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In what ways can a free flow environment enable more opportunities for learning for children aged from birth to four years?

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to determine how a free flow approach can impact upon the learning opportunities for children aged from birth to four years. The action research took place at a thirty-three place day nursery and seven children aged from birth to four years were chosen as respondents. Assessments of the environment/provision have been made using the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS, 2006) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS, 2005). The free flow approach has established continuous provision and therefore more diverse opportunities for learning. The impact on individual respondents has been measured using Laevers (2005) Self-Evaluation Instrument for Care Settings (SICS). The SICS (2005) data demonstrates the positive impact the free flow approach has had on respondents. The free flow approach promotes respondent's autonomy. The multi-aged setting provides a rich group climate in which children of all ages link and support each other.

Keywords: wellbeing, multi-age, enabled environments, free flow, involvement.

**In what ways can a free flow environment
enable more opportunities for learning for
children aged from birth to four years?**

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1. Abstract

The purpose of the research is to determine how a free flow approach can impact upon the learning opportunities for children aged from birth to four years. The action research took place at a thirty-three place day nursery and seven children aged from birth to four years were chosen as respondents. Assessments of the environment/provision have been made using the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS, 2006) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS, 2005). The free flow approach has established continuous provision and therefore more diverse opportunities for learning. The impact on individual respondents has been measured using Laevers (2005) Self-Evaluation Instrument for Care Settings (SICS). The SICS (2005) data demonstrates the positive impact the free flow approach has had on respondents. The free flow approach promotes respondent's autonomy. The multi-aged setting provides a rich group climate in which children of all ages link and support each other.

2. Introduction

The chosen setting is a 33 place day nursery which caters for children aged from four months to four years. The setting operates out of a purpose built building. The building comprises of one room, with access to an enclosed spacious garden. There is a separate nappy changing unit and toilets. The seven areas of learning are represented across the room and garden. A partition gate separates the room in half. There is a small gated off area specifically for pre-school and another area for under twos. The children are segregated into two groups: under twos and over twos. For the first part of the morning the under twos are on the carpeted area and have access to role play, small world, book corner, construction, and mark making areas. The over twos have access to messy activities and free flow between the messy side and garden. After morning snack the areas are packed away and the age groups swap sides. Children sit in their groups at lunch times and the afternoon session follows the same routine. As the Manager of the setting, I will be a participant researcher and therefore applying a first person narrative to this research project. This will be action research, working within the setting.

The decision to implement free flow across the setting came from observing the children's patterns in play and evaluating the environment's effectiveness to meet the individual needs of the children. As part of the setting's quality assurance programme I complete annually the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS, 2006) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS, 2005). Both scales are judged on a scoring system that assesses the environment/provision for the specific age group. High scores are achieved for continuous provision – children having access to all areas of learning at all times.

The term free flow is broad and can be interpreted in many ways. Broken down simply free flow is defined by the offer of the environment. Henderson (2011) describes free flow as an offer of rich play and learning experiences which allow individual children to connect with the learning environment. The free flow approach identifies the importance of allowing children time to develop and refine skills at their own rate and without interruption. Bruce (1991) states a free flow approach can facilitate children's learning by offering an organised environment, accessible to all. High functioning free flow play is achieved by practitioners sensitively choosing moments for direct teaching and offering language to support learning. The overarching principles of the EYFS (2012) complement this approach:

- Unique child: recognising and providing for children's individual needs and interests.
- Enabled environments: providing a learning environment which is accessible for all.
- Positive relationships: interactions with peers and practitioners to facilitate learning.
- Children learn and develop at different rates: allowing children the time to develop and refine skills.

A free flow approach will greatly impact the children at the setting. Children of all ages will have access to the entire provision and therefore more varied opportunities. There will be fewer interruptions to activities and play. Children will be able to free flow in and out of the garden throughout the day. A free flow approach will allow children to follow and build upon their own interests and refine skills. It will also give children the freedom to engage with a wider range of adults and children. Free flow will provide a multi-age environment. Younger children can develop problem solving skills from working alongside older children. Older can take on a leadership role, developing confidence in their own abilities.

A free flow approach will also impact the setting on a professional level. Staff will work with children of all ages – extending their knowledge of child development – as they adapt activities so they are inclusive for all. It will impact upon my own professional development as I lead the team through this transformation and manage any potential risks or issues.

Laevers' (2005) Self-Evaluation Instrument for Care Settings (SICS) will be used to measure the success of the transformation into free flow, providing data for analysis. Involvement levels will demonstrate opportunities for learning. Wellbeing levels will demonstrate the emotional impact on the respondents. Ethically the tool will also ground the project – keeping the children's wellbeing at the forefront. A sample of seven children has been selected for the study as respondents, aged between birth and four years.

I will be using the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) audits to assess the environment and outcomes for children, using these findings to implement a free flow approach. I will then carry out the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) audits again to assess the impact the implementation of free flow has on the environment.

Mays and Pope (1995) evaluated the principal approaches of qualitative research and summarised them into a methodological checklist to assess the quality of the research. I will be adopting Mays and Pope's (1995) checklist to improve the rigor of this qualitative research. This will enable me to apply parameters to the research design/methodology to promote validity of the outcomes of the project. I will be adopting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria to my methodology to ensure the validity of the project.

Before introducing a free flow approach into the setting I will conduct a literature review to develop a greater understanding of the learning processes of a child and in particular how a

child's environment – the provision, practitioners and peers impact upon learning. The key themes/narratives of the research are: How can wellbeing and involvement be defined? What influences wellbeing and involvement in the early years setting? What is the impact of the free flow approach and multi-age groupings?

3. Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to refine the scope of the research. I initially intended to limit the research to English journals and academic texts from the last ten years – to mark the introduction of the EYFS and the concept of enabled environments. However it became apparent when researching Frobel and Montessori and case studies of multi-aged groupings that these models are more commonly practiced in European and international countries. Therefore I widened my search to international publications. I used key words to narrow down my search: wellbeing, enabled environments; and multi-aged classrooms. I avoided the term free flow as the term is too broad and can be perceived in many different ways. Enabled environment gives a more specific definition and therefore more useful texts in relation to this project.

The literature review defines the parameters of the research project. Before introducing a free flow approach into the setting it is important to build a foundation of the learning processes of a child and in particular how a child's environment – the provision, practitioners and peers impact upon learning. The literature review will explore the main themes of the research: How can wellbeing and involvement be defined? What influences wellbeing and involvement in the early years setting? What is the impact of the free flow approach and multi-age groupings?

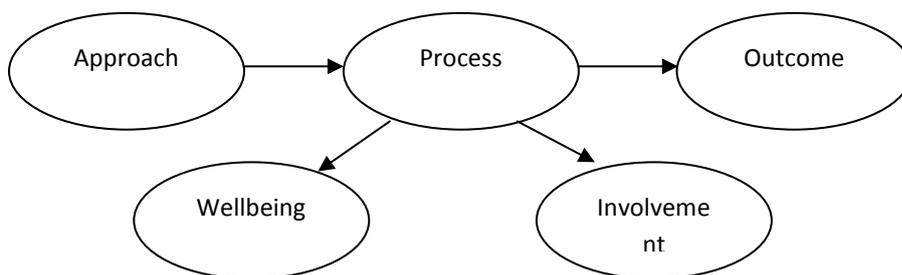
3.1 How can wellbeing and involvement be defined?

Children's wellbeing is key to involvement and therefore learning and development. This is identified in the EYFS (DCFS, 2012) with the introduction of the three prime areas of

learning: personal social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development. A child who has high wellbeing is open and receptive; they can express themselves and describe themselves in positive terms (Gorden, 2008: 7). The EYFS recognises that if children are not confident in their own abilities, able to communicate and connect with the environment and those in it, it is unlikely that children will thrive in other areas of development. Therefore a child's wellbeing should be at the forefront of every decision early years practitioners make.

Laevers (2005) believes that wellbeing and involvement go hand in hand and shape a child's experiences and learning. He called this the process within a child.

Diagram one: Laevers' (2005) process within a child



Laevers (2005: 6)

Diagram one illustrates the process of how a child learns. The approach represents the environment, the provision, and interactions with other children/adults. The process is how the child responds to these factors – which affect the wellbeing and involvement and the overall outcome – the learning. Breaking down this model further – wellbeing and involvement can be defined as the process of how children learn. High levels of wellbeing give a child the confidence to be open and receptive to any given experience. Involvement is what fuels a child's learning. This is identified in the revised EYFS (2012) characteristics of

learning: playing and exploring; active learning; critical and creative thinking. The key themes for the characteristics of learning are engagement, motivation and thinking – this is involvement and it is how children learn. When children have high levels of involvement they are working at the limits of their capacity. They are problem solving and refining skills, linking with others in the environment to achieve a goal. Laevers (2005: 20) states:

“Involvement only occurs between being able to do something and not yet being able to do something.”

Laevers (2005) constructed a scanning tool (SICS) to measure children’s wellbeing and involvement. It is also a self evaluative tool for practitioners to assess the provision/practice. I will use Laevers’ SICS tool to measure the respondents’ wellbeing and involvement throughout the action research process. I will discuss this further in the methodology section.

3.2 What influences wellbeing and involvement in the early years setting?

Laevers’ (2005) process within a child demonstrates that outcome/learning begins with the approach and the environment is a key element. The term enabled environments was introduced by EYFS (DCFS, 2007). The curriculum highlighted the role the environment plays in children’s learning. The curriculum identified the potential learning opportunities of a quality indoor and outdoor environment.

