quantifiable, child-level outcomes, shaped by GLD, the RBA, [2.3.3;2.9] and wider accountability pressures, something that Biesta warned about as far back as 2010 [2.5].

Taken together, the centre meets policy requirements but does not stop at minimal compliance [4.3.2; 4.3.3; 4.3.5]. Instead, it operationalises SR in ways that are locally meaningful, relationally grounded and ecologically aligned, noting that this often happens in difficult circumstances [2.2.3-2.3.5]. Therefore, responding to concerns about narrowing effects of data definitions (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017) [2.2.2]

RQ3. When are SR Strategies Enacted and Which Strategies are Used?

Micro (child–adult–peer; adult-to-adult): At the microsystem level, SR was enacted through everyday relational routines that supported children's agency, social communication and confidence [4.3.1.-4.3.5 & 5.3.2]. Social snacks fostered turn-taking, independence and social talk, while dialogic reading enabled expressive language, self-expression, and narrative development. Outdoor play further allowed risk-taking and problem-solving (North Shields for OFSTED, n.d.), and targeted Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) sessions strengthened vocabulary and narrative structure (Bercow, 2008). These findings reflect the literature's emphasis on proximal processes and development [2.3.4] and align with Illeris's (2007) dimensions of content, interaction and incentive [2.2.2 – 2.7], demonstrating how learning is activated through meaningful social participation and thoughtful environments.

Meso (home – setting – school): As shown in Chapter Five, open-door routines, community walks, SEND reviews with parents, shared sensory spaces and co-authored child interest profiles cultivated non-tokenistic partnerships that respected cultural

identity and family knowledge. This reflects evidence offered by the FSWs who introduced home learning packs as part of COVID adaptations [4.3.5.1], using the justification from research that co-production and interagency alignment strengthen children's continuity of experience and reduces reintegration discontinuities [Chapter 2].

Macro (policy accountability, local socio economics): While practice sits within GLD/RBA accountability and post-pandemic recovery, stakeholders of the RSC resisted schoolification by co-producing a local operational definition and a living intentions document [6.4.2]. They shared daily thoughts and introduced a spiral curriculum including a parent and child physical movement session. One manager discussed the confidence children got from joining in “*gives children something to aim for*” [4.3.2.1] that prioritises relational outcomes alongside skills. This evidence parallels critiques of datafication and performativity, instead calling for activities that support cultural diversity and are needed (Neaum, 2016), as highlighted in the literature review [2.3, 4, 2.3.5], and further meets the demand for locally grounded, equity-centred SR models [2.7; 2.9].

Across levels, enactment at the RSC reflects an ecological, negotiated model in which SR is distributed across systems, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecology and Rimm–Kaufman & Pianta's (2000) transition as relationship continuity [2.2]. The centre operationalises SR by aligning relational routines with families and the local community, thereby broadening what “counts” beyond GLD/RBA measures [Chapter 2].

Findings showed that SR strategies are enacted continuously from birth to five phases (B25M p.44-48) by professional roles and woven into everyday relational routines. This sequencing, as shown below, reflects the ecological and developmental emphasis on timing and proximal processing [2.6]:

- From 1- 2 years: Health Visitors lead statutory developmental checks, initiating early intervention pathways [2.6].
- From 2 – 4 years: Educators embed SR through relational pedagogy and a spiral curriculum, consistent with socio-ecological and sociocultural accounts of learning [2.2.3; 2.3.3 – 2.6.1].
- From 4 – 6 years: transition planning with receiving schools, child interest profiles, SEND

reviews and joint meetings support continuity across systems [2.6.5; 2.6.6; 2.7.3 - 2.9].

Across these stages, strategies align coherently with Illeris' (2007) learning dimensions [2.2]. These learning dimensions and evidence from the study are listed below:

Content: dialogic reading, phonological awareness, vocabulary and narrative groups, and routine–embedded self-care.

Interaction: open door practice, peer helping, community walks, two-way information sharing with schools, and shared decision -making with families.

Incentive: belonging-oriented routines, predictable patterns, child voice in transitions, and community celebrations.

A key insight is that SR is shaped not only by strategies but by the learning environment itself, as this study evidenced that the RSC became strengthened post-COVID through relational consistency and community engagement [5.5.2], echoing ecological learning integrations.

