

# Speaking of Research

## Series 2 - Victoria Giacomelli

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Health literacy, young children, global challenges, health outcomes, health inequalities, life course approach, social determinants, children's voices, participatory methods, systematic review, health behaviours, developmental level, early interventions, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, research legacy.

### SPEAKERS

Victoria Giacomelli, Catherine McDonald

#### **Catherine McDonald** 00:04

Hello and welcome to Speaking of Research a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in the second series of our podcast, we're focusing on research that addresses global challenges. We'll be in conversation with doctoral researchers about their research, which global challenges they hope to inform, and how they hope their work will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Victoria Giacomelli from the University of Portsmouth. Victoria, your work focuses on health literacy in young children, tell us more about that.

#### **Victoria Giacomelli** 00:42

First of all, thank you very much for having me on your podcast today to talk about health literacy. So essentially, health literacy is about how people find, how they understand and how they use health information, and how they do that in a way to make better health decisions or health judgments. As you might expect, people with good levels of health literacy tend to have better health outcomes. And what we're seeing as well is that groups who are at risk of poorer health outcomes anyway tend to have lower health literacy. So, health literacy at its core really is about empowerment, and it's about how we can use it as a tool to try and reduce some of those health inequalities. So my research specifically is looking at health literacy in younger children, so sort of between the ages of four and eight.

#### **Catherine McDonald** 01:27

And can I ask, what do you actually mean by health literacy? Can you define that as a term for us?

#### **Victoria Giacomelli** 01:34

Yeah, of course. So, I always say that if you've got health education that is about knowledge, health promotion might be about raising awareness, but where health literacy falls into it is, it's sort of those things, but on steroids, I always say. So, it's about taking what you know, what you understand, and using that to make better decisions and better judgments about health. So that could be knowing where to go. It might be how you talk to someone about health, and it's about having those tools to be able to make better decisions, ultimately about your health.

**Catherine McDonald** 02:08

So what is the specific global challenge that you're addressing here in this research?

**Victoria Giacomelli** 02:14

So the challenge that I'm looking at is about how we can use health literacy to improve the health of young children. So we know with children that if they can adopt healthy habits from the start, that quite often they become lifelong health habits. So, the World Health Organisation for health literacy in particular has talked about a life course approach to health literacy. So, by that, they mean not just looking at health literacy of adults, but actually looking from children all the way through to older adults. But what we find in the research is that so much is around adults, and what tends to happen with children is that we're using adult concepts and adult constructs to understand how they use health literacy. But actually, children are quite a different population. We see, for example, that for young children, they might use adult proxies. So, we look at parental health literacy to see how that impacts on Children's Health we don't actually look at children themselves. In the period of middle childhood, for example, so that's the period of childhood that comes directly after early childhood. We're seeing low levels of health literacy. So, for example, in Wales, just under a quarter of children are known to have low levels of health literacy, and that's seen in Germany, it's seen in Netherlands. So really, I think what my research is about is looking at early interventions, trying to support children's health literacy from a young age, to get it right at the foundation, right at the start, to try and make a difference so that we go all the way through the life course with hopefully better levels of health literacy, and that's the global challenge that my research is addressing.

**Catherine McDonald** 03:45

And what motivated you to do this research? What was the experience where you either saw or felt the need for this?

**Victoria Giacomelli** 03:53

That's a really good question. I think it's come from two aspects, firstly, I'm a mum myself. I have got two boys, and I see how they talk about health, and they always have opinions. So, I think children have a lot to say. I'm also a governor of health and wellbeing at a school, and they're doing some really great stuff on health. So physical health, mental health, and as part of that, we do what's called pupil conferencing, which is essentially like focus groups with

children, and those children are really eloquent about things to do with their health that actually can sometimes be really quite complex. So, things like for mental health, knowing what the amygdala is and how that impacts on their well-being. I think it came from that wanting to look at how we can help people with health, so health literacy is what's known as the social determinant of health. A social determinant of health is a non-physical or a non-medical reason for a health outcome. And when I was thinking about research and thinking about what I'd seen in those children in schools, I think it's really interesting that there's a social determinant of health that actually we can do something about as researchers. So social determinants are usually quite structural, quite difficult as researchers to modify. But I think it's really exciting that there's a social determinant that we can do something about, and as I said, that children are actually willing and able to engage with this

**Catherine McDonald** 05:23

Absolutely. I know as you speak, I'm thinking about all the young people in my life, and they absolutely are so much more aware of healthy outcomes than I ever was at their age. So we are heading in the right direction, aren't we?