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) has played a fundamental role in both education and early years’ provision. The Montessori approach is founded upon the following underlying principles: auto education; multi-age classrooms; teacher as a guide; the prepared

environment; the child's love of work. These principles underpin the foundations of the free flow approach (Lillard, 2005). Montessori believed that the environment was fundamental in facilitating children's learning and should be accessible to all children. Furniture should be at the children's height and resources should be clearly labelled and available for children. An organised environment gives children the confidence and ability to access their own resources, returning to key interests again and again – extending opportunities for learning. Montessori highlighted the importance of a free flow environment, allowing children to move freely between inside and outside spaces. This approach allows for a holistic learning experience and therefore contributes to the overall learning and wellbeing of children. The Montessori approach identifies a child's capacity for learning is increased the more they can engage with their environment (Standing, 1998).

Montessori believes when a child is engaged – this is the normal state of childhood. Lillard (2005) identifies the adult's role in preparing the environment as key and identifies the possible outcomes for children when the environment is not effectively managed. Lillard (2005: 32) states: "Behaviours such as timid, passive, clingy, withdrawn, aggressive, disruptive, possessive are adaptations children have made in order to accommodate developmental obstacles in the physical and social environment."

Therefore the environment is fundamental in maintaining children's wellbeing and involvement. Practitioners must observe children effectively, offering guidance as needed and maintain and adapt the environment to meet the needs of the different children. Ultimately this allows children to develop the confidence to make mistakes, problem solve and develop the ability to direct their own learning. The Montessori approach has a profound respect for the child and their ability to guide their own learning (Lillard, 2005).

As children grow older they learn new skills by building up layers of reference that they can refer back to. A free flow approach will give children the freedom to connect with the environment and make links – creating more opportunities for learning. This is referred to as the self activity of the child (Bruce, 2012).

A free flow approach will give the setting the unique opportunity to provide children with the same key person throughout each child's nursery experience. This will directly impact upon wellbeing. Roberts (2010) identifies the importance of the role of the key person and believes that each key child should be anchored in the key person's mind. All practitioners must command a sense of authority but also apprenticeship – providing boundaries and guidance, whilst allowing children the time and space to play and develop ideas. Elfer *et al* (2012: 25) states: "What is certain is that children who are enabled to feel safe and secure will be more able to be themselves and to try out new ideas in the various relationships and experiences on offer in the early years setting."

3.3 What is the impact of the free flow approach and multi-age groupings?

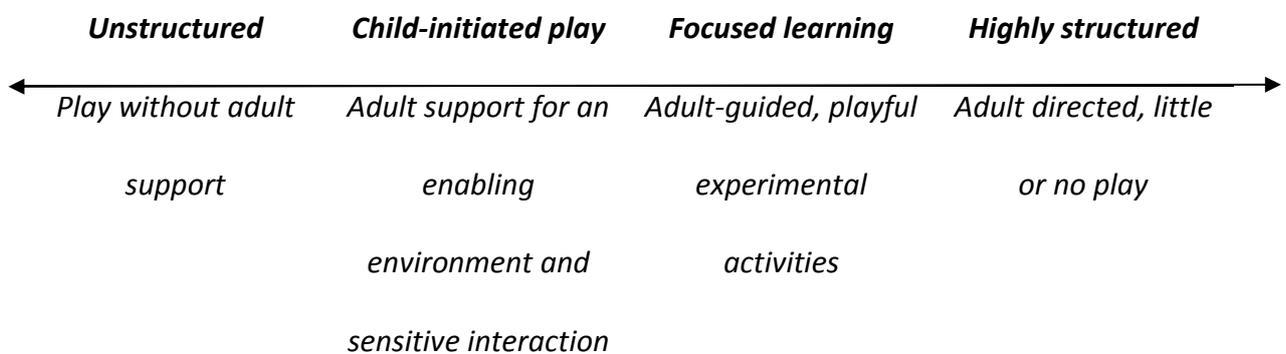
The environment is paramount in an effective multi-aged setting. The environment must accommodate the varied needs and abilities of the group to ensure children are safe and secure. Adams (1997) identifies that simply mixing the age groups does not guarantee an effective learning environment. It is the responsibility of the practitioners to monitor and support the children and also manage the expectations of the children. Katz (1995: 4) identifies the responsibility of the practitioner to ensure younger children are not intimidated by the older and more able children. The practitioner also has the responsibility

to ensure that the younger children are not disrupting play. Practitioners must guide and help children adapt to create suitable roles in play.

The role of the practitioner will be key in implementing a successful free flow environment.

The National Strategies: Early Years (Crown, 2009) sets out guidelines for practitioners to promote best practice. The document outlines a continuum of approaches.

Diagram two: National Strategies continuum of approaches



(Crown, 2009: 5)

This continuum identifies four types of play. The benefit of a free flow environment is that it can offer children the freedom to explore a wider environment with defined areas of learning. However the danger of this is that without effective staff deployment there will be an increase in unstructured play – minimizing children’s opportunities for learning. Staff must closely observe children’s play and provide opportunities to develop the learning by intervening or adapting the environment.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) championed the role of the teacher in early education. Guidance from a more knowledgeable other allows children to perform beyond their perceived capacities (Smidt, 2009). This is known as the zone of proximal development. Children link

with a more knowledgeable other to refine and learn new skills. A free flow approach would increase the opportunity for children to connect with a more knowledgeable other – connecting with older peers as well as practitioners - and therefore increase opportunities for learning. Vygotsky said that in play children create and carry out roles and define rules. They explore what they know and develop self regulation. Doyle (2010: 9) states “Play creates the Zone of Proximal Development of the child. In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour, in play he is, as it were, a head above himself.”

In a typical Montessori setting, children will stay in the same group for three years. In her journal, Haskins (2010) shares her experiences of adopting the Montessori approach and the impact of teaching a multi-aged group. Haskins (2010: 12) states: “I came to know each one on an extraordinary profound level, which enabled me to support them more fully in their own growth and learning. The younger children learned from the older classmates, the older children had the opportunities to be role models.”

Katz (1995: 217) Believes that age is a crude indicator of a child’s abilities. The EYFS (2012) takes this into account. The learning outcomes overlap in ages, taking into account the spectrum of learning and development of children. The curriculum encourages practitioners to value children as individuals and celebrate differences and plan for children’s individual stages of development. Single age groups can put more pressure on young children, to process information and develop skills at the same rate. A multi-age environment can support practitioners in managing their expectations of children and developmental differences (Banks 2012: 70)

A multi-age environment allows children to link with peers to develop and refine skills. Younger children develop problem solving and reasoning skills from having the opportunity to work alongside older children and gain confidence in challenging themselves. Older children learn about responsibility, adapting their play to include younger children, and therefore becoming more confident in their own abilities as they take on a leadership role. Children from an early age build connotations of roles of older and younger children. They look to older children for support. Older children have lower expectations of younger children – taking on more supportive roles – adapting their actions and speech to accommodate. This is influenced by each child's own culture and family. Children can recognise their own progress, developing what Katz (1995: 5) refers to as a community of development. This is what I hope to achieve with the introduction of free flow into the setting.

4. Methodology

This research adopts a naturalist paradigm and a qualitative approach. A naturalist paradigm focuses upon people and how they respond/ behave within a particular setting or experience. A naturalistic approach is subjective and reflective of the respondents involved. The qualitative approach is widely used in the field of social science. A qualitative approach uses in-depth studies of small sample groups and provides results that are descriptive rather than predictive. Robson (1993: 370) describes qualitative data as rich in context. The qualitative approach has a strong theoretical underpinning and provides more descriptive data and a narrative to the outcomes of the project. This will be action research, I will be a participant observer, working on the front line with the staff and children to reflect upon practice and improve the opportunities for learning for the children at the setting. Action research is the most efficient approach for a participant observer to use as it will allow me to evaluate outcomes throughout the process and involve the staff team (MacHaughton and Hughes, 2008). As the setting manager I have the power to input change and develop a reflective culture within the staff team to carry out effective action research.

A sample of seven children has been selected for the study as respondents, aged between birth and four years. The respondents represent the range of ages, genders, abilities and sessions of the children in attendance. (See table three for respondent details). On each day the setting will have six children aged under two, four two-three year olds and twenty-three aged over three years. I have reflected these numbers in the ages of the respondents chosen.

Mays and Pope (1995) devised a checklist to improve the rigor of qualitative research which I have used to underpin this research design. This has enabled me to apply parameters to

the methodology to promote validity of the outcomes of the project. The parameters set out by Mays and Pope (1995) are:

- Define theoretical framework/methods used throughout the research
- Define the context of the research
- Justify the respondents chosen – ensuring diversity/external validity
- Define methodology
- Define procedures for data analysis and theoretical structure
- Justify any quantitative evidence to test qualitative conclusions.
- Reflect upon any data that may modify the analysis/outcome of project
- Provide clear referencing to any source material used within the project.

I will be adopting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria to my methodology to ensure the validity of the project:

- Credibility: defining internal validity
- Transferability: defining external validity
- Dependability: defining reliability
- Confirmability: defining objectivity

4.1 Research Approach and Validity

This research will track the respondents' wellbeing and involvement over a period of five weeks – therefore a qualitative approach is appropriate. A qualitative approach will allow for a more rich and personal study of the respondents (Barbour, 2008). This will be achieved through persistent observations which will record details of the respondents'

activities and interactions with each other, the practitioners and the environment. This will allow me to analyse the group climate and the impact of the free flow approach on children's relationships and wellbeing and involvement.

The naturalist paradigm is often questioned by researchers of the positivist paradigm. Shenton (2004) identifies that a naturalist paradigm cannot address validity/reliability in the same manner as a positivist paradigm. Quantitative data is reliable in the sense that it is transferable and can be projected onto a large scale. However Shenton (2004) argues that qualitative data can be much more rich and constructive in context. For example in this study – quantitative data will be used to log the respondent's wellbeing and involvement levels. However the observations attached to each level recorded will tell us far more about that individual respondent – the how and why.

