ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Knowledge exchange, foster care and early education: Introducing treasure baskets to foster carers of young children

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Abstract

All children have a right to early childhood education, but preschool-aged fostered children are less likely than others to access formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) services such as nurseries and playgroups. The home learning environment is crucial for this group. Building on an earlier pilot study where foster carers of young children saw education as something that largely happens outside the home, this paper presents a knowledge exchange project that aimed to build foster carers' self-concept as educators. The design of the project aimed to exchange knowledge between academic researchers and practitioners through an experientially based training programme, which focused on extending the specific ECEC practice of treasure baskets. The programme was theoretically grounded in social pedagogy, which takes an educative approach to social issues. Although there were clear difficulties in recruitment, there were promising signs that the knowledge exchange dialogic approach promoted the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and enhanced foster carers' sense of self-confidence as educators for the young children they look after.

KEYWORDS

foster care, home learning environment, knowledge exchange, social pedagogy, young children

1 | INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, societies are investing in early childhood education as a means to enhance the prosperity of the future adults the children will become, the present families they live with and so the nations of which they are citizens. Access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, underscoring almost universal acceptance of its merits and young children as rights holders. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals identify 'pre-primary' education as a strategy to support human flourishing (Woodhead, Rossiter, Dawes, & Pankhurst, 2017) particularly for those living in conditions of poverty. Despite the global priority afforded ECEC, some groups of children

are missing out. In this paper, we focus on what might be done to bring an educative environment to one of these groups, young children living in foster care. There is a striking absence of information about young children's educational lives in foster care (Jackson & Hollingworth, 2017). We simply do not know if, or how, their rights to education, health and social life are upheld.

In England, all children in care under the age of 3 are in foster care, so this domestic environment is the principal site for the everyday upbringing of this group. What happens in the home environment is a more important predictor of children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2015). Fostering standards refer to the provision of a 'stimulating environment' where

children are encouraged to 'enjoy their interests, develop confidence in their skills' (Department of Education, 2011, p. 19). The standards discuss the role of fostering *services* in terms of carers they supervise, 'promoting', 'supporting', 'helping', 'advocating for', and 'monitoring' children's education including preschool education (Department of Education, 2011, p. 20). Guidance to evidence foster carers' attainment of training standards uses the terminology of 'supporting educational potential' (Department of Education, 2012, p. 16). The standards do not seem to conceptualize foster carers as educators themselves. But whether or not foster carers see themselves as responsible and equipped for this role will have a considerable bearing on young children's cognitive development, educational engagement and progress. Melkman (2018) notes already considerable educational disadvantage among children in care by age 5 that does not improve over the primary school years. We suggest that, if this is to change, social work and fostering services need to give much more attention to the foster home learning environment. In particular, foster carers need to see themselves not only as experts in the everyday lives of fostered children but also as capable educators themselves (Cameron, Connelly, & Jackson, 2015).

This paper presents a knowledge exchange (KE) project aimed at introducing a social pedagogically framed educative approach to fostering young children through the specific ECEC concept and practice of the treasure basket (Goldschmeid & Jackson, 2004). Social pedagogy is an educative philosophy with its origins in continental Europe that provides a framework for care practice in many countries (Cameron & Moss, 2011). For example, within a social pedagogical approach, foster carers are considered 'educators' who are responsible for upbringing, because their role is to support children and promote their participation in everyday life, on behalf of society.

In this tradition, the self-concept (or self-belief) is important (Baumeister, 1999). Within social pedagogy, the practitioner is a relational resource, who brings their knowledge, skills and personal characteristics to the encounter in which they are working—whether child or adult. The effect is broadly educational. The self-concept as educator is someone who works with mutual curiosity and an open stance, accompanying the person (child/adult) or group and enabling them to be the very best version of themselves. This might be in the context of advice and guidance roles or committed upbringing, such as foster care, but always searches for the development of a person's potential, often through the medium of the expressive arts or exploration of the outdoors (Cameron & Petrie, 2011).