In summary, SR strategies are developmentally sequenced, relationally grounded and curriculum embedded, reflecting Illeris's (2007) integrative model and the broader evidence that readiness emerges from sustained interactions within and across systems [2.7; 2.8; 2.9]

RQ4. How far are strategies equitable (including SEND)

This study identified that the centres' SR strategies included explicit efforts to grow equity, demonstrated through targeted SLCN groups [2.6.5; 2.7.3], accessible daily routines, interagency SEND meetings with parents, and environmental adaptations such as sensory spaces and visual supports [2.7.4]. These practices align with socioecological and inclusive models of readiness that recognise developmental variability and the need for differentiated culturally responsive provision [2.5.1 – 2.5.5]. Evidence shows that equity is fully intended but uneven due to SEND referral bottlenecks, funding outcomes, COVID effects, and school variability [4.3.2; 4.3.5; 4.3.3]. Evidence from a discussion about SEND and its impact on the family showed that one parent discussed anxiety over failing to toilet train due to SEND and framed this in an ashamed and defensive way: “X

would only go to the toilet that way (...) he would not sit on the toilet if he wanted a poo." Therefore, toileting was perceived as a technical challenge rather than an emotional milestone, and while the centre provided support, needs remained unmet [4.2.2].

Additionally, the centre provided parent-friendly meetings, communication passports, and co-authored information sharing, which was observed as consistent with community-level partnership models and co-production frameworks [2.6.1-2.6.9; 2.7.1-2.7.2; 2.7.3].

Although cooperation was not without pitfalls, one parent described her concerns about her child starting school and being immediately classed as *"under a cloud"*, explaining that in a local school most children were on the sunshine (chart). Still, those who could/would not comply were on a cloud, she exclaimed, *"he will always be on a cloud"* (P1), drawing attention to the need for anti-paternalism prompts. Anti-deficit symbols and words, identifying the need for differentiated transition pathways, mirrored the literature's critique of deficit framings and instead called for power-balanced, culturally aware collaboration. Snow (2006) draws attention to inequities when children start school and makes links to socio-economic backgrounds [2.4.1].

Together, these practices reflect the literature's emphasis on relational, ecological and culturally grounded equity work in early years, reinforcing UNICEF's (2012; 2019) and OECD's (2023) focus on inclusive, holistic readiness [2.2.1]. However, despite these strong equity intentions, this study found that resource fragility and time costs threaten sustainability [5.4.2.1]. This pattern echoes wider societal sector concerns about workforce instability, emotional labour and structural pressure [Chapter 2].

RQ5. Who is Involved in School Readiness?

A multi-stakeholder organisation, with sometimes conflicting expectations [4.3.1-4.3.5]. The individuals directly involved in the Ready for School Nursery included Local Authority managers who oversaw governance and ensured adherence to statutory pathways [2.4.2], working alongside RSC managers who established organisational routines across micro and meso systems [2.5; 2.6].

Managers timetabled groups and family sessions and built new open-door routines

following reduced activity in COVID [3.3.6 & 5.3.2], responding to relational practices and research that suggests the benefits of collaboration and routine (EEF, 2021; Demissie & Pearse, 2024; Peterson et al., 2018).

Early years educators are responsible for daily pedagogical activities and implementing proximal processes [2.6–2.6.9]. As evidenced in researcher observations, one manager talked about the Curiosity Approach, a point picked up by Ofsted in its 2023 inspection [4.3.2 & 5.3.1].

Newly appointed dual-role family workers supported home and setting partnerships, aligning with evidence on meso-level collaboration [2.5]. Evidence of this was described by an FSW discussing their role in home learning by creating “*Lots of different activities for families, word searches, colouring in and things for the whole family to do in the home*” [4.3.4]. An activity which, according to a Sure Start review in 2012, reduces structural inequalities and improves long-term outcomes [2.7.3].

RSC users, whether weekly or occasional, included health visitors who performed statutory checks and supported early identification and intervention [2.2.2; 2.5.1], as well as primary teachers collaborating on transition, continuity and school-ready practices [2.6.8; 7.6]. Parents acted as active co-constructors of readiness, reflecting family-centred approaches [2.6.3], while children expressed preferences and interests, supporting notions of child voice and agency. Community partners, such as libraries, sports centres, dietitians and voluntary sector Speech and Language Therapy (SALT), contributed resources and expand ecological support networks [2.6-2.6.9].

RQ6. What should be achieved during the SR stage of education?

Stakeholders across systems identified foundational achievements as a sense of self, a sense of belonging and a sense of community, with communication, confidence, curiosity and independence as cornerstones that scaffold a secure transition into school, as evidenced in the data [4.3.1-4.3.5]. These priorities align with the wider literature, which positions readiness as relational, contextual and identity-centred rather than defined by narrow pre-academic skills lists (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Munnik & Smith, 2019; Needham and Ulkuer, 2020). The literature review further critiqued such

lists as reductive and emphasised the value of socio-emotional, linguistic and relational capabilities [2.6].