Mays and Pope (1995) valued the work of qualitative research. However they identified issues of researcher bias when one is a participant observer. As the setting manager I am directly responsible for the setting – and therefore you could argue potentially bias. However the aims of the project demonstrate my ability to identify areas of development within the setting and my reflective practice. Mays and Pope (1995) also identified the limitations of qualitative data in which the volume of results may be too large – or limit the number of respondents used. This may also impact upon the quality of the data analysis and overall outcome of the project. These are all issues that I must overcome before carrying out this project. Seven respondents have been chosen; this equates to approximately twenty percent of the thirty-three place setting. Twenty percent provides a strong sample of the children in attendance (Robson, 1993).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the research's worth was dependent upon its trustworthiness. They identified four principles to determine trustworthiness and validity:

Credibility: Mays and Pope (1995) linked the strength of the research design in supporting the credibility of research. A triangulation of methods will underpin the structure of the research, allowing for trustworthiness of the data. These methods are SICS (2005), ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) and persistent observation of the respondents.

Action research will be a prolonged engagement over a period of four months. The environment will be assessed throughout using the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005). Any changes to be made to the environment as a result will be shared and discussed with the staff team to develop a collaborative approach. Staff will be briefed with progress of the project during monthly staff meetings. Progress of the project will be shared with parents in the monthly newsletter.

Transferability: The study is narrow in scope and its focus is based within the chosen setting. Outcomes from the study will be specific to the setting. However the overarching principles of the free flow approach/wellbeing and involvement can be applied to other settings for a wider impact. The completed project and its outcomes will be shared with the wider company to support the development of free flow across other sites.

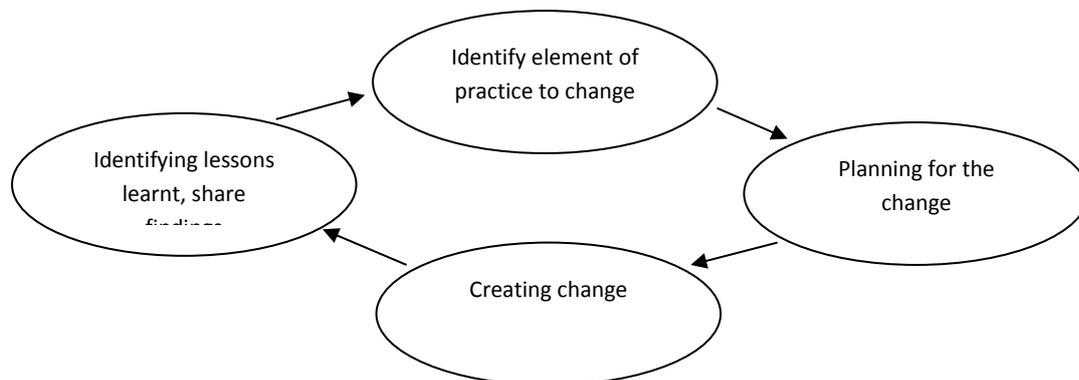
Dependability: The audit tools I am using, Laevers' SICS (2005) tool and the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) audits are universally available. The audit tools have defined parameters which set a discipline across the research which ensures consistency. All respondents are to be observed seven times throughout the day, twice a week for five weeks. I will be carrying out all observations to ensure consistently throughout the project.

Confirmability: This will be achieved through the triangulation of methods. As the manager, I am committed to the development of the setting and strive to provide the best outcomes for children and staff. I can ensure trustworthiness by regular debriefs with the staff team and parents. I will share results of research with the central support office. I have also included details of the project in the settings self evaluation form – which can be viewed at any time by the regulatory body Ofsted.

4.2 Research Methods

During the literature review process, I explored a number of different research approaches. I have chosen the action research model. Mac-Naughton and Hughes (2009) identify the basic process of action research.

Diagram three: Basic process of action research



Mac-Naughton and Hughes (2009: pg 3)

The action research model can be broken down into a basic process: question/preparation – input/change – evaluation/reflection, working as a cycle. It complements the EYFS model of planning – observation – assessment that we use in the setting to meet the needs of

children as it relies upon the practitioner's observations and reflections. It is the most appropriate model as the cycle promotes reflective practice. I will be using the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) scales to assess the environment and outcomes for children, using these findings to implement a free flow approach. I will then carry out the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) scales again to assess the impact that the free flow approach has had on the environment. Senge and Scharmer (2001) recognise that the success of action research is tied with the staff team. The process begins with building a foundation of knowledge and sharing it with the team – taking into account the capacity and limitations of the setting. The final stage is the impact on practice – monitoring and reviewing to achieve goals and to maintain them. It is important that I ensure that the staff team are fully involved in this process. Successful action research creates what Senge and Scharmer (2001) refer to as a learning community.

4.2.1 Research Methods: Laevers' (2005) Self Evaluation Instrument for Care Settings (SICS)

Laevers (2005) developed SICS (2005) with a research team at the Leuven University Belgium. SICS (2005) is a tool for self assessment widely used in early years settings. The SICS (2005) tool assesses the wellbeing and involvement of children. SICS (2005) evaluates the effectiveness of the approach within the setting and links using Laevers' (2005) process within a child model. The SICS tool is made up of the scanning tool; self evaluation tool; and the Leuven scales (appendix 1) which give definitions of wellbeing and involvement on a scale of one (low) to five (high). The SICS (2005) tool has three stages:

- Step One: The assessment of children’s wellbeing and involvement – the scanning. The observer records a short observation detailing the activity of the child and then uses the Leuven scales (2005) to plot the child’s wellbeing and involvement based on that observation – this is the scanning process. Scanning can also be used on individual children throughout the day to measure wellbeing and involvement.

- Step Two: The analysis of the levels recorded. The observer should take into account individual circumstances of the children – culture/background, ability etc. The observer assesses the observations and the influence of the approach – rich environment, group climate, autonomy, organisation, and adult input. The analysis of these five elements will be how I assess the impact of the free flow environment on the respondents.

- Step Three: Step three involves putting into practice any actions to improve children’s wellbeing and involvement. This is a self-evaluative tool for practitioners, driving to improve quality and outcomes for children. I will ensure that I include the staff team in step three of the process – to encourage staff to reflect on their own practice. Ultimately this will support a collaborative approach, driving forward the setting’s development.

SICS (2005) will be used to measure the success of the transformation into free flow, providing data for analysis. The scoring system will be discussed further in the results analysis section. Involvement levels will demonstrate opportunities for learning. Ethically the tool will also ground the project – keeping the children’s wellbeing at the forefront.

4.2.2 Research Methods: Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (2006)/Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (2005)

I will be using ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) to assess the effectiveness of the environment.

ITERS (2006)/ ECERS (2005) are two of a series of four assessment scales that have been tailored to evaluate the overall quality of early childhood settings/programmes. The scales are well established and were first published in 1980. Each assessment scale has been adapted to assess the developmental needs of the specific age group. The foundations of the ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) scales originated in health, development and education. This basis provides a tool which takes a holistic approach when judging outcomes for children (Harms et al, 2006: 1).

ITERS (2006) is used to assess the environment/provision of children aged from birth to thirty months. Harms et al (2006) recognises this is the most vulnerable age and the need for the environment to promote optimal development (Harms et al, 2006: 1). The ITERS (2006) scale takes this into account and assesses how the environment protects children in regards to health and safety. This will be key during the transformation into free flow – making sure the youngest children are safe. The scale identifies criteria for meeting young children's individual routines and assesses interactions between adults and children. The scales identify thirty-nine key elements of the environment for judgement. These elements are organised into seven subsections: space and furnishings; listening and talking; programme structure; activities; personal care routines; interactions; and parents and staff. Harms et al (2006) Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale – Revised, includes a score sheet which I will be using to record the assessment of the environment. I will then transfer the data to a spreadsheet for analysis.

ECERS (2005) scales are used to assess the environment/provision of children aged from twenty-four to sixty months. The scales identify forty-three key elements of the environment for judgement. The scoring definitions reflect upon the developmental stages of the age, applying more emphasis on problem solving and challenge. The forty-three elements are organised into seven subsections: space and furnishings; personal care routines, language and reasoning; activities; interaction; programme structure; and parents and staff. Harms et al (2005) Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Revised, includes a score sheet which I will be using to record the assessment of the environment.

The two scales are identical in format, differing slightly in assessment parameters. The judgements are developmentally appropriate for the specific age groups. Both scales are judged on a scoring system. Each of the elements are scored by selecting a numbered definition which best describes the observation from the setting. Definitions are numbered from one to seven, the higher the score – the higher the quality. Each score is accumulated in each of the seven areas to give an overall judgement. The scoring system will be discussed further in the results analysis section. The scales are the most effective tools for me to use as the score system will provide clear and concise data for analysis. The defining judgements and observations I record from the assessment will provide rich and specific data which I can apply to the provision to improve outcomes for children.

ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) provide reliability and validity. The scales are used worldwide by early year's settings as a quality improvement tool. The assessment is a lengthy process; a minimum of three hours is required to complete all sections of the scale. The scoring system of the scales provides validity and the judgement definitions provide scope for improvement, next steps and reflection.

4.2.3 Research Methods: Persistent Observations

I will be a participant observer, carrying out direct observations on the respondents.

Gorman (2007) identifies the danger of the participant observer influencing the staff team and therefore the outcome of the project. As a participant observer and the manager of the setting, my position may influence the staff team's actions. For this reason the research will focus solely on the outcomes for children. In my role as manager, I am immersed in the day to day running of the setting. My role will allow for an accurate and detailed understanding of the respondents and the setting. These observations will accompany the wellbeing and involvement records to give richer data to analyse on the overall impact free flow has had on the individual respondents. Observations will allow me to record interactions between the children and the environment.