In the United Kingdom, social pedagogy has been gaining support as a relational, ethical, creative and reflective approach to working with children and adults in a variety of settings. In foster care, social pedagogy training has a positive impact on foster carers' self-confidence, in their use of theory, practical and creative activities and in their interactions with other professionals (McDermid, Holmes, Ghate, Trivedi, Blackmore & Baker , 2016).

This paper introduces what is known about developing foster carers' competences through continuous professional development (CPD) activities such as training and KE; provides an account of the characteristics of effective learning in professional contexts; documents the project design including training content; and discusses the findings of the project in relation to implementation and outcomes for foster carers. We argue that bringing foster care and ECEC practice together within a social pedagogic framework is highly promising as a method of engaging foster carers in reimagining their educative role and creatively adopting new practices.

2 | CAPACITY BUILDING IN FOSTER CARE: TRAINING

There is mixed evidence on the actual changes to practice brought about by foster care training (Baginsky, Gorin, & Sands, 2017). Impact is most likely on trainees' *learning* rather than improved quality of life or outcomes for children (Baginsky, Gorin, & Sands, 2017). Intensity and mode of delivery of training are significant factors (Solomon, Niec, & Schoonover, 2016). Across a meta-analysis of 15 studies on the outcomes of foster carer training in the United States, children in the intervention programmes had fewer difficulties at follow-up compared with children in comparison groups where the training had not taken place, particularly where the level of input was highest and there were homework requirements (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Knibbs, Mollidor, & Bierman, 2016; Solomon et al., 2016).

Given that one of the findings of Baginsky et al.'s (2017) review was the significance of training for carers' sense of self confidence and self-efficacy, it would appear important to attend to the ways in which capacity-building initiatives in foster care enable individuals to realize their knowledge and skills and marshal them into new practices, or, in other words, shift from trainee learning to trainee behaviour (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006), from which improvements in service delivery and outcomes should follow.

3 | CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH KE

KE is loosely defined as a two-way interaction and flow of ideas between, typically, academic research and practice that seeks to enhance the impact of research for public benefit (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC], 2020). KE tends to be people based, problem solving and community based, rather than commercialisation oriented (Bullock & Hughes, 2016). KE foregrounds the principle of 'shared value' knowledge that 'academic researchers, practitioners and policy makers bring different, complementary skills to the table' and nurture 'relationships, opportunism, and creativity over and above process and formalised activity' (Murdock, Shariff, & Wilding, 2013, p. 427).

KE programmes that seek to build capacity and enhance service outcomes draw on theories of collaborative learning such as 'communities of practice', a group who 'share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger & Trayner, 2015). There are three components of effective shared learning: a domain, a community and a practice, around which dialogue takes place and practitioners

'develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction' (Wenger & Trayner, 2015). In KE programmes, participants might be colleagues or co-practitioners who are helped to become communities of practice and who collaborate and reflect on their practice in order to advance goals held in common.

The essential features of KE might be (i) the principle of exchange of theoretical and practical knowledge between practitioners and researchers; (ii) a shared focus around which to generate new knowledge and/or skills; (iii) collaborative, experiential learning based in dialogue and practical activity; and (iv) a team or peer approach to learning. It offers distinctive benefits over traditional, instrumental and unidirectional training, as KE creates the opportunity to learn through relational and practical activity that has a direct bearing on the work contexts in which the new knowledge will be applied.

4 | KE IN FOSTER CARE

In Emond, George, McIntosh and Punch's (2019) KE programme to develop resources for use in foster care and residential care, the dialogic process revealed the complexity of accommodating differing understandings of the knowledge to be translated and widely varied starting points, memories, beliefs and expectations, leading to 'wider and deeper reflection on care itself' (Emond et al., 2019, p. 69). Some participants reported 'transformational' learning through the process of exchange of practice and research knowledge, assisted by longer term involvement, having a concrete objective (to create resources) and the style of delivery: an inclusive approach, a high level of information sharing, a personable tone in project communications, a warmth in the interactions between participants, a high level of commitment to the project and a feeling of mutual accountability (Emond et al., 2019). These project findings underline the features of KE described above.