According to one Manager, “*being emotionally ready to leave mum is a major thing*”, positioning emotional security as a core readiness outcome [4.4.2.1-2] which was echoed by another, “*children need to feel safe and secure, or they aren't going to be ready to learn*”. The centre promoted safe in alignment with UNICEFs (2012) framework which includes emotional security and key to learning in the future.

Furthermore, the emphasis on belonging, continuity and relational coordination directly reflects SR literature that highlights the importance of reciprocal relationships and cross-alignment in transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

These principles were mirrored in this study’s analysis of transitions, continuity and multi-agency collaboration [2.5.1–2.6.6] and its conclusion that readiness emerges from culturally responsive, partnership-driven processes [2.9].

RQ7. What are the Benefits- to Whom and Why?

This study demonstrates clear benefits of the RSC's readiness approach across children (confidence and identity), families (networks of trust and friendship), settings (assured practices) and schools (efficiency in transition). Yet tensions remain where measurements are increased and ideas of wellbeing reduced [4.3.1-4.3.5].

For children and families, shared learning opportunities, predictable routines and language-rich interactions strengthened security, agency and transition confidence, outcomes associated with positive early trajectories in the literature [2.2.1; 2.7.3]. Shared learning was observed in First Aid sessions [5.3.3], Book Clubs [5.3], and in community walks [5.4.1]

For settings, the model fostered a coherent pedagogy, shared expectations and stronger partnerships that supported the meso–level alignment identified as critical for continuity [2.5.1–2.5.5].

Schools reported reclaimed instructional time and clearer profiles for differentiation from the outset, reflecting the value of high-quality transition processes [2.5.5–2.6.6].

These benefits illustrate why locally grounded, relationally organised SR approaches matter, reinforcing the need for mixed-methods evaluation to address reductive influences of GLD/RBA (Kay, 2022; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017) [2.2; 2.3.3]. Policymakers are therefore urged to invest in policies that include identity and belonging as core educational outcomes, enabling local flexibility so that communities can serve their children.

RQ8. What are the effects of policy on local SR enactments and indicators?

Policy shaped local SR enactments in complex and sometimes ambivalent ways. On one hand, accountability mechanisms drew necessary attention to readiness, placing practice within statutory expectations across the EYFS, health checks and transition processes [4.3.3-4.3.5]. On the other hand, datafication pressures risked constraining pedagogy and narrowing the definition of SR in ways critiqued in the literature [2.2.2; 2.3]. The centre responded by balancing these policy influences with strategic pushback, developing a co-produced intentions document, mixed-methods reviews, and transition profiles that foregrounded relational, contextual, and identity-centred dimensions of readiness. Importantly, creating local indicators and pathways made identity, language interaction, and inclusion auditable without sacrificing contextual sensitivity.

6.5 Contributions

6.5.1 Contribution to Theory

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by reframing SR as a relational, identity-centred and contextually produced construct, moving beyond narrow developmental or skills-based accounts. This responds directly to critiques of checklist-driven readiness in the literature [2.2.; 2.3] and builds on socio-ecological, transactional and sociocultural models [2.4.1; 2.5].

The thesis advances the Ready Child / Authentic Child framework [Figures 18 and 22], challenging the contentious idea that all children need to be school-ready at a specific age and in a linear, managed way. It argues that SR, as a phrase, suggests that all early years education is school facing. This subsequently reduces early years education to a narrow, compliant space.

The study suggests that a shift in language could address the tension surrounding the word and its connotations. Hence, the “Ready Child Framework” offers a solution to the tension between formal schooling and play-based education, emphasising that we support individual children to be ready for life in stages and in ways that make sense to the individual, their circumstances, and their abilities. Therefore, this reframing of the school-ready child reconceptualises childhood. Directly responding to Chapter One Key messages “lack of definition” and “need for a new model” by replacing deficit compliance narratives with “identity-centred, relational concepts of readiness.

Integrating Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems and Illeris’s (2007) learning dimensions [2.1;2.2] to foreground belonging, agency and communication as central to readiness; while recognising that elements of Mechanical, Holistic, and Political framings will be necessary, I claim that we take from them the parts that support us seeing children individually and celebrating authenticity it all its forms.