4.3 Ethical principles of the project

An outline of the research design and request for ethical approval has been gained by Birmingham City University Ethics Committee on 29th January 2015. I have adhered to the Birmingham City University ethical framework, taking into account the rights of the respondents and practitioners working in the setting. The methodology and procedure for data collection and analysis has been approved by Birmingham City University Ethics Committee and all procedures have been adhered to. The research project concerns wellbeing and therefore data is of a sensitive nature. Ethics will influence how the data is recorded and shared. The setting name, and names of children and staff will not be

included. The respondents' data will be coded to ensure anonymity. I have chosen to use Gorman's (2007) four principles of bioethics. The principles to attain/uphold are autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. I have chosen to use Gorman's (2007) principles to ensure that my methods are justified and will evaluate the impact on the respondents and staff involved throughout the process.

Permission has been gained by the Managing Director of the setting (appendix 2) and progress will be shared during monthly review meetings. The research design and ethics approval documents have been shared in full. Staff will be welcome to contribute to the action research and provide feedback.

The observation process will not affect the respondent's autonomy – they will be able to make choices of whom/what they want to play with. The parents of the seven respondents chosen have all signed informed consent (appendix 3) and a copy of the ethics approval and research proposal has been shared. The research project has been shared with all parents in the parent newsletter to keep parents informed and welcome feedback. At the end of the project the outcomes will be shared in full at the parent's forum.

Before a free flow approach is introduced a rigorous risk assessment will be carried out across all areas of the nursery to ensure that the environment remains safe for children of all ages. Staff will also need to be briefed on safety and appropriate training will be delivered. Deployment of staff will be key to ensure that all children are supervised appropriately. Older children will also need to understand their responsibilities of keeping the environment safe – and that appropriate tools/resources must be used safely and kept out of reach of the younger children.

5. Results Analysis

The action research process began in February 2015. I met with the staff team to discuss plans to introduce the free flow approach into the setting. I shared the theoretical foundations of the literature review and outlined the aims and outcomes of the project. This was an important process as it allowed staff to voice any concerns and for the team to devise the layout of the room and effective deployment. As in any action research project staff participation is important, particularly if the outcomes of the project are going to have longevity. This collaboration was continued throughout the process and achieved with monthly staff meetings and individual supervision meetings. Staff also had the opportunity to attend external training on enabled environments and SICS (2005). The staff team have shared their enthusiasm with the parents of the setting, discussing the benefits of what we hope to achieve for all children.

5.1 Validity and rigor of results

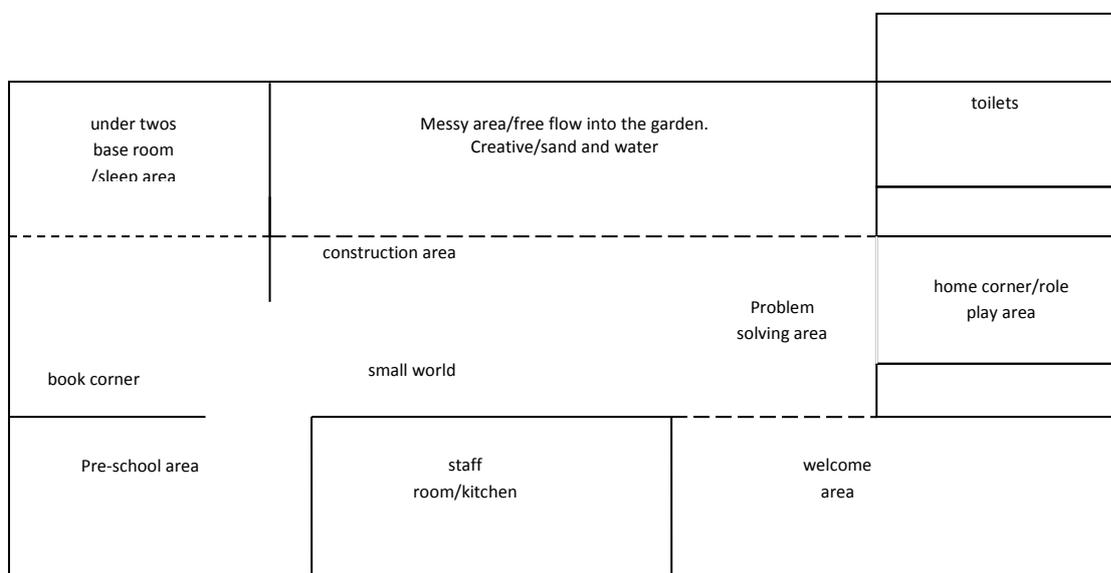
Results will be reported in a narrative format to provide coherence and document the impact the action research has had on the setting and respondents. Yin (1989) used theoretical propositions to not only set the questions of the research but also shape the analysis. The content of the literature review and methodology creates a triangulation of theoretical approaches which will underpin the results analysis. The theoretical framework will also help me to validate any variables in the results. I will analyse the SICS (2005) readings/observations by applying findings back to the process within a child model (Laevers, 2005). The analysis of the approach determines the impact of the process and outcome (learning). The approach (and therefore success of the project) will be assessed by analysing the following:

- Rich environment
- Group climate
- Autonomy
- Organisation
- Adult input

5.2 Analysis of ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005)

On 2nd March 2015, I conducted the initial ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) assessments on the environment. Diagram four illustrates the layout of the setting on 2nd March 2015. The broken lines represent the partition fences that segregate the groups and areas.

Diagram four: Layout of setting 2nd March 2015



Both ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) scales were completed over a period of five hours simultaneously. The intention was to assess the opportunities for children aged from birth

to thirty months and children aged from twenty-four to sixty months and make judgments about what the provision offered both groups throughout the session. The ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) scores were determined by linking observations of the setting and provision to the numbered definitions for each element. Each element has detailed definitions for scores from one to seven which not only help to define where the setting is at but also how to achieve the maximum of seven. Full definitions for the scale of each element are listed in the publications: Harms et al (2006) Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale – Revised and Harms et al (2005) Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Revised. During the assessment I used these publications and the score sheets to record when each definition was observed – the more definitions observed the higher the score for that subsection. The overall judgements for the scoring are: a score of one – two is inadequate; three – four is minimal; five – six is good; seven is excellent (Harms et al, 2005; 2006). To achieve the highest scores observations must be varied and represent a range within each element. Lower scores are given if a particular element is limited or not evident during the observation. Table one lists the overall scores from the 2nd March 2015 assessment. (See Appendix 4 for analysis)

Table one: Results of 2nd March 2015 ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005)

ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) Subsections:	ITERS	ECERS
Space and Furnishings	4.8	4.75
Personal Care Routines	6.5	6.17
Listening and Talking (ITERS)	6	
Language/reasoning (ECERS)		6.25
Activities	4.2	4.8

Interaction	6	6.2
Program Structure	4.75	4.5
Parents and Staff	6.68	6.68
Total Average Score	5.57	5.64

The results show a total average score of 5.57 for ITERS (2006) and 5.64 ECERS (2005) which gives the setting an overall judgement of good. However scores for space and furnishings; activities; and program structure all received a minimal judgement. The setting failed to gain the maximum score of seven because the provision was not diverse enough throughout the day. The results demonstrate that the division of the provision and age groups impacts upon the opportunities for children’s learning by restricting continuous provision. The setting scored a minimal judgement for activities because the division of the age groups meant that only half of the provision was accessible to children at one time. There were limited resources for imaginative play throughout the day – nothing in the garden or messy side. Messy/creative activities were restricted to the messy area – so only available for half the session. These elements of provision should be available throughout the session as children experiment with imaginative play to create meaning and develop layers of reference (Bruce, 2011).

The structure of the day also impacted upon the scores. Children’s play was constantly interrupted throughout the session. The division of the provision also limited the opportunities for children to transport resources into other areas to extend play ideas, reducing opportunities for autonomy (Laevers, 2005). The division also dictates the amount of time children spend in the garden. Several children in the under two’s group were

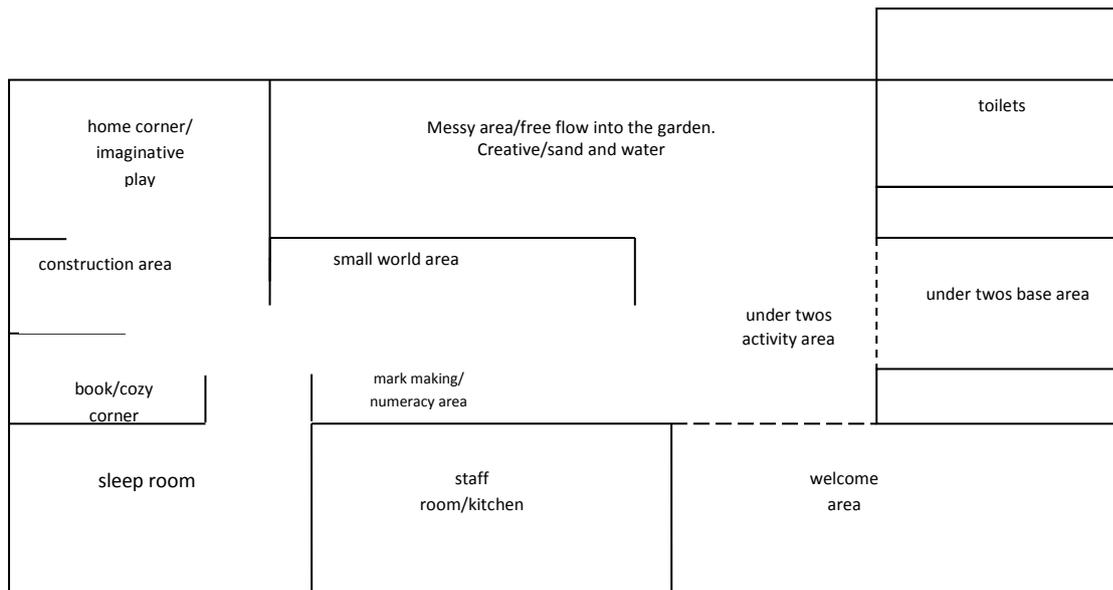
sleeping during their allotted time in the garden and missed out due to the lack of flexibility in the routine.