Effective CPD in schools shares some characteristics of KE: where it is designed to be collaborative, team work and dialogue based, Cordingley, Bell, Rundell and Evans (2003) found CPD to be positively linked to teachers' broadening ranges of pedagogic strategies, self-confidence and commitment to ongoing learning with positive impact on students' learning and motivations. A capacity-building programme in foster care designed to introduce social pedagogy also used a dialogic approach (McDermid et al., 2016) that aligned well with features of KE. Foster carers reported that the training provided an empowering set of core social pedagogic principles, tools and models, which helped them to better understand and meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. They gained in confidence as practitioners and acquired new tools for working with conflict or difficult situations (McDermid et al., 2016).

Finally, a KE programme focusing on the education of children in care used school- and virtual school-focused projects to improve practice (Carroll and Cameron, 2017). In one of the projects, a virtual school worked with foster carers to develop their awareness of the importance of home learning.

5 | DEVELOPING FOSTER CARE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN THROUGH KE: PROJECT CONCEPT

Very little research about the day-to-day educational and social experience of young (precompulsory school age) fostered children has taken place. In a small ethnographic study, Meetoo, Cameron, Clark and Jackson (forthcoming) found that young fostered children may be relying on the adults and other children in the fostering household for stimulation and enjoyment of life, early literacy and numeracy. Study foster carers were experienced in the role, came from diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds, and held varied professional profiles. They tended to see themselves as responsible for relationships and day-to-day caring tasks, such as providing regular meals, and for the logistics of looking after children in local authority care (e.g., attending to multiple appointments, contact with birth family, meetings with social workers). For them, education was something that principally happened outside the home, in settings such as toddler groups, playgroups, nurseries and, eventually, school.

The current KE project was designed to see whether foster carers could (i) begin to change their self-concept from carer to educator and (ii) adopt more explicitly educational practices in their day-to-day work with young fostered children.

The specific ECEC practice in focus was the now very widely used treasure basket (Gascoyne, 2012). The idea was originally developed by Elinor Goldschmied as a means of engaging and providing interest for babies and infants who can sit up but not yet move independently. The household and natural objects collected in the basket are designed to stimulate the child's senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Infants are encouraged to explore freely with an adult's supportive but unobtrusive presence and are often absorbed in play with the objects in the basket, for as long as an hour at a time (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994). Jackson and Forbes (2015) further developed the idea of the treasure basket for use at home and in ECEC settings and emphasized the learning involved for parents and practitioners in seeking out and collecting items for the basket. However, extending the concept to older children as a means of promoting dialogue and interaction between adults and children in out-of-home care is completely new and has not been tried anywhere else so far as we know.

By introducing this practice into fostering, we hoped to widen and deepen foster carers' practical resources and provide an opportunity to reflect on how the role of carer might be thought of as educational and a means to further the child's development. Many young children in care have some kind of developmental delay and have very limited vocabularies compared with home-based children (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010; Flynn, Côté, & Vincent, 2018). The treasure

basket can provide a focus for discussion and expanding the child's vocabulary in a different and complementary way to reading and looking at pictures.

5.1 | Programme design and contents

The KE programme was designed to harness three elements: (i) expertise from University College London (UCL) research in early childhood education; (ii) social pedagogic approaches to experiential training and development; and (iii) foster carers' own expertise in 'doing' foster care.

In Stage 1, research findings from our earlier ethnographic study (Meetoo et al., forthcoming) were collated and presented to professionals and foster carers in workshops in two London boroughs. The aim of the workshops was to present the findings and receive feedback from workshop participants. The majority of participants were foster carers (n = 9). We aimed recruitment at social workers, but none volunteered to attend. The priority of supervising social workers is placement, and they usually do not see education as part of their core business (Jackson, 1998; Jackson, 2019). Professional participants were an educational psychologist (n = 1) and staff from one local authority's virtual school (n = 3). In parallel, we interviewed four leading academics at UCL (Dr Alison Clark, Professor Julie Dockrell, Dr Rosie Flewitt and Professor Eamon McCrory) who each represented a different perspective on early learning (early childhood pedagogy, special needs, psychology, neuroscience), where children have particular disadvantages such as disabilities or prior experience of abuse or neglect and what the home learning environment would need to take into account. This material fed into Stage 2 training.