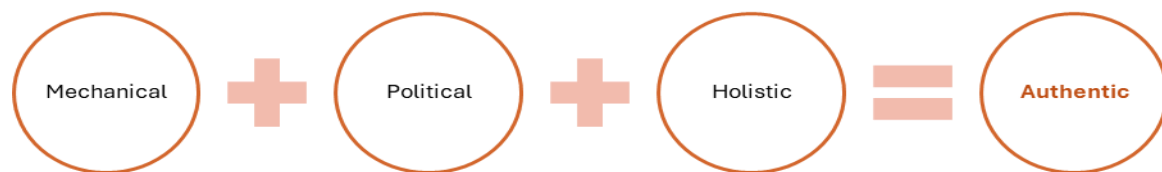


Figure 22 Ready Child Framework Elements

6.5.2 Contribution to Practice

Relational recovery and relational pedagogy emerged as central threads across the changes enacted practically in the RSC. These approaches are strongly supported across policy research and practice. Care-based pedagogies align with Noddings' (2013) ethics of care, highlighting the observed attentiveness, relational responsibility, and reciprocal encounters between stakeholders. At a systemic level, the OECD (2023) positions relational practices as essential for societal balance and longer-term economic resilience, arguing that early relationships underpin later participation, wellbeing and productivity, a position echoed by UNICEF (2012; 2019). Pedagogically, relational approaches have long been advocated within early childhood traditions (Vygotsky, 1978;

Bruner, 1983), with Sousa and Moss (2022) identifying relational and dialogic co-constructive encounters as foundational to meaningful learning and play.

From a developmental perspective, Bronfenbrenner & Morris's (2006) bioecological model highlights how relational processes are the engines of development. These proximal interactions accumulate over time to shape children's competencies and identity (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000) emphasise the centrality of durable relationships and high-quality transition arrangements in supporting children's continuity across systems, agreeing with the EYFS and Grimmer (2018).

Framed through this body of work, the changes that emerged in the centre, although seemingly small when viewed individually, represent a significant collective shift. The small stories of change described and observed show how micro interactions, when enacted across settings, staffing groups, and routines, produce a cumulative movement toward a relational, equitable, child-centred conception of SR. Together these shifts reaffirm that SR does not need to be achieved through large structural reforms or through meeting all developmental milestones at once. Rather, it is realised through incremental, relationally grounded steps, co-generated with the people who live and work in the system.

This study shows that when professionals engage as inquiry catalysts, using open change conversations and co-design, they create conditions in which relational recovery becomes a way of working. The centre's changes illustrate how inquiry can become embedded in everyday practice, enabling staff, children and families to co-produce transformative practice. The following table summarises the notable changes observed.

Notable Changes in the Centre	
Focus Area	Summary of Change / Action
Speech and Language	The Centre introduced small-group phonological awareness sessions (story-linked tasks for sound recognition, vocabulary, and recall). Children engaged readily; staff targeted attendance for those with delayed communication while keeping sessions inclusive for all.
Environment and Engagement	Classrooms were reconfigured into smaller family-sized areas; outdoor classrooms were refreshed (safety checks, new points of interest). Leuven's observations indicated a visible shift toward higher engagement levels during play; staff described discernible positive energy in the rooms.
Snack and Routine	Snack time was redesigned with child self-service (small jugs/utensils), peer helping, and plate washing, embedding independence, turn-taking, and social talk in a social and non-compliant manner.
Family Facing Spaces	Two new rooms were created: a confidential parent space for timely support and signposting, and a sensory room for high-incidence SEND needs and parent-child co-play.
SEND Collaboration	Regular interagency SEND meetings with parents were experienced as informative, supportive, realistic, and friendly, strengthening advocacy and shared planning.

Table 13 Notable Changes in the RSC

6.5.3 Contribution to Policy

The study contributes to policy by showing how national readiness agendas (House of Lords Library, 2025; Ofsted, 2014; DfE EYFS, 2025) acknowledge that not all children can be ready at the same age or stage, as attested to by policy critiques in the literature regarding the “measurement turn” and the narrowing effects of performativity [2.2.2; 2.5]. The findings align with OECD process quality and UNICEF’s three-pillar model [Figure 7], both of which frame readiness as situated within relational and community systems [2.3.2]. These relational practices, including codesigned planning, open-door routines, community walks, shared spaces, and strengthened transitions [5.5.2], reflect evidence on meso-level partnership and micro-level co-production [2.5.1-2.5.3; 2.7].

This study further advances the case for evaluation reform, arguing for mixed method approaches that capture belonging, identity, and continuity alongside attainment, reinforcing arguments in the review that current tools do not fully capture the relational or contextual dimensions of SR [2.3.3; 2.9]. Moreover, it highlights the need for bottom-up localised policies and, importantly, acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for SR across the sector nor nationally.

The following section offers recommendations that address all systems likely to influence stakeholders’ lives and children’s learning; the recommendations are presented for policy, settings, professionals, families, and children.