The ITERS (2006) scale scored lower for language as the division of the age groups limited opportunities for the older children to model language to the youngest children. Due to the layout of the room the designated pre-school/under two base rooms were not accessible for half of the session and therefore not utilising all spaces effectively. Therefore children missed opportunities to access age appropriate resources/challenges throughout the session.

The scores for interaction, listening and talking/language and reasoning both scored good judgements. Staff were observed facilitating and extending children's learning and modelling language. The group climate was positive, children displayed high levels of interactions within their peer groups.

The results of the March 2nd 2015 ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) scales were shared with the team and plans were put into place to implement a free flow approach into the setting. The observations/scores from the scales identified areas of development and priorities for improvement. Together the staff team transformed the environment – removing the partition fences and creating zones for the different areas of learning. Diagram five illustrates the changes made to the environment:

Diagram five: Layout of setting 6th April 2015



The decision was made to remove the pre-school base room and use the resources to enhance other areas of provision – making them accessible to all. The sleep room was moved into a more secluded area to help children rest. The second ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) assessment was carried out on 6th April 2015. Repeating the process using the same judgements and parameters allowed me to clearly define the impact of the free flow approach on the environment. (See Appendix 5 for analysis)

Table Two: Results of 2nd March 2015 and 6th April 2015 ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005)

	ITERS			ECERS		
	2/3/15	6/4/15	Impact	2/3/15	6/4/15	Impact
Space and Furnishings	4.8	6.6	2.2	4.75	6.75	2
Personal Care Routines	6.5	7	1.5	6.17	7.00	0.5
Listening and Talking (ITERS)	6	7	1			
Language/reasoning (ECERS)				6.25	7.00	0.75

Activities	4.2	6	1.8	4.8	6.3	1.5
Interaction	6	7	1	6.2	7	0.8
Program Structure	4.75	7	2.25	4.5	6.75	2.25
Parents and Staff	6.68	6.83	0	6.68	6.83	0
Total Average Score	5.57	6.77	1.2	5.64	6.80	1.16

The results of 6th April 2015 ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) assessment demonstrates the impact the free flow approach has made on the environment and provision. The setting scored outstanding judgements in personal care routines; listening and talking/language and reasoning; interaction; and programme structure. The setting achieved good judgments in all remaining areas. An average of 1.2 points progress has been made to the overall judgement scores. The free flow approach has meant that all elements of continuous provision are available throughout the sessions. Children were observed transporting resources indoors and out to extend their play, creating Montessori's state of auto education (Lillard, 2005). The multi-aged groupings extended opportunities for more varied interactions between children, again developing opportunities for learning. These themes will be discussed further in the SICS (2005) analysis evidenced by the observations of the respondents.

5.3 Analysis of SICS (2005) approach and individual respondents

SICS (2005) scanning took place for five weeks commencing in April 2015 to assess the impact of the free flow approach on the respondents. The readings provide a time series

analysis. Kiddler (1981) identifies that multiple observations help to rule out threats to validity. Each respondent was observed seven times a day, twice a week. Observations of the respondents took place at random times during the day. Each observation was then assessed using the Leuven scales (Laevers, 2005) which lists definitions of wellbeing and involvement on a scale of one to five. One is extremely low; two is low; three is moderate; four is high; five is extremely high (Laevers, 2005).

A total of fifty-six observations/scans have been recorded for each respondent. The aim of this was to build up an accurate and holistic average of each child’s wellbeing and involvement levels. Extensive readings will consolidate the findings of the research by ruling out rival explanations (Robson, 1993).

I felt it was important to observe/scan the respondents in all aspects of routine and play. This enables me to analyse and reflect upon all elements of the provision and routine, allowing the research to have greater impact. Each scanning is accompanied with an observation describing the activities of the child. The scanning plots the respondent’s wellbeing and involvement levels and the observation provides context for analysis.

Table three: Analysis of SICS (2005) respondent observations (total averages)

Child code	Respondent	Analysis of approach						
		Wellbeing	Involvement	rich environment	Group climate	Autonomy	Organisation	Adult input
Child A	- twenty months, female	4.9	4.3	71.4%	57.1%	53.5%	50%	44.6%

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attends two full days per week, commenced September 2014 - sibling (Child D) attends 							
Child B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - thirteen months, female - attends full time, commenced September 2014 - sibling (Child E) attends - Polish, speaks English as an additional language - she has special educational needs and is not mobile 	4.9	4.4	55.3%	72.9%	25.7%	33.9%	37.5%
Child C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - twenty-five months, female - attends four full days per week, commenced January 2014 	4.9	4.3	57.1%	80.4%	48.2%	55.4%	28.5%
Child D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forty-two months, female - attends two days per week, commenced September 2013 - attends the foundation nursery class at the attached school 	5	4.6	57.1%	88.6%	45.7%	48.5%	20.4%
Child E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fifty-three months, male - attends full time, commenced September 2012 	4.9	4.6	73%	88.8%	50.7%	71.4%	14.3%

	- Polish, speaks English as an additional language.							
Child F	- forty months, male - attends four short days a week, commenced August 2013	4.9	4.5	80.3%	78.6%	66.7%	53.6%	26.8%
Child G	- forty-three months old, male - attends four days per week, commenced February 2013	4.9	4.4	82%	82%	35.7%	42.9%	39.3%
Average score/percentage		4.9	4.4	68%	78.3%	46.6%	51%	30.2%

Table three lists the average readings for the respondents' wellbeing and involvement. The average was calculated from the fifty-six individual readings of each respondent's wellbeing and involvement. What is clear from the results is that respondents of all ages demonstrate high levels of wellbeing within the setting, averaging at 4.9 out of 5. This was consistent across the majority of individual readings also – with only a few readings below 5 due to the activity or behaviour observed by the child. However this is to be expected as human behaviour/emotion fluctuates. I will discuss this in more detail in the analysis of the approach.

Involvement levels were also consistent across the respondents, averaging at 4.4 out of 5. These readings do fluctuate more – depending on the activity of the respondent. For example I felt it was important to measure the wellbeing levels when the respondents arrive at the setting and observe how confident they are leaving their parents and their reactions

to the environment/group climate. These readings provided consistently high results for wellbeing – as all children showed delight in coming into the setting, seeking out friends or their key person or even an activity. However these initial readings often scored a three for involvement – as unless they went straight into an activity – there was not enough evidence to rate higher than moderate (Laevers, 2005). Children would often greet their key worker or a peer or go straight to the breakfast table. At meal times respondents showed high levels of wellbeing, confident to engage in conversations or self serve – again this was not evidence enough to give the highest scores for involvement. This has affected the overall score for involvement. However inclusion of these readings has ensured validity of the project (Mays and Pope 1995). The readings reflect that children are not constantly fully involved – throughout the day there will be times when they seek out others to converse or even rest.

Table three breaks down the analysis of the approach observed during the scanning process. The percentages represent the average influence each element had on the respondent's wellbeing and involvement levels. Percentages were calculated by accumulating the number of times each element was referenced in the analysis of an observation and divided by fifty-six – the total number of times observed. Although the scanning/observations were carried out at random times, the figures give an overall indication of the impact each element had on the respondent's approach to wellbeing and involvement. (Respondent observations referenced in this section can be found in Appendix 6).

5.3.1 Analysis of SICS (2005) approach and individual respondents: rich environment

The provision is strong; this is demonstrated by the results of 6th April 2015 ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005). The free flow approach has opened up the environment and provision for all children and increased opportunities for learning. The areas of learning are defined and clearly labelled, following the Montessori model of the prepared environment (Lillard, 2005). The observations demonstrate the diverse range of provision and activities accessible to the respondents throughout the day. The respondents were also observed frequently taking part in trips to local parks and forests. Respondents showed delight and confidence taking part in trips. For example CE/9/4/15:3, Child E and a group of friends explore the park, they work together to move the roundabout – fast and slow and stop to let children off. Another example is CF/5/5/15:4, Child F is confident to direct the member of staff to the forest school site and describe the different activities.

The environment/offer was referenced in sixty-eight percent of the total SICS (2005) analysis. This demonstrates the impact the free flow approach has had on the children's wellbeing and involvement. Child B is not mobile however she achieved high levels of wellbeing and involvement. Staff position her in a variety of activities/areas where she can engage and thrive. For example CB/16/4/15:2, Child B explores the heuristic play items, linking together different approaches. Later that morning CB/16/4/15:4, Child B is involved in a body painting activity, exploring textures and colours. Her brother Child E wants to play with her and is welcomed into the activity. The other children also involve her in activities and engage with her. For example, CB/13/4/15:2, Child B is sat in the book corner with a group of children. They show her their book and point to the pictures, involving her.

5.3.2 Analysis of SICS (2005) approach and individual respondents: group climate

The group climate had the most significant impact upon children's wellbeing and involvement levels. Seventy-eight percent of the total observations referenced the group climate as an influencing factor on the respondent's wellbeing and involvement levels. The respondents were clearly at ease within the environment and demonstrated high levels of wellbeing. Children have formed friendships and show pleasure in seeking each other out and greeting them on arrival. For example CC/13/4/15:1 Child C has bumped into her friend on the way to nursery and they arrive together – announcing they are here together.