In Stage 2, we worked with social pedagogy trainers from Treehouse Associates to develop a 4-day KE programme. The aim was to offer an experientially and dialogically structured programme of learning activities that introduced (i) the social pedagogic self-concept of educator and (ii) using treasure baskets with young fostered children. The programme was run in two local authority areas: one that was highly urban and multiethnic and the other in a rural, predominantly ethnically White area of England. Two groups of foster carers were recruited. In LA 1 (called 'county'), two supervising social workers were trained social pedagogues and could therefore immediately grasp the relevance of the proposed KE. They promoted the opportunity for free training to individual foster carers they knew and found the internal funding for room hire and supported foster carers attendance through paying travel costs. They recruited 15 foster carers (of whom nine attended) and volunteered to be co-trainers with Treehouse Associates in both local authority areas. In LA 2 (called 'urban'), the impact of a poor Ofsted (a national inspection agency) rating was consuming managerial time. Although willing, and with more than a year's established experience of working together with the UCL team, who had attended several foster care network support group meetings to advertise the KE programme, the local authority were

reliant on administrative help to send out invitations to foster carers to attend, rather than the more proactive approach in the county area. Fewer (4) foster carers signed up after several months of recruitment activity. Due to scheduling difficulties, the programme was run over 3 days in the urban area. In both areas, the UCL research team visited on the last day to collect evaluative reflections on the KE programme experience from foster carers and trainers.

Programme content was built up from Treehouse Associates' expertise in social pedagogy and prior training programmes with foster carers, dialogic meetings with the UCL team, materials relevant to the treasure basket training and findings from the Stage 1 workshops and interviews.

The themes of the KE programme were (i) risk competence; (ii) lifeworlds and lifespace; (iii) people, things and places; and (iv) building the approach. On each day, there was a variety of learning methods from theory-based discussion to practical activities, and each included active appreciation of the discursive and practical contributions of foster carer participants. The content was designed to progress from developing reflective skills to building new competences. The content on Day 1, for example, looked at the role of risk when caring for, and being the everyday educator for, a young child and the differences between being risk averse and risk competent. This was informed by research findings and Stage 1 workshop discussions around foster carers managing risk and risk competency. Examples given by participants included being responsible for protecting the child from everyday hazards, which can be more problematic when the child has developmental delays, and being attentive to children after contact with their birth families, such as checking that their foster child did not show any sign of having suffered harm, such as bruising, both to safeguard the child and to protect their own integrity and reputation as foster carers. The content included an examination of theories of education and its relevance to foster care and the impact of this knowledge on the self (e.g., through questions such as 'how did they make you feel?'). The team similarly took forward discussions from the workshops on 'what is education for young foster children' and 'how foster carers contribute to educational experiences of young foster children' to inform Day 2 sessions on learning in the everyday, and 'lifeworlds and lifespace', and the Day 3 focus on 'people, things and places'. A set of slides containing quotations from academic researchers in Stage 1 was printed on A3 and placed around the training room. These findings were a resource referred to during the Stage 2 training to provide a depth of evidence to the materials being presented.

Activities included making maps of everyday life to assess what goes on for foster children and to what extent they included 'educational' or scope for educational activities, and going out to collect objects for treasure baskets. Having a thorough understanding of 'risk' and its impact on everyday choices as a foster carer helped them to broaden their scope of what is legitimate activity as a carer and gain confidence in themselves as everyday educators.

6 | FINDINGS: IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

The thematic analysis of the Stage 1 interviews with academic experts on early learning found two main themes about how and in what circumstances young children learn. These were (i) context and (ii) collaboration.