6.6. Recommendations: Actionable Steps for Policy, Settings, Professionals, Families and Children.

Building on this study’s contributions to theory, practice, and policy, the findings point to structural and systemic factors that shape and reshape SR nationally, locally, and within organisations. This points to action at multiple levels to strengthen sustainability, reduce inequality and support collaborative work among stakeholders. The following recommendations are aimed at policymakers, families, educators and children to support meaningful change.

6.6.1 National (Policy)

1. A national transitions framework aligns with literature on continuity and meso system coherence, in response to the fragmentation of transition pathways, and the anxiety this produced for families. [2.6.5–2.6.]

An action plan for better transitions might include the following:

- One joint child visit
- A co-completed Child interests'/play preferences and strengths profile
- A two-way staff meeting (nursery – school/Senco)
- Post-entry checks week 4 and 12 with success indicators.

(Indicators: 80% parent satisfaction; 75% teachers/ early years educators report smooth transition; 10% of transitions handled by tick list only 90 % completion of child interests and play preferences profiles completed).

2. Reframe school ready → Ready Child, reflecting critiques of deficit and performativity framing [Chapter 2] and aligning with UNICEF/OECD models [2.2.2]. Moving towards a life-ready model which recognises authentic ability, personality and contributions to society, without exception.

3. Fund culturally responsive SLCN initiatives, reflecting evidence on language inequality [2.6]. Provide training, space and time for national and local initiatives to be delivered and importantly time for them to embed.

4. Recognise workforce expertise and emotional labour, reflecting concerns raised in the literature [2.6–2.9]. More than recognise, provide space for relational practice, reflective thinking and insightful intervention.

6.6.2 Local (for Settings)

1. Co-produced intentions documents [5.5.1] reflect partnership and co-production evidence [2.6]. Supporting localised implementation of national guidance, while valuing and integrating local amenities, cultural traditions, and familial need.

2. Protect time for open door (RQ3) routines and planning, echoing findings on relational continuity [2.6]. Open door is not about the door; it is about the relationships: open to offering

advice, supporting need, referring to others, safeguarding children. Open door is a social service that requires additional protected time.

3. Audit practice to avoid drift into checklist logic, responding to critiques of performativity [2.3.3]. New innovations and change can initially meet with resistance; regular audits- asking “how are we doing”- and a curiosity approach to audits support gradual and sustainable change.

4. Scale spiral pedagogy consistent with ecological models of learning [2.5;2.6]. By including parents, in movers, reading, library and walking sessions, the centre created a spiral curriculum that supported families to play and learn together. Avoiding hierarchical narratives and tokenism, the spiral curriculum was co-constructed, including all stakeholders (note: the children have a lot to say).

6.6.3 For Professionals

1. Cross-sector CPD reflects the literature on multi-agency work and shared goals [2.6.6–2.6.73]. This also addresses relational and cooperative reporting and interventions, the small group SLCN groups reduce the referral rate and threshold in the area.

2. Inquiry Catalyst cycles align with collaborative, improvement-focused practice [2.7]. A transferable and useable model of audit and improvement which supports autonomy, growth and respects diverse ways of working.

3. Mixed methods evaluation follows recommendations for capturing relational outcomes [2.3.2; 2.9]. Children’s sense of self-identity and belonging offer an alternative yet parallel foundation for being a ready child or SR. As such evaluations of SR should include more than quantitative measure.

6.6.4 For Families

1. Partnership and co-design reflect family-centred approaches [2.6.3–2.7.3]. See spiral curriculum and open-door work; both value the input of parents, where multi-agency and joint CPD offer opportunities for system alignment.

2. Anti-paternalism protocols align with critiques of deficit models; training and addressing deficit language and framing is required to ensure children’s foundational learning is not shaped as starting behind, needing more, being disadvantaged. Sense of self is mirrored by sense of

how we are seen and heard [2.5.3; 2.6.4].

6.6.5 For Children

1. Familiar adults, predictable routines and child-led exploration reflect evidence on transitions, emotional security and proximal processes [2.6.8–2.6.9]. Children voiced a hope to recognise play in their new setting, a transition pathway should include a known adult, a specific number of meeting times and recognisable play to ensure a comfortable transfer between settings.

2. Child voice aligns with socio-cultural learning theories and the importance of agency [2.6]. Talking and drawing echoed the High Scope plan, do, and review approach, and should become normal practice, valuing children's contributions to learning and the environment.

6.7. Limitations

This study carries several inherent limitations. As an intrinsic case [3.2.3] with a convenience sample, its boundaries reflect the purposeful, context-specific nature of case study methodology, and therefore its transferability is analytical rather than statistical (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). These limits arise not from methodological weakness but from a purposeful design that prioritised depth over breadth and aligned well with the ecological framing outlined in section 2.4. The study was further shaped by COVID-19 disruptions, which constrained access, sequencing, and continuity mirroring wider sector-level instability and workforce pressures identified in the literature [2.1; 2.2.3; 2.5.2]. Finally, the interpretivist stance carried inevitable researcher positionality risks, which the study actively mitigated through reflexive journaling, triangulation, member checking, and planned withdrawal, consistent with relational and interpretive principles [2.2.2; 2.9].