I observed the positive impact of multi-aged groupings and how quickly children adapt their behaviours to meet the needs of those around them. Older children are confident demonstrating skills to support, acting as Vygotsky's more knowledgeable other (Daniels, 2001). Younger children are challenged by the older peers to perform at the edge of their capacity. This was at times facilitated by staff but more often by the respondents themselves. Relationships quickly formed between the oldest and youngest children. Child A and Child G have formed a friendship. Child G seeks out child A to play with and enjoys supporting her and teaching her new skills. A total of seven observations were made of these interactions. For example CG/24/4/15:4 Child G is visiting Child A in the under twos area. He demonstrates to her how to use the musical instruments to alter sounds. Younger children show confidence in linking with older children for support. For example CA/8/4/15:6 Child A is taking part in a cooking activity and struggles to scoop the flour; she looks to Child G for support – he rips the packaging of the flour so she can scoop it out. Another friendship has developed between Child B and Child F which initiated in CB/9/4/15:6 when they sat next to each during rolling snack. Child B enjoyed playing with

Child F's curly hair – which made him laugh. Child F would then always look out for Child B and interact with her. For example CF/13/4/15:4, Child F is playing with the animals in the tent, he notices Child B watching him and asks an adult to bring her over. They play together in the tent with the animals. They have since formed a closer friendship, CF/6/5/15:1, Child F has brought in his favourite rattle from when he was a baby to give to Child B. This has developed another friendship between Child F and Child E who now refer to each other as brothers. Child F runs over to greet Child B and Child E every morning CF/30/4/15:1.

Younger children approach older children's play and are welcomed. For example CA/13/4/15:7, Child A approaches a group of children playing with the puppet stand, they welcome her into their game – asking if she wants to be baby bear. Another example is CD/10/4/15:6 Child D is building sandcastles but allows Child C to join in and help – welcoming her ideas and offering guidance, evidence of an emerging community of development (Katz, 1995: 5).

5.3.3 Analysis of SICS (2005) approach and individual respondents: autonomy

Also apparent in forty-six percent of the observations was autonomy - respondents actively making choices about what/whom they want to play with. Montessori's organised environment enables children to access the resources they need independently (Standing, 1998). Even the younger children show awareness of the structure of the environment. For example CA/20/4/15:1, Child A arrives at nursery and finds her peg picture and sticks it onto a peg. Children show understanding of the concept of free flow. For example

CC/17/4/15:3, Child C sees an adult open the door to the garden – she gets her coat and chooses to play outside. Children transport resources across the indoor and outdoor environment to develop play. For example CE/16/4/15:5, Child E is playing with the dinosaurs indoors, he decides to take them outside and play with them in the herb garden, using the herbs to represent a jungle. The free flow approach allows children to develop ideas/themes independently and in a holistic manner (Bruce, 2012).

I observed staff working in consultation with children – challenging them and helping them to consider their own behaviours (Katz, 1995). For example CG/28/4/15:7 Child G is rolling heavy rubber rings down the slide. The adult encourages him to consider safety and what may happen – which he is able to do. He suggests that the rings are too heavy and they might hurt someone. Another example is CD/13/4/15:4, following a disagreement over a toy, Child A bites Child D – Child D reacts by biting back. Their key worker approaches them and Child D explains what happened. The adult asks questions to help Child D consider what action she could have taken. Child D says that she should tell an adult if her sister takes her toy or bites her. The adult praises her and explains that Child A is younger and she needs to help teach her sister appropriate behaviours. CD/13/4/15:6, later in the day Child A tries to take Child D's toy and Child D tells her key person. The adult praises her and addresses Child A's behaviour. The adult role develops the autonomy of the children and therefore the group climate in general (Doyle, 2010).

5.3.4 Analysis of SICS (2005) approach and individual respondents: organisation

Before the free flow approach was introduced children's opportunities for autonomy was limited due the highly structured routine. The routine has been stripped back. The introduction of rolling snacks and opening up all areas to all children means that children can engage throughout the session without interruption. Children come together for key group time in the morning and afternoon and again for lunch and tea. The approach creates opportunities for Montessori's auto education (Lillard, 2005). Staff also give five minute warnings until a transition in the routine to prepare children and help them to organise their time and finish their activities. The organisation is referenced in fifty-one percent of the observation analysis. This is high considering the adapted routine was only implemented in April 2015 and demonstrates how it is meeting the needs of all children.

The SICS (2005) scanning has also helped to identify issues in the routine and modify accordingly. For example CE/27/4/15:4 and CG/17/4/15:4, children were lining up to wash their hands in large groups. This meant that children were waiting for long periods of time and becoming disruptive. Reflecting upon the analysis, children are now gathered together to take part in interactive rhymes/games and sent in small groups to wash hands, for example CE/8/5/15:6. Children are kept engaged while waiting to wash hands.

5.3.5 Analysis of SICS (2005) approach and individual respondents: Adult input

The adult role, according to the analysis, had the least impact on the children's wellbeing and involvement at thirty percent. This is much lower than the other factors, however the National Strategies: Early Years continuum of approaches (Crown, 2009) identifies the need for a balance between less structured and highly structured play. The thirty percent

represents observed activities facilitated by the adult – it does not take into account all interactions from the adult in child led play. Key group times provide opportunities for highly structured and challenging activities. For example CD/1/5/15:3 the adult supports Child D in writing the letters of her name, using positional language to help her visual and form the letters. Practitioners provide challenge, encouraging children to perform at the edge of their capacity (Smidt, 2009). Games are played in small groups to develop early learning skills. For example CE/16/4/15:2, playing the rocket game, counting loops and using language to describe less and more.

Analysis of individual respondents shows the youngest respondents had higher percentages of adult input – whereas older children generally scored higher for autonomy. Respondents were supported by familiar adults and their individual needs met. For example CA/27/4/15:2, Child A is encouraged to sit on the potty by bringing a doll to sit on the potty next to her. The adult role also provides new experiences for children. For example CD/17/4/15:5 an adult collects Child D from the foundation class at school and takes along her two best friends to surprise her. Child D excitedly introduces them to her teacher. Practitioners are flexible, welcoming all to join in with activities and welcome siblings to sit next to each other at meal times.

The intention was to keep the respondents' wellbeing at the forefront throughout the research. The respondent's wellbeing has scored consistently high throughout the process, averaging at 4.9 out of five. This demonstrates the consideration and sensitivity staff have for the children. As a result the children have adapted and responded positively to the free flow approach.

6. Conclusion

The scope of this research is very specific and the judgements made in the conclusions uniquely apply to the setting. However the narrative of this research illustrates the impact the free flow approach has had on the setting and potentially inspires others to follow.

Triangulation of results has been achieved here through the application of different research methods. This has improved the quality of the data – allowing me to assess the impact on the environment (the offer) and also the impact on individual respondents (the process) (Laevers, 2005). The research has adopted a procedural approach to validity. The use of ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) and SICS (2005) has applied parameters and consistency to the project and has provided reliability to results. It also provides an audit trail/process for another researcher to follow. In conclusion I will apply the findings of the research analysis and theoretical foundations to the original questions.

6.1 How can wellbeing and involvement be defined?

This project has embraced Laevers (2005) process within a child model. Breaking down this model down simply – wellbeing and involvement can be defined as the process of how children learn. Laevers' (2005) work has provided the theoretical foundations of this project. His process within a child model demonstrates not only how children learn – but how their environment/interactions shape their opportunities for learning. Laevers' (2005) work has greatly impacted upon this project and my own personal practice. I will continue to use his SICS (2005) scanning tool within the setting – as a means of quality assurance – focusing upon the children's voice to guide the development of the nursery.

6.2 What influences wellbeing and involvement in the early years setting?

I have used Laevers' (2005) SICS scanning tool to analyse the research results. This project demonstrates not only the influencing factors of wellbeing and involvement – but the impact they have on the respondents. This has been achieved through extensive observations and scanning. Respondents scored an average of 4.9 for wellbeing and 4.4 for involvement. These figures champion the impact of the free flow approach.

The free flow approach has enhanced the offer of the environment. Children have access to a greater range of opportunities and provision. Respondents were observed accessing a range of experiences with confidence. This has been achieved by adopting the Montessori model of the prepared environment (Lillard, 2005). The areas are defined, organised and labelled – accessible for all children. This facilitates children's learning, as they are able to access the resources they need to engage in play. Montessori calls this the auto education of a child. The prepared environment also contributes to children's sense of wellbeing. All respondents scored high for wellbeing, demonstrating their sense of confidence and security within the environment.

Respondents adapted positively to the changes in routine. The introduction of key group times has provided opportunities for highly structured activities in smaller groups.

Respondents demonstrated high levels of involvement during these activities. The routine has been stripped back and children have access to all areas of provision throughout the day. This has greatly impacted upon involvement levels. Respondents were observed in a state of auto education, selecting resources and transporting/adapting them as needed to

shape play. Respondents demonstrated high levels of autonomy, impacting wellbeing as they demonstrate preferences and refine skills at their own rate (Doyle 2010).

Practitioners were observed using a continuum of approaches (Crown, 2009). The practitioners acted as a guide to facilitate opportunities for learning. However practitioners also gave children space and provided tools for children to steer their own learning and experiences. The practitioners' support has been fundamental in the success of this project.

6.3 What is the impact of the free flow approach and multi-age groupings?

The group climate has had the biggest impact upon the respondents' wellbeing and involvement levels. The respondents were clearly at ease within the environment and demonstrated high levels of wellbeing. I observed the positive impact of multi-aged groupings and how quickly respondents adapt their behaviours to meet the needs of those around them. Older respondents are confident demonstrating skills to support, acting as Vygotsky's more knowledgeable other (Doyle, 2010).