6.1 | The child's context and environment for learning is key

All the academic experts interviewed concurred that the context in which the child is present and their environment, be that at home with their birth parents, school and foster carer home, is an important factor for their learning (Tizard & Hughes, 2008). According to Alison Clark 'learning is a complicated network of children's engagement with other people, with things, with places; ... children learn best in an embedded way with lots of connections to their cultural background, to their own interests'. Rosie Flewitt explained how multimodality is an approach that signals the complex interplay that is language, signs and body language and the equal value of each mode in understanding children's communication. Through the example of children who may not talk at nursery but talk at home, she highlighted the importance of considering the learning context and environment for the child. Such examples were used with foster carers during the training:

> ... children can be silenced by places because they find them intimidating, and because they can see that the communicative expectations are very different to what they are used to at home. They do not know what the rules are because they have not figured them out yet ... So sometimes children who react in this way to a new setting get labelled as shy, as antisocial; but they are not. They're figuring it out ... whatever the child's preferred communication way is, if you just go along with that you can build trust, you can build a rapport, and then you start to build on the modes of expression.

A further example used in the training was based on Eamon McCrory's work on children's adaptation to harmful environments. Being hypervigilant to threats where a child may be experiencing unpredictable violence may to some extent keep them 'safe', but may also come at a cost to forming supportive relationship and also learning:

> We can think about the impact on two levels. One can be a direct effect, so ... if you are allocating lots of your attention to processing threat you have less attention to allocate to more normal developmental experiences like learning in school or socialising with friends. But there is an equally important impact over time in how

an individual elicits and sustains to other supportive relationships ... If you are more likely to attribute hostility, that might lead to more conflictual interactions and make it harder to establish and cultivate the kind of protective relationships that can help buffer against future stresses.

The challenges that looked-after children face place foster carers in a key position to provide supportive and conducive environments to enable their learning. Such environments should enable children to have '... the freedom to have a go and to be able to get things wrong ... To be in ... an emotionally stable environment in which children feel confident enough to have a go' (Alison Clark).

Similarly, Eamon McCrory suggested that

> ... the way that the child experiences an environment very much depends on the relational context with the care giver. So they might be in a playground that's lovely with lots of things, but do they feel inhibited or anxious? And how are they are able to approach other peers? A focus on the material world can make it harder to grasp the relational context which is essential in helping the child negotiate the world around them.

6.2 | Learning through collaborative, child-led and exploratory enquiry

Foster carers are key actors in nurturing a learning environment, and the academic experts offered specific insights into relevant elements of such an environment:

- Fostering a curiosity and an enjoyment of learning, this taking priority over being able to learn a number of new words or being able to spell;
- Promoting children's self-confidence by highlighting things that they do well and praising them;
- Reading bedtime stories, as they perform several functions such as bonding, making the child feel secure and learning;
- Using play-based learning and problem solving so that children can explore and engage with the toys and objects in a variety of ways and add their own meanings. This stands apart from '"educational toys" that can have 'just one script for the children to follow' (Alison Clark)
- Learning from the 'everyday' daily routines such as bath time and washing up, which can be through play. As Alison Clark explained:

a washing machine can be a playful object in the sense that the washing machine is going and a young child can sit in front of it and they'll be mesmerised by it going round, and the bubbles. And then maybe that might then lead to getting some bubbles and playing with bubbles. ... using the everyday but in quite an imaginative way ... water is another thing. So setting out the water play, maybe having a

bit of extra time for bath time so there's more play alongside the actual cleaning. So every moment of the day ... bring in that sort of creativity.

- A collaborative approach to learning between adult and child, by working with the child's interest and capabilities. As Julie Dockrell explained through the following example:

> ... in two different examples ... both three-year-olds that had serious behaviour problems. ... one parent tried to constrain them ... because she thought it was appropriate that the children would be quiet and sit down ... And the other, exactly the same kind of problems...(she) worked with his interests to ... break things up to allow him to do what he liked doing, which would not necessarily be what she wanted him to do, which was play in the mud. So it's about working with them

7 | COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE TREASURE BASKET KE PROGRAMME