6.8 Chapter Conclusion: The Value of the Experience and My Words

This three-year study explored how SR is understood and enacted in one multi-agency centre in the Northeast of England. I began with curiosity rather than compliance, questioning whether contemporary framings of SR genuinely fit the children, families and communities we serve today. I challenged path dependency (Sousa & Moss, 2022) rather than reproducing inherited scripts, what we might do now, in this place, with these

children, given today's realities. My positionality started as a reluctant researcher, steeped in practice, a pracademic; it ended with an excitement to recognise a position as an early (or late due to age) career researcher, with something to add to discussions about SR.

6.8.1 Frameworks Reconceptualised

Using Bronfenbrenner and Illeris's reconceptualised framework [Figure 9] allowed me to address SR across systems and deepen my understanding of it. SR is a vast topic that permeates cultures, policies, structures, teams, families and impacts children's present and future lives. Because it is all invasive, it is difficult to grapple with; as such, the framework offered the required clarity.

6.8.2 Intersection, Prominence and Local Vision

Thematical analysis [Figure 12; Sections 4.3.1–4.3.5] confirmed SR as an integral and interconnected construct, as stakeholders discussed influences, while pedagogy, practice, and family are prominent in discussions, politics, and structural barriers, non-least that the recruitment and retention crisis, were important, whereas ideas of SR and child development were intersecting and at times oppositional, making distinctions between holistic or mechanical difficult and at times blurred. This analysis led stakeholders to step back from wider influencing factors and address them locally.

6.8.3 School Readiness is a Contested Construct

This study confirms what the wider literature has long cautioned regarding SR. It is contested, historically, geographically and politically. Definitions shift across time and place; what counts as readiness in one system or era becomes problematic in another (Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp, 1995; UNICEF, 2012; Early Years Coalition, 2021). Attempts to stabilise SR as a set of fixed competencies have emerged in national standards and inspection regimes, and they flatten both developmental and cultural diversity (Meisels, 1998; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Wood, 2013).

Recent iterations that foreground compliance to set standards and narrow indicators too easily become a performativity list (Ball, 2003; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017), creating a culture that mistakes measurability for meaning. This is a concern as

we already marginalise children by ability, gender and economics and adding a reductive SR regime will only increase inequity while calling itself readiness (Ofsted 2014; DfE 2025; OECD, 2023; Grimmer, 2018).

6.8.4 Policy and Practice Borrowing: More of the Same

The study recognises the historical and geographical variations of SR and cautions against accelerating the trend of policy and practice borrowing imported frameworks and borrowed checklists, when lifted out of their culture, suggests what works elsewhere must work here regardless of a community's needs [1.13; 2.3.3; 2.5.3]. My argument is not against learning from others; it is against uncritical transplantation. A locally thoughtful, needs-led approach is simpler and more effective by listening to the children, families and practitioners and designing SR with them in mind.

6.8.5 What This Study Shows Can Be Done

This study identified factors that challenge the linear, compliance-first SR and demonstrated that a place-based participatory approach can transform contested policy into everyday relational practices that build belonging and confidence. Working as an inquiry catalyst, using change conversations and cooperative design, the centre enacted a series of small stories of change, which, taken together, altered culture.

Finally, if we only react to history, we will reproduce it (and call it something else). If we only borrow from elsewhere, we will forget who we are. If we only follow policy, we will enact someone else's story. But if we attend to the children in front of us, in this place with these families, we will write a different future, one built through small relational steps that accumulate into profound change. This is SR worth doing.

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Appendix 1. Whole Data Set Thematic Table