I observed practitioners welcoming younger respondents to more complex activities and games – pairing them with an older child. As a result younger children develop focus, learn expectations and are exposed to rich vocabulary. I observed older respondents learn about responsibility and condition their own behaviours. The respondents recognise their own progress when playing alongside younger children. The interactions and friendships that I have observed are the emerging of what Katz (1995: 5) refers to as a community of development.

The result analysis demonstrates the success of the action research and introduction of the free flow approach into the setting. The action research process has greatly impacted upon the success of this project. Providing a cycle that has developed rigor, allowing for reflection throughout the process – from the initial ITERS (2006)/ECERS (2005) assessment to the analysis of the final SICS (2005) data. This will be a process that I will continue to use within the setting. I will use these tools to continue to develop the provision and opportunities for children.

My aim was for the outcomes of this project to have longevity. Children will be able to keep the same key person throughout their experience at the setting. The setting will introduce family key groups – providing continuity of care which will continue to support children's wellbeing. The approach has been embraced positively by children and staff as a result we have changed the culture of the setting.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Laevers' (2005) Wellbeing and Involvement Scales

The table below lists Laevers' (2005) levels of wellbeing used to assess the respondents in this research:

Level	Wellbeing	Examples
1	Extremely low	The child clearly shows signals of discomfort: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• whines, sobs, cries, screams;• looks dejected, sad or frightened, is in panic;• is angry or furious;• shows signs feet, wriggles, throws objects, hurts others;• sucks its thumb, rubs its eyes;• doesn't respond to the environment, avoids contact, withdraws;• hurts him/herself: bangs its head, throws him/herself on the floor.
2	Low	The posture, facial expression and actions indicate that the child does not feel at ease. However, the signals are less explicit than under level 1 or the sense of discomfort is not expressed the whole time.
3	Moderate	The child has a neutral posture. Facial expression and posture show little or no emotion. There are no signals indicating sadness or pleasure, comfort or discomfort.

4	High	The child shows obvious signs of satisfaction (as listed under level 5). However, these signals are not constantly present with the same intensity.
5	Extremely high	<p>During the observation episode, the child enjoys, in fact it feels great:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it looks happy and cheerful, smiles, beams, cries out of fun; • is spontaneous, expressive and is really him/herself; • talks to itself, plays with sounds, hums sings; • is relaxed, does not show any signs of stress or tension; • is open and accessible to the environment; • is lively, full of energy, radiates; • expresses self-confidence and self-assurance.

(Laevers, 2005: 13)

The table below lists Laevers' (2005) levels of involvement used to assess the respondents in this research:

Level	Involvement	Examples
1	Extremely low	<p>The child hardly shows any activity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no concentration: staring, daydreaming; • an absent, passive attitude; • no goal-oriented activity, aimless actions, not producing anything;

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no signs of exploration and interest; • not taking anything in, no mental activity.
2	Low	<p>The child shows some degree of activity but which is often interrupted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited concentration: looks away during the activity, fiddles, dreams; • is easily distracted; • action only leads to limited results.
3	Moderate	<p>The child is busy the whole time, but without real concentration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • routine actions, attention is superficial; • is not absorbed in the activity, activities are short lived; • limited motivation, no real dedication, does not feel challenged; • the child does not gain deep-level experiences; • does not use his/her capabilities to full extent; • the activity does not address the child's imagination.
4	High	<p>There are clear signs of involvement, but these are not always present to their full extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the child is engaged in the activity without interruption; • most of the time there is real concentration, but during some brief moments the attention is more superficial;

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the child feels challenged, there is a certain degree of motivation; • the child's capabilities and its imagination to a certain extent are addressed in the activity.
5	Extremely high	<p>During the episode of observation the child is continuously engaged in the activity and completely absorbed in it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is absolutely focussed, concentrated without interruption; • is highly motivated, feels strongly appealed by the activity, perseveres; • even strong stimuli cannot distract him/her; • is alert, has attention for details, shows precision; • its mental activity and experience are intense; • the child constantly addresses all its capabilities: imagination and mental capacity are in top gear; obviously enjoys being engrossed in the activity.

(Laevers, 2005: 14)

Appendix 2: Copy of letter of consent signed by setting's Managing Director

1/2/15

Dear *****,

Request to carry out action research at *****

I am writing to request permission to carry out action research at the setting. The title of the research is: In what ways can a free flow environment enable more opportunities for learning for children aged birth to four years? The research will take place between March and June and will include:

- Assessment of the environment and provision: *Observe/critique the environment using the ECERS framework. Implement a free flow environment, allowing for more defined areas of learning and adapt to children's patterns in play.*
- What impact does the environment have on children's wellbeing and involvement? *How effectively does the environment meet the needs of the age group? Measure before/after ECERS by following sample group of 7 children aged from 0-4 years (approximately 20% of children attending 33 place nursery). Monitor wellbeing/involvement and learning opportunities of sample group, through tracking observations, and SICS observations.*
- What impact does the integration of the age groups have? Social influences on cognitive behaviours
- How effectively can a free flow environment meet the needs of all of the age group?
- What learning opportunities are to be gained or missed? *Use peer observations to monitor impact of staff interactions having on children's wellbeing and involvement.*
- Critical analysis of data from sample group, use conclusions to develop the environment and outcomes for children.

The purpose of the project is to identify strengths and weaknesses of the free flow provision and further develop practice and the environment. It will also be used as a tool for staff development. I plan to share the outcomes of the project fully with parents and use as part of the nursery's self - evaluation. The name of the nursery, children and staff involved will not used in the final write up of the project.

Please sign below to give consent for this research to take place at *****.

Kind Regards

Appendix 3: Copy of letter of consent signed by respondent's parents

1/2/15

Dear parent,

Request for participation in action research

I am writing to request permission to observe your child as part of action research in the setting. The title of the research project is: In what ways can a free flow environment enable more opportunities for learning for children aged birth to four years? The research will take place between March and June and will focus on:

- What impact does the integration of the age groups have?
- How effectively can a free flow environment meet the needs of all of the age group?
- What learning opportunities are to be gained or missed?
- Critical analysis of data from sample group, use conclusions to develop the environment and outcomes for children.

I am requesting permission to observe your child during this action research. Observations will be linked to wellbeing and involvement and also assess the impact of the free flow environment and multi-age grouping. These observations will enable the setting to measure the impact of the free flow approach on individual children – keeping the children's needs in the forefront.

A free flow approach will mean that children of all ages have access to the entire provision and therefore more varied opportunities. There will be fewer interruptions to activities and play. A free flow approach will allow children to follow and build upon their own interest and refine skills. It will also give children the freedom to engage with a wider range of adults and children. Free flow will provide a multi-age environment. Younger children can develop problem solving skills from working alongside older children. Older can take on a leadership role, developing confidence in their own abilities.

The name of the nursery, children and staff involved will not be used in the final write up of the project. Parents will be kept informed of any changes to the provision and outcomes of the project will be shared in full. Please sign below to give consent for your child's to be observed as part of this research project.

Kind Regards

I give permission for my child _____ to be observed as part of the action research.

Signed: _____ (parent)

Appendix 4: Analysis of ITERS(2006)/ECERS(2005)results 2nd March 2015

Area of Judgement	ITERS (2006) Score	ECERS (2005) Score	Analysis
Space and Furnishings	4.8	4.8	Children have access to the following areas: role play; small world; construction; book corner; ICT; mark making; problem solving; water tray; messy/creative. The provision is divided into two. Under twos are separate from the over twos. The children have access to half the provision for half the session and then swap. Cosy space is not available throughout the day. Garden is not accessible throughout the day. Limited opportunities for free play across all areas.
Personal Care Routines	6.5	6.2	All key information is recorded and shared with parents. Sleep area is within the main room sometimes proving disruptive for children. Staff sit promote healthy attitudes towards food. Safe environment, risk assessments in place. Staff role model to children how to stay safe
Language-Reasoning	6	6.3	Book corner is only available at certain points in the session. The book case is tall and many of the upper shelves cannot be reached by most children. Adults make statements to encourage children to share experiences/meaning. Adults demonstrate knowledge of how to extend language/experience.

Activities	4.2	4.8	Art provisions only available when group has their turn on the messy side. Sand and water available at certain points in the day. Home corner only – no themes or other opportunities for role play across the nursery. Access to pre-school room/resources limited. Under twos do not have sufficient use of the garden.
Interaction	6	6.2	Staff are deployed across indoors/outdoors and children are supervised effectively. Children interact within their age groups and extend play ideas/experiences. Children are supportive and respectful of each other. Could be more opportunities to play alongside older children to gain role modelling opportunities.
Program Structure	4.8	4.5	Routine is very structured in order to allow both groups access to both sides throughout the day. Therefore children’s play is frequently interrupted. Limited opportunities for free play.
Parents and staff	6.8	6.8	There is an open door policy and information shared freely with parents. Termly appraisals and monthly supervision meetings are carried out with staff to promote development.
Total Average	5.57	5.64	