Implementation of the KE treasure basket programme meant a constant process of adaptation to the participants and their pre-existing knowledge. Although all the foster carers were approved to care for children aged 0–5, not all of them had a child of this age group at the time of the programme. This meant that the experiential content was not always focused on the actual target group of young children but led to a broader exploration of theory and ways of using the treasure basket approach with older children. Some participants had attended a social pedagogy course previously in county or were familiar with the approach through their supervising social worker who was also a qualified social pedagogue. By contrast, in the urban area, none of the participants had encountered social pedagogy previously. This, and the shortened duration, brought an intensity of learning to the programme. Running it as KE rather than training required adoption of new topics that participants brought with them. For example, on Day 3, compassion fatigue was introduced in the county group by one of the participants with reference to another of the participants who had not arrived. This prompted a long discussion about how and in what circumstances new ideas could be feasibly introduced to foster carers. At times, when they are close to burnout through compassion fatigue, foster carers reported that they found it very difficult if not impossible to synthesize new knowledge with existing practice.

8 | PROGRAMME EVALUATION

This was a pioneering KE programme, which met significant obstacles in implementation. Recruitment was difficult in the urban area,

where the children's services team was distracted by external inspection requirements, and there were no in-house social pedagogues to encourage foster carers to participate. In county, there were practical problems such as arranging childcare cover to enable foster carers to attend. The extent to which a shift from learning to behaviour took place over time was impossible to ascertain. However, in line with other social pedagogy training programmes (Cameron, 2016), immediate feedback was very positive, suggesting that this is a promising avenue for capacity building in foster care with young children.

9 | FEEDBACK FROM FOSTER CARERS

Foster carers were asked to name three things they had learned during the programme. All participants referred to learning social pedagogy theory and concepts such as multiple intelligences, lifeworld maps, intentionality, three Ps (personal, private and professional knowledge), the learning zone model and head, heart and hands (Kaska & Ladbrooke, 2015). Several referred to the relationship between theory and practice. For example, one said: 'I have learned to consider my foster child's comfort zone and areas of anxiety. This has in turn helped me to apply ideas of his proximity zone for allowing him to learn and stretch himself. The 3Ps have allowed me to consciously keep areas of privacy for my own wellbeing and self-care'.

Another summarized her learning as 'greater confidence in my knowledge of social pedagogy and in particular the theory and relating this to my practice'. A third said 'it has reminded of what I knew and empowered me to use it, especially using a treasure basket'.

Foster carers described the course in the following ways: 'inspiring', 'well balanced', 'interesting and thought provoking', 'reflective', 'life saving and life changing. It helped me reflect upon my own area of stress and self-improvement to try to improve my caring', 'empowering', 'enjoyable and I learned a lot from (Treehouse Associates) but also from the group' and 'very educational, engaging and knowledgeable for me and other foster carers looking after young children, and is also very useful for young people of any age'. One participant summed up the course as 'Various models and reflective tools through which to improve the role of foster carer and an understanding of how to intentionally use objects to spend quality time and create educational opportunities'.

These evaluative descriptions match the programme's intentions and show relevant learning from the curriculum and from participant dialogue. The pace of delivery was seen as an area for improvement by some: 'sometimes I felt things could have moved faster, perhaps into three days, however I realise part of the benefit is reflective time and faster would not have worked for everyone'. Another wanted to 'sometimes allow digression or stories to slow pace or progress but on the whole [it was] good'. The pace of a KE programme that uses experiential and peer learning inevitably has to adjust to pre-existing knowledge, variations in applicability to individual cases and in-the-moment adjustments to emerging topics as noted above (compassion

fatigue). Treehouse Associate trainers also reflected on the issue of pacing. In retrospect, they thought they could have introduced the treasure baskets earlier in the programme. Nevertheless, by the end of Day 2, some participants had dramatically shifted their self-concept. One of the trainers reported that, in a supervision session with one of the participants, she said 'My God, this blew my mind, the idea that I am as valuable as anyone else; in a meeting I can say "no, I don't think this is good for my foster child". She never did that. I didn't realise we would do that in the first two days'.

The KE programme used the concept of 'intentionality' to bring a deliberate focus to being conscious of changing practice. The evaluation asked foster carers to specify how they would use their new knowledge. They had a range of ideas for using the treasure basket, including 'with my birth children to enable them to better understand the foster child and form an attachment'; 'shar[ing] with one child's teaching assistant'; 'sharing the idea with friends who are foster carers'; and 'giv[ing] basket to adoptive parents, explain and support them to in extending use of it with them'.