Data set thematic table – themes without full context – note some themes could fit into more than one category – but were only added to one.				
Home learning (5) parents learning supporting problems Home routines Environment and routines	Emotions (13) – anxiety/worry/and development. Not worried Emotional regulation Emotional readiness Kindness Confidence Separation anxiety Attachment Separation Emotional intelligence PSED	Resources (staffing) (7) Resource for role Resources: to include celebrations Resourcing, staffing, training, and digital tools Resourcing and staffing Resourcing maintenance and capacity Staff change management Time Poor	Pedagogy (10) Baby development Child activity Practice and pedagogy Pedagogy Classroom pedagogy Environmental enabling learning Child development Environmental enabling learning	Parent Partnership (10) Engagement Spaces Engagement Interventions Sessions Community activity. Working with Parents Parent/carer confidence and trust Communication and partnership Non-compliant parents
Transition (8) Transition and school relationships Transition preparation Transition in alignment with school Child in new environment School versus centre Expectations.	Multi-agency (7) work: Cross-agency and speech and language Early Help Interventions	SR as academic (10) Early literacy Reading Independence Speech and language Boundaries and behaviours	SR as function (10) Functional skills Self-Care Readiness as skills Skills Practical skills Toileting Self-care Rules and Boundaries	Family (9) Family First Family engagement Family hardship Family vulnerability Family trust Family and responsibility Whole family approach,
Local policy. Systems) Environmental safety/risk management Safety awareness and risk Staffing safety and quality of care Risk awareness /Vulnerability	Relational Practice (4) Relational Practice/informal networks/- Early relationship	Assessing (10) Evaluation and progress Evaluation and outcomes Evaluation and what works Statutory checks Evaluation and evidence Evaluation and paperwork	Play (5) Outdoor Play Curiosity led play Access to play Outside play	Interventions (8) Home routines Intervention Interventions and SEND Interventions working Interventions through home
Community (4) Transience – moving families Our community Health promotion and community links Community activity	Training (2) Staff roles, and professional learning Future Child (1) Expectations (1) Cheese Sandwiches (1)	Interventions (6) Home routines Intervention Interventions and SEND Interventions working Interventions through home	Healthy lifestyles (2) Screen time and safety Social care processes over (carer decision making (1) SR as a definition (2) SR definition	Parents Learning (4) Parents learning together Educating the parents
Professional identity Professional identity and resources Dual role	Social readiness (5) Socialisation Being social Social skills – sharing	Approaches (4) Participatory Collaborative approach Researcher stance and reflexivity Ethics, consent, and inclusion	COVID (12) COVID Impacts	Stakeholder set up and governance (1)

Appendix 2: Mechanical Child

Mechanical Child
Description: Across interviews, focus groups, observations and journal entries, a dominant understanding of SR emerged that positioned children as needing to demonstrate a set of mechanical, functional and highly observable skills before being considered “ready” for school. This theme, what I term the Mechanical child, captures how readiness is constructed as a checklist of behaviours and tasks to be performed independently, often with little consideration of developmental variability, relational context, or the systems that shape a child’s life.
Associated themes and examples taken from the thematic table: In coding, the words connected with Mechanical child include: • School readiness skills/rules and boundaries /reading • School readiness skills, including baby and child development • Practical school readiness • Independence • Socialisation • Child self-care • Independence, routines • Toileting and self-care • Home school routines and structures • Confidence (ready to cope) As a theme in the first coding, it was addressed 158 times It transferred to the Full data set thematic block 17 times Examples from stakeholder interviews included: “They need to be able to go to the toilet themselves... but not all children will, because of SEND” Parent forum “The resources supported the children to pour and serve themselves, “taken from a researcher’s observation. “<u>really</u> important for parents to know what the signs are” - HV

Appendix 3. Holistic Child Thematic Overview

Holistic Child
Description: The holistic child foregrounds children as complex, relational beings whose development cannot be meaningfully reduced to discrete competencies. Rather than viewing learning as a linear accumulation of skills, the holistic lens suggests that children's meaning-making emerges through interactions with people, places, spaces, routines, materials, and cultural expectations. Children's curiosity is seen as a driver for learning, thus requiring environments for exploration, co-construction, and imaginative engagement. A need for responsive adults who create spaces where children feel safe to participate, take risks and express themselves.
Associated themes and examples taken from the full data set thematic table: In coding the words connected to Holistic Child Included: • Play/ Curiosity led play • Outdoor play • Sense of self and self-representation • Emotions • Emotional development • Social-emotional readiness and separation • Social skills – sharing and kindness • Children's emotional intelligence • Child development • Confidence in a new environment (also listed in Mechanical, where framed as functionality) • Outdoor play and <u>environment</u> access. As a theme in the first coding, it was addressed 55 times It transferred to the full data set 19 times Examples of stakeholder views include. <u>"a school</u> has a chimney, a door and toys," Child 2 <u>"they</u> like to shar a story with other children, just the way we do" EYE 4 <u>"learning</u> new independent skills "<u>EYE</u> 1