Appendix 5: Analysis of ITERS(2006)/ECERS(2005)results 6th April 2015

Area of Judgement	ITERS (2006) Score	ECERS (2005) Score	Analysis
Space and Furnishings	6.5	6.8	Free flow allows the children to move freely across all areas. Children have access to the following areas: role play; small world; construction; book corner; ICT; mark making; problem solving; water tray; messy/creative. Furniture is used to separate areas and create defined areas/zones and space for privacy. Cosy areas inside and outside - cushions and mats available
Personal Care Routines	7	7	All key information is recorded and shared with parents. Rolling snacks in the morning and afternoon avoid disruptions in children's play. Children prepare snacks - dips, rolls, salads etc. Individual requirements are met. Children sit in mixed age groups, self serve.
Language-Reasoning	7	7	Range of books - fiction/non-fiction are displayed at children's level. Adult asks questions to extend learning and creative/critical thinking. Adults make statements to encourage children to share experiences/meaning. Adults model language to youngest children.
Activities	6	6.3	Range of activities accessible throughout the day across different areas of learning. Sand and water available all day

			inside and outside. Access to role play items throughout the day inside and out. Children can take resources outside to extend play.
Interaction	7	7	Children interact across all age groups - this is sometimes facilitated by staff - but also by children themselves. Older children are alert to younger children - and will guide them or tell an adult if they are doing something they shouldn't. Staff praise positive interactions and behaviours - ask older children to assist etc. Children of all ages are welcomed to activities
Program Structure	7	6.8	Routine is basic and flexible to meet the needs of individual children. Children move freely to a range of activities throughout the day. Children are encouraged to use age appropriate tools. Activities are brought down to the children's level.
Parents and staff	6.8	6.8	There is an open door policy and information shared freely with parents. Termly appraisals and monthly supervision meetings are carried out with staff to promote development.
Total Average	6.77	6.8	

Appendix 6: SICS (2005) observations referenced in Results Analysis

Child Code	Date/time	Wellbeing	Involvement	Additional Comments	environment	Group climate	autonomy	Organisation	Adult input
CA/8/4/15:6	8/4/15 2.00pm	5	5	At a cooking activity you are scooping the flour on to the scales. You struggle to lift the spoon out of the flour packet. You try several times before Child G asks if you want help. He holds the flour and tilts it and says 'now try'. You are able to lift the spoon out of the packet and pour the flour onto the scales. You smile, Child G says – 'it's a bit tricky isn't it' and you nod.	1	2		4	
CA /13/4/15:7	13/4/15 5.45pm	5	4	We are playing with the puppet stand in the home corner. The adult is telling the story and some older children are acting out the story with the characters. We are telling the story of the three bears. You find one of the three bears and hold it up – the children say 'You can be the baby bear' and you smile.	1	2	3		5

CA/20/4/15:1	20/4/15 7.30am	5	3	<p>Arrive with mum and sister. You find your peg picture and stick it on a peg.</p> <p>You run to the breakfast table, mum calls you back for a kiss – you go and kiss her then return to the table – independently select which cereal you want. You interact with the adult – nodding and pointing to respond to questions.</p>	1	2		4	
CA/27/4/15:2	27/4/15 8.15am	5	5	<p>I call you to change your nappy and sit on the potty. You find your doll and bring her with you, reaching for my hand. In the bathroom you pull out the potty and take off the doll's nappy and sit her on the potty. I take off your nappy and clean you. You enjoy joining in with songs and actions. You then sit on the potty – giving me the doll to hold. When you have finished on the potty – we put on a clean nappy on you. You find the doll's nappies in the drawer and help to put a clean nappy on the doll.</p>	1	2	3		5

CB/9/4/15:6	9/4/15 2.30pm	5	5	You are sat at the table next to Child F at snack time. You reach and touch his hair lightly. He asks what you are doing and you laugh at him. An adult says I think she likes your hair – he asks you and leans forward so you can touch it. You run both hands through his hair and you both giggle.		2			
CB/13/4/15:2	13/4/15 8.50am	5	4	You are sat in the book corner, a group of older children are sat with you. Another child is looking through a book with you, she talks you through the pictures and tells you what is happening in the book you lean forward with your hand on your legs and star intently at the book. You look up at her and smile.	1	2		4	

CB/16/4/15:2	16/4/15 8.50am	5	5	You are sat with the heuristic play items. You handle each object with interest and move it from hand to hand. You bang objects together and show delight kicking your feet at the sounds it makes. You link different approaches and create a range of sounds.	1		3	4	
CB/16/4/15:4	16/4/15 10.30am	5	5	You are taking part in a body painting activity. You use a range of different brushes to make marks on the paper and your hands. You dip your hands in the paint and giggle and kick your feet rubbing your hands together watching the paint colours mix.	1		3		

CC/13/4/15:1	13/4/15 7.30am	5	5	<p>You arrive at nursery with your friend – who you have bumped into outside.</p> <p>You are very happy ‘look *** is here too’ you say. You drop your coat on the floor and the two of you run off and play. Your dad comes and finds you in the home corner and says bye and don’t forget to have breakfast.</p> <p>You smile at him and continue playing.</p>	1	2			
CC/17/4/15:3	17/4/15 9.30am	5	5	<p>An adult opens the door to the garden.</p> <p>You go and get your coat and put it on independently. In the garden you walk over to the mud kitchen and swap you shoes for welly boots and put your shoes on the welly stand. In the mud kitchen you mix mud and herbs in a pan and put the pan on the stove</p> <p>‘dinner’s ready’ you call.</p>	1		3		

CD/10/4/15:6	10/4/15 3.00pm	5	5	You and a group of children are in the sand pit building sand castles. You use directive language and work together to fill the bucket. You ask your brother to lift and set the sand castle 'it's too heavy for me' you say. You tell the other children – we need to draw on the doors and windows. Child C has a plastic sail. You ask 'is that the flag?' she nods – 'ok be careful' you say.	1	2	3		
CD/13/4/15:4	13/4/15 10.10am	2	2	Your sister Child A has taken a toy from you – you take it back and she bites you. You are cross and bite her back making her cry. Your key person takes both of you to one side and explains that we don't take toys or bite each other. I explain to you that Child A is your baby sister and you need to tell an adult if she hurts you – not hurt her back – it is your job to teach her. You nod and give her a cuddle and say sorry.		2			5

CD/13/4/15:6	13/4/15 5.25pm	5	5	Child A has tried to take your toy in the garden. You call me over and tell me what is happening. I tell her not to take your toy and she gives you a cuddle and goes and plays. I praise you for how you dealt with the situation and you nod – ‘I didn’t hurt her’ you said.	2			5
CD/17/4/15:5	17/4/15 3.30pm	5	5	Your friends have come to pick you up from school – you are really happy to see them and tell your teacher – ‘these are my friends’. They ask you about your school and you tell them all about it.	2			5

CD/1/5/15:3	1/5/15 9.15am	5	5	At the mark making table you are tracing over the letters of your name. You are able to name the letters of your name and match the magnetic letters to the letters. An adult encourages you to try to write the letters independently – you say you can't. The adult breaks it down for you and describes the movements and you copy and repeat the instructions 'down and across'. 'I did it!' you say proudly.	1			4	5
CE/9/4/15:3	9/4/15 9.55am	5	5	At the park you work with a group of children to move the roundabout making to go 'super fast'. You give each other directions – to slow down or stop when someone wants to get on or off. You work together as a team.	1	2	3		
CE/16/4/15:5	16/4/15 1.30pm	5	5	You are playing with the dinosaurs in the garden. You move them out of the tuff tray and into the tyres filled with herbs. 'This is where they live – these dinosaurs only eat plants'.	1		3		

CE/27/4/15:4	27/4/15 12.00pm	3	2	Lining up to wash your hands before lunch, you wait patiently for a few minutes before becoming distracted and wandering off. An adult ask if you have washed your hands. You say 'it's taking too long.'				4	
CE/8/5/15:6	8/5/15 3.45pm	5	5	Before tea time we are singing songs together and taking part in action rhymes. You enjoy taking part. We sing ring a roses and take it in turns to make up the final line. You say 'sharks in the water, sharks in the sea, don't eat me!' The adult is the shark and chooses children that have been eaten. You have been eaten and understand that this means that you wash your hands and sit for tea.	1	2	3	4	

CE/16/4/15:2	16/4/15 9.15am	5	5	At group time you are playing the rocket game with a small group of children. You take turns without support and show interest in how everyone is doing. You count the rocket loops each child selects and talks about who has less and more.	1	2		4	
CF/13/4/15:4	13/4/15 11.10 am	5	5	You are playing in the tent with the animals and grass play sets. You notice that Child B is watching you. You wave to her 'hi Child B'. She waves back. You ask an adult to bring Child B into the tent because she wants to play with you. An adult sits Child B in the tent with you and you give her some animals and play with her.	1	2	3	4	

CF/30/4/15:1	30/4/15 8.45am	5	3	Child E and Child B have arrived at nursery. You run over to them and reach for Child B – her mum kneels down so you can hug her. She touches your face. You tell them ‘I made you cakes at my home – they are in the kitchen – one for brother and one for baby Child B.’		2			
CF/5/5/15:4	5/5/15 10.30am	5	5	We arrive at the forest. You tell the adult about forest school and show here the marks from the forest school fire. You and Child E run over to the cave you dug out at forest school. ‘It’s still here – we need to make it bigger’. You dig out the mud using sticks and your hands.	1	2	3		
CF/6/5/15:1	6/5/15 8.45am	5	3	Child E and Child B have arrived at nursery. You run over to them and reach for Child B – her mum kneels down so you can hug her. She touches your face. You have brought her a present – your favourite rattle from when you were a baby.		2			

CG/17/4/15:4	17/4/15 11.50am	2	2	You are lining up to wash your hands before lunch. In the line you become disengaged and when another child pushes you and you push them back				4	
CG/24/4/15:4	24/4/15 10.15am	5	5	You are in the under twos room. Child A is exploring the musical instruments, handling them with both hands and exploring sounds. You shows her how to tap the tambourine rather than shake it 'it makes more noise' you say. Child A taps the tambourine and looks up and smiles at you 'That's it Child A you did it' he says and you smile.	1	2	3		
CG/28/4/15:7	28/4/15 3.15pm	4	4	You roll the rubber ring down the slide. An adult asks you not to do that. You say 'but I can roll the ball down the slide.' She gives you the ring and asks why not. You hold it and say 'it's heavy it might hurt someone.'	1	2			5