With current foster children, several carers said they would 'create a treasure basket for each foster child/meeting their specific needs' and a carer who had a sibling group thought it would be 'interesting to create individual baskets for each child and, with birth children at home, I look forward to involving them'. The concept of intentionality had helped some foster carers to reflect on herself, their child and their needs:

> … I realise he has a fantastic imagination but I am almost wondering if he is almost overstimulated by the things he has … I will have to approach this with him. I am not a natural player … I will use the treasure basket more and use more things around the home. Almost as though he is doing too much, too many activities, too many friends around the house. Need to find a quiet space for him, so I will use the treasure basket (FC1, urban)

For this carer, the programme had been an opportunity to reflect on 'learning opportunities you can create in the everyday and has calmed me down a bit, that I can take a step back, made me think, maybe this is going on/that's going on and I can use the wondering thing, thinking more about our interactions … [I can] do an interaction that is totally different, like the treasure basket, rather than be caught in a conflict' (FC1, urban).

Participants also had plans to use the treasure basket in innovative ways. One who had a child with 'a difficult relationship with food' wanted to 'put fruits and vegetables in the basket' and another planned to use a basket with a child aged 6 and a half with special educational needs' (FC7 county). Exploring the treasure basket idea had helped carers to have confidence in the outdoors as a learning opportunity. Carers wanted to 'do more exploratory outdoor trips' (FC5, county), 'keep items when we go out for a walk, such as stones in a bottle, and then talk about them' (FC6,

county) and, when 'walking back from activities, to reflect back on the pleasure we have just experienced' (FC1, urban).

10 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Young children in foster care are in a liminal position where their future family and home environment may not be decided, yet they are expected to be a part of a current foster family, an arrangement that can persist for months and even years before they are adopted, returned to their birth family or stay in foster care long term. In an era when most young children attend some form of ECEC, and home learning is known to be crucial, the project on which this paper is based sought to illuminate how foster carers and the professionals they come into contact with might support young fostered children's early educational and social development in the home environment, with a particular focus on the treasure basket as a tool for collaborative exploration of the natural and everyday world, communicative learning and joint reflection.

The design of the project aimed to exchange knowledge between academic researchers, practitioners and through an experientially based training programme, with a view to a shift in foster carers' self-concept from carer towards being an educator. The training was underpinned by concepts from social pedagogy, itself congruent with the findings of the academic interviews, that learning needs to be in context and in collaboration with others. Feedback from foster carers suggested that they grasped the content of the training and were committed to using more educational practices such as reflection, discussion and joint activities, which is suggestive of a shift in self-concept towards 'educator', and they used their expertise to think through adapting the theory to practice.

Moreover, foster carers said they enjoyed the training programme, learning both theory and practice skills, and were committed to adopting the treasure basket practice. Arguably, the KE approach, which included time for dialogue and content substantially grounded in the workshop findings and interviews conducted in Stage 1, contributed to the success of their experience as Emond et al. (2019) found.

There are three main ways in which this project makes a contribution to knowledge. First, the mode of training was longer and more immersive and designed in line with KE principles of research–practice exchange, a shared focus, collaborative knowledge generation and team learning. This set it apart from the training usually offered to foster carers in the areas studied. While there has been a social pedagogy training programme in foster care (McDermid et al., 2016), the programme presented here narrowed the focus and intentionally brought social pedagogic concepts into dialogue with techniques from ECEC. Second, although foster care in general has a role in supporting children's education in school, and although ECEC has a role in looking after and educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the two are usually considered separate domains. The common ground in educative

approaches to children's upbringing are rarely explored in training programmes. The project focus on education in the daily life of the foster home was highly innovative, but its very unusualness may be one reason why recruitment was difficult. Third, the very positive evaluation of the experience of the programme was in line with those of other social pedagogy training (Cameron, 2016), suggesting that the programme could be worth repeating with more foster carers and in different locations. Clearly, intention to change practice is not the same as actual changed practice and further KE programmes on the same theme could usefully gather data on longer term impact on practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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