**Victoria Giacomelli** 05:37

Yes, I think so, I think we definitely are. In terms of listening to children, one of the things that's really key in my research is using a rights-based perspective. So, we've got the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that talks about the children's right to be heard, as well as obviously, children's right to health and well-being. Traditionally, in health research, children's voices have seldom been heard, but that's changing, and I think that's a really exciting thing, because, as you said, children have a lot to say. Whenever I have been speaking to them in my interviews and research conversations, children always have a really interesting perspective. And I've not carried out an interview yet where a child hasn't had something to say about health. And I think that's a really powerful thing on its own.

**Catherine McDonald** 06:22

This interview and this episode is not the first in the Speaking of Research series, where we're hearing about research being conducted with the very people that it's focusing on, which is such a hugely important thing, and it must be, I mean, they say never work with children, but it's clearly working for you.

**Victoria Giacomelli** 06:41

I mean, I really enjoy it. I think when you're working with children, you definitely have to get more creative. So for example, a traditional interview format might not work, but actually that's really fun. We've done some really interesting stuff. So, for my second study, I'm doing a grounded theory study that uses some participatory methods, so that's things like draw and tell, and artifact elicitation, where I have a box of things, and it sort of ties into their

developmental level. So giving them those concrete objects gives them something to talk about, and it's really exciting and it's really fun, and sometimes you end up talking about unicorns and dinosaurs, but they always have something to say about health as well. So I think it just goes to show that children have a lot to say, and we as researchers need to meet them where they're at and find ways to listen.

**Catherine McDonald** 07:27

Totally. So tell us what you found out so far.

**Victoria Giacomelli** 07:30

So I'm just heading into year two of my PhD. My first year has been a systematic review of the literature, so that's particularly been looking at what the research on health literacy in young children has told us so far, how health literacy has been defined and used, and what sort of outcomes we've got. So I suppose really encouragingly, firstly, the review shown that the research suggests that young children do have levels of health literacy, which is always a really good start. It's shown that proximal and distal outcomes can be influenced by health literacy interventions. So, by proximal outcomes I mean health literacy itself, but distal outcomes are things like the health behaviours. So, it might be tooth brushing, for example. So that's all really encouraging. I've also found that children are operating in a way that's consistent with their developmental level, which might not be a surprise, or you might expect that, but I think it's important to know, because a lot of the research is using adult centered definitions or models or understandings, and not necessarily taking into account where children are at developmentally. And I think when you're trying to influence and talk about health with them, as I said, it's kind of like how you do research with them, right? You've got to meet them where they're at, and so I think that's really important to know. So yeah, the focus for me next is going to be about talking to children, talking to their adults. Because it's really important to talk to children, but it's really important to talk to their adults as well. I mean, they're a huge influence. It's just not doing it to the exclusion of talking to the children. So that's my next focus, which is really exciting.

**Catherine McDonald** 09:06

And what specifically are you hoping to change with this research? What would you almost like its legacy to be? You know, what's your ambition for it?

**Victoria Giacomelli** 09:11

A few things. So, I think first of all about kind of moving that conversation about health literacy in early childhood out of academia and moving it into the context where it's most helpful. So as I said, it's this social determinant of health, and it's one that we can actually leverage. And I think that's really exciting, especially when other social determinants are usually more structural. I think the other legacy, to use, your word of my research, that I'd love to have is

about amplifying the voices of children in research. So as I said, it's an area where their voices aren't often heard, and it's really important to talk to the adults, but it's also really important to talk to the children, and doing so in a way that we can get the best outcomes for them, because ultimately, that's what we're trying to do with our research. So I would hope that if I could have that as a legacy I'd be really happy.

**Catherine McDonald** 09:25

Well, that's the perfect place to end our conversation, but I very much hope we end up having another one when you're much further down the line, and I very much look forward to hearing about where you might have got to with your research and what you might have informed and changed. Thanks to Victoria Giacomelli, and thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit [southcoastdtp.ac.uk](http://southcoastdtp.ac.uk). Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcast production.