Appendix 4. Political Child

Political Child
Description: Across interviews, focus groups, observations and journal entries, the political child acknowledges that children's early experiences are shaped by structural forces that extend far beyond the microsystem of the setting. This lens recognises children as citizens living within political, economic, and institutional systems that influence what is possible for them, their families, and the stakeholders who support them. COVID-19, austerity, staffing shortages, policy shifts, accountability regimes, and resource constraints each reshape the conditions of children's daily lives. From this perspective, "school readiness" is not just a child attribute; it is a socio-political construct that reflects inequities and expectations. It highlights how children may experience transitions and expectations differently depending on their socioeconomic position, cultural identity, and access to systemic support.
Associated themes and examples taken from the thematic table: In coding and thematic analysis, the words associated with the political child included. • COVID, COVID-19, COVID-19 Impacts, COVID response, COVID era gaps. • Resourcing, staffing, training, paperwork and digital tools, resourcing and staffing, resourcing and maintenance and capacity • Resources and resources for celebrations • Local policy, system contexts, stakeholder setup and governance • School versus centre expectations, transition alignment with schools • Evaluation and progression, evaluation and progress, evaluation and outcomes, evaluation and progress made • Statutory checks • Professional identity/professional identity and resources • Social care processes over carer decision making, Vulnerability and context transient • School readiness framing • Methodological framing As a theme in the first coding, it was addressed 172 times It transferred to the full data set thematic coding block 38 times Examples from stakeholder interviews included. "Our outside area needs a bit of attention; a bit of finance would be nice" EYE 5. "The things we want them to do need modelling" Manager 1

Appendix 5. Family and Power

Family and Power Dynamics
Description: The family and power theme centres on the dynamic relationships between families, stakeholders, and systems, recognising that power is constantly negotiated in the everyday interactions that shape children's experiences. Families are not viewed as passive recipients of professional expertise but as partners whose histories, values and circumstances significantly influence children's learning and wellbeing. It foregrounds the strengths, cultural knowledge, and aspirations of families, understanding partnerships to be reciprocal rather than directive. Power is not only seen in decision-making but exists in who has access to information, to advocacy, to resources, to time, to relationships of trust. Family and power highlight relational safety, cooperation and respect.
Associated themes and examples taken from the whole data set thematic table : In coding the words connected with Family and Power Dynamics include • Home learning/parents learning/supporting problems/home learning includes educating parents • Working with parents/parent partnerships/parents' partnerships and engagement/parents and expectations. • Family engagement/family first, family context, vulnerability and trust, family hardship, vulnerability, safeguarding and risk • Whole family approach, whole family approach, responsibility split • Early help, Interventions and multi-agency working, multi-agency working, keyworker • Parent partnership interventions and family sessions, parent partnership – spaces • Communication and partnership/parent carer confidence and trust • Community /health promotion and community links As a theme, at first, coding it was addressed 317 times It transferred to the full data set 30 times Examples from stakeholder interviews include: We do work with a lot of other professionals, quite often supporting parents through that” EYE 5 “I do think that most parents are on board for a partnership – they want the best for their children” EYE 4 “<u>working</u> together with the speech and language therapist and mum... set some goals... simple activities to build anticipation and get a response” EYE 3

Appendix 6. Practice and Pedagogy

Practice and Pedagogy
Description: This lens foregrounds the craft, knowledge, and intentionality that practitioners bring to daily interactions, routines, and learning environments. It frames pedagogy as relational, situated, and responsive, evolving through reflection, training, and collaborative inquiry rather than the delivery of predetermined activities. Play sits at the heart of this theme, but not as an undifferentiated activity; play is understood as a pedagogical tool, a mode of inquiry, a vehicle for communication, and a pathway to independence, creativity and competence. High-quality practice requires educators to be intentional in how they extend children's thinking, provide emotional stability, enable independence and cultivate curiosity. This lens also captures the organisational conditions that shape practice, resources, staffing time, space, and routine assessments, and partnerships. Acknowledging pedagogy is never static.
Associated themes and examples taken from the full data set thematic table: In coding, the words thematically connected to Practice and Pedagogy include: • Practice and Pedagogy/Pedagogy? Practice and Pedagogy (transition) • Intentional adult interaction • Interventions, keyworker, multi-agency SEND, SLCN (practice implementation) • Assessing S and L / speech and language training / early literacy • Environmental resources, outdoor access, and environmental enabling learning • Staff roles, transition and professional learning, staff change management • Participatory collaborative approach, of what works for whom and why (learning systems) In coding, they emerged 400 times. It transferred to the full data set thematic block 13 times. Examples from data include “<u>we</u> knocked the long welcome song on the head—now it’s much shorter, and we move quickly to breakfast and the curious activities.” EYE 3 “<u>mark</u> making is playdough... big movements... not just holding a pencil.” Teacher “They want to share the story with other children just the way that we do, bringing books back every week” EYE 4 “If children don’t feel safe and secure, they aren’t going to be ready to learn” (Manger